

Alter Egos / Alternative Rhetorics: Belle Knox's Rhetorical Construction of Pornography and
Feminism

By

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Abstract

In early 2014, Miriam Weeks, more famously known as “the Duke Porn Star” was exposed for acting in pornography to pay her exorbitant Duke tuition bills. Throughout the media saga that followed her outing, Weeks defended her decision to act in pornography, arguing that it was a feminist affirmation of her sexual agency. However, Weeks’s defense of her pornography career is not monolithic, but rather, takes two distinct forms. The first form is characterized by structural or intersectional rhetoric, focused on the contextual factors that implicate the meaning of both pornography and feminism. Contrasting this rhetorical pattern is another that emerged in Weeks’s defense of pornography, characterized by neoliberalism. This rhetoric focused on the affirmation of individualism. Weeks’s neoliberal rhetoric constructed pornography as an openly-accessible option to solve economic shortcomings, regardless of the individual’s social location. Not only is pornography constructed neoliberally, feminism is also constructed neoliberally. Weeks’s neoliberal construction of feminism reduced feminism to an ideology premised solely on the affirmation of individual choices made by women, regardless of what those choices are. Thus, it ignored the role class plays in gender-based oppression. Although these two rhetorical patterns appear mutually exclusive, they co-exist within Weeks’s defense of her pornography career, articulating two distinct versions of both pornography and feminism.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

“For a first-year woman at Duke, a half-second Google search transformed her from Lauren, a college Republican and aspiring lawyer, into Aurora*, a rising porn starlet.” – Katie Fernelius*

“For me, Lauren is nerdy, she’s intelligent, she’s aspirational,” Lauren said. “So is Aurora—but she’s sexy and innocent, too. She gets to be more open than Lauren, more vulnerable. I feel totally and completely myself as Lauren and as Aurora. An alter-ego is liberating. It’s probably the most empowered I have ever felt.”¹ – Miriam Weeks (being interviewed as Lauren)

Miriam Weeks, more famously known as Belle Knox or “The Duke Porn Star,” rose to prominence in early 2014 when it was revealed that she was acting in pornography to pay her exorbitant Duke tuition bills. Thus, the “Duke Porn Star” was born, the namesake drawing particular attention to Weeks’s simultaneous identities: pornography star and student. As the saga unfolded, Weeks provided a variety of statements and justifications for her pornography career, ranging from arguments about the inaccessibility of affordable college education to the inherently empowering nature of pornography. In her first interview with Duke’s student newspaper, *The Duke Chronicle*, Weeks attempted to conceal her identity as Miriam Weeks / Belle Knox, instead, identifying herself as Lauren and Aurora. As stated above, Lauren is “a college Republican and aspiring lawyer” while Aurora is “a rising porn starlet.” Weeks described these personas further, noting that she feels “totally and completely” herself as *both* Lauren and Aurora; arguing that her alter ego is “liberating” and “the most empowered” she has “ever felt.” In this instance, Weeks attempted to compartmentalize her identities, maintaining distinct

spheres for Lauren the student and Aurora the pornography star. Weeks's creation of her pornography star alter ego allowed her to draw distinctions between her life as a student and her life as a pornography star, as well as how these two identities interact and contrast each other.

Despite Weeks's attempt to conceal her identity as Lauren/Aurora, shortly after the *Duke Chronicle* article was published, Weeks's identity was exposed. Weeks was "outed" as the "Duke Porn Star" by one of her fellow classmates, someone she had identified as a friend before he outed her.² After the outing, Weeks explained that she was mercilessly harassed and bullied on and offline, so much so that she was forced to take a leave of absence from Duke.³ The majority of the harassment and bullying came from Duke students and commentators on the internet who claimed that Weeks's decision to act in pornography made her sexually promiscuous and/or a slut. Not only did she receive tremendous amounts of slut shaming, Weeks also was the recipient of a whole host of arguments about how her actions were degrading to women and anti-feminist to the core. For example, Meghan Murphy, founder and editor of popular feminist blog, *FeministCurrent*, presented a scathing critique of what she calls "Belle Knox feminism," a feminism premised on the universal affirmation of women's choices, regardless of what those choices are.⁴ She went on to explain that defending pornography as feminist is regressive because it relies upon that idea that women are always-already sexually available objects who exist for male pleasure; therefore, even if women "chose" to act in pornography, it is a choice that perpetuates the male gaze.

Following her outing and the subsequent bullying, harassment, and criticism, Weeks went out to set the record straight. Weeks participated in a number of interviews with famous news outlets and talk shows, such as *CNN*, *The View*, and *Howard Stern*. In addition to interviews, Weeks penned a number of pieces explaining her rationale for acting in pornography, primarily

on popular feminist blogs like *XOJane* and *Jezebel*. Throughout her media campaign, Weeks defended pornography, both critically and uncritically. Regardless of the narrative that Weeks utilized to endorse pornography, feminism was central to the discussion. At a fundamental level, all of Weeks's arguments in defense of pornography comment on its feminist potential. Weeks's defense of pornography is another iteration of a long-standing debate over pornography's feminist potential. Throughout the 70s and 80s, the "sex wars" were waged amongst many feminists with various opinions about whether or not pornography could be liberating. Most notably, Andrea Dworkin and Catharine Mackinnon were outspoken in their condemnation of pornography, arguing that pornography is nothing but another form of male domination of women, a sanctioned and legal form of sexual exploitation.⁵ Conversely, Gayle Rubin and other pro-pornography feminists argued that women had the freedom to choose to engage in pornographic acts, which have the potential to be sexually empowering.⁶ Scholars spanning a variety of disciplines still engage the same questions of whether sex work and pornography can be liberating for women.

The marriage of pornography and feminism is not new. When pornography performers defend pornography, this relationship is revealed and defended time and time again. Stoya, a famous pornography star, published a short piece in the inaugural issue of *Porn Studies* called "Feminism and the mainstream." The first line reads: "Feminism and pornography both have slippery definitions."⁷ Following, she argued that questioning the feminist potential of pornography depends as much on the definition of feminism as it does on the definition of pornography. Although Stoya is not an academic studying pornography or feminism, she touched on a foundational characteristic of both: they are discursively constructed in a host of ways. Feminists, academics, and sex workers met up with *RedWedge*'s Brit Schulte for a roundtable

conversation about the problems associated with representations of pornography in popular media. The roundtable revealed that performers and academics, alike, navigate a representational field in which connotations and misrepresentations hamper the ability to analyze pornography's effect on feminism and broader society; popular representations of pornography treat it as a monolithic entity.⁸ Indeed, one of the biggest representational misconceptions that haunts pornography is that it is a coherent, unified, and homogenous entity, rather than one littered with diverse meanings. For example, a dominant narrative of pornography is that it is a business premised on the exploitation of vulnerable, victimized women who are preyed upon by directors and producers.⁹ Although this depiction is certainly true in some instances, it does not represent the entirety of the pornography industry.

Central to questioning the feminist potential of pornography are the concepts of "liberation" and "empowerment," which both represent central points of friction for pro-pornography and anti-pornography feminists. For pro-pornography feminists, pornography has the potential to be sexually empowering for women because they have the capacity to make decisions about their own bodies and sexuality. Although this is liberating to pro-pornography feminists, anti-pornography feminists would argue that pornography exploits women and reinscribes male sexual power, thus, can never be empowering. The concepts of liberation and empowerment are contested alongside feminism; thus, the "liberating" potential of pornography depends on particular definitions and conceptions of liberation and empowerment. The contested nature of these two terms directly correlates to the type of feminism that is constructed. For example, pro-pornography feminism would argue that pornography is liberating because it is an affirmation of women's sexual agency. On the contrary, anti-pornography feminism would argue that pornography is not liberating because the sexual agency that appears to exist only exists

insofar as women perform socially-acceptable sexuality which is scripted by the male gaze and the objectification of women.¹⁰

The rhetorical slippage of terms like pornography and feminism presents a variety of concerns for scholars unpacking pornography's impact on feminism as well as feminism's impact on pornography. Both concepts crucially depend on the other to create and re-create meaning. In addition to these two terms modifying each other's meanings, capitalism, too, alters the meaning of both feminism and pornography. For example, Weeks directly compared her desire to act in pornography to her refusal to participate in other minimum wage jobs. Speaking as Lauren, she said, "I felt more degraded in a minimum wage, blue-collar, low paying, service job than I ever did doing porn."¹¹ Here, she created a hierarchy between minimum wage jobs and pornography, highlighting that pornography is not as degrading as other jobs in capitalist society. Her lament squarely places pornography (and by extension, feminism) within the capitalist matrix.

Pornography and feminism are co-constitutive; they are intimately linked and construct one another in interesting ways. Rhetoric is central to this process. The ways in which actors describe pornography and feminism as well as situate them within broader social contexts shift the meaning of both pornography and feminism. Academics, pornography stars, and cultural commentators all contribute to representational creations of pornography and feminism. These representations shift the work that pornography does in constructing feminism and vice versa. For example, one could argue that there are enclaves within pornography that are feminist because they emphasize the safety of performers, pleasure of women, and reality of sex, but are situated within a broader pornography community that is not feminist.¹² Conversely, one could argue that all pornography should be considered feminist because it affirms the individual

choices of women to do with their bodies as they please. The material pornography might be the same, but its situatedness within broader contexts changes its meaning and feminist potential; this process is negotiated rhetorically. This thesis will explore the triad of pornography, feminism, and capitalism by analyzing Miriam Weeks's rhetorical constructions of pornography and feminism, paying particular attention to the ways that capitalism intersects both concepts.

Throughout the debacle that followed Weeks's outing, two distinct patterns emerged within Weeks's descriptions of pornography's feminist potential: one that is attentive to a host of structural factors that implicate both pornography and feminism and one that is entirely divorced from these concepts, instead, focusing on "choice" and "individual freedom." The first rhetorical pattern is characterized by Weeks's attentiveness to factors like soaring college tuition prices, the structure of the labor economy, the structure of the pornography industry, and cultural expectations of women's sexuality. When Weeks's rhetoric takes on a structural character, her construction of pornography and feminism becomes much more nuanced. For example, Weeks penned an editorial for *Time* that described her relationship to both college tuition and pornography.¹³ Here, Weeks linked the necessity of her pornography career to the expectation that all American teenagers attend college after high school, arguing that economic need drives many women to act in pornography. Rather than delinking pornography from its broader social context, pornography, here, is directly impacted by external economic forces within capitalist society, such as rising college tuition prices. Feminism, too, is situated within a broader social context. When Weeks was interviewed by Kat Stoeffel, she discussed the rape culture present at Duke University, paying particular attention to the sexual expectations that it created for women.¹⁴ She connected the impact of Duke's rape culture to the virgin-whore dichotomy by arguing that women are simultaneously expected to be sexual and innocent. This feminism is

situated within the context that Duke provides; women on college campuses navigate a field in which they are constrained by gendered sexual expectations, not only limiting the ways in which women can perform their sexuality, but also opening them up to violence if they perform it incorrectly. Weeks mentioned that she experienced rampant slut shaming after it was discovered that she acts in pornographic films, because she performed her sexuality in a socially unacceptable way.¹⁵ All in all, the first rhetorical pattern that emerged is structural and intersectional in character; it is attentive to contextual factors that change the meaning of both pornography and feminism. As will be shown, capitalism is central to this process.

In contrast to the first rhetorical pattern, a second rhetorical pattern emerged within Weeks's defense of pornography that was entirely decontextualized from the broader factors that implicate both pornography and feminism. Namely, in this rhetorical pattern, Weeks's analysis ignored capitalism's import for both pornography and feminism. This pattern is characterized by autonomous individualism; Weeks' defense of pornography became flattened to a defense of individual choice. Weeks argued, "I can say definitively that I have never felt more empowered or happy doing anything else. In a world where women are so often robbed of their choice, I am completely in control of my sexuality."¹⁶ Weeks's defense of pornography, here, is distinct from the defense in the first rhetorical pattern because pornography is delinked from external social factors that both construct and implicate the industry and the bodies that interact within it. Rather than pornography being posited within a broader context of economic factors such as college tuition, it is treated as a permeable industry that is available to any agent who wishes to work within it. Not only is pornography siphoned off from its broader context so, too, is feminism. Weeks argued, "Whatever choice a woman is making and she is the one deciding to do -- reclaiming the agency behind the decision to do, even if it is a degrading sexual act -- is

absolutely feminism.”¹⁷ Here, Weeks vehemently dismissed any argument that a choice that a woman makes could *not* be feminist or could be counterproductive for the broader goals of women’s liberation and empowerment. Her use of dashes around the phrase “reclaiming the agency behind the decision to do, even if it is a degrading sexual act” eliminates the possibility of dissent or exception to her rule of agency and choice. No matter what the choice is, it is feminist if a woman makes it. Feminism is constructed as a movement that accepts and praises *all* choices made by women, regardless of what those choices are. In fact, critiquing women’s choices, Weeks hinted, is *anti*-feminist. This iteration of feminism divorces it from its broader social context; it places the onus of feminist responsibility onto the women who practice feminism. Choice is posited as the ultimate litmus test for feminist empowerment.

In order to unpack the two rhetorical patterns that appeared within Weeks’s defense and justification for acting in pornography, I will borrow the conceptual framework used in Stephen Howard Browne’s essay, “‘This Unparalleled and Inhuman Massacre’: The Gothic, the Sacred, and the Meaning of Nat Turner.” Browne explained that Thomas Gray’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner* represents the “exemplum of two distinctive and competing discourses through which violence—in this case slave rebellion— was to be properly understood. . . . To read *The Confessions* is in fact to read two texts at once.”¹⁸ Following, Browne postulated that within *The Confessions* exist two distinct texts: Gray’s narrative of the events and Turner’s. Each text does different work in constructing both the identity and meaning of Nat Turner. Browne identified the sacred and the gothic as simultaneous textual characteristics that compete for constructing the meaning of violence during antebellum slavery; “each fully consistent on its own terms but standing in sharp contradistinction to the other.”¹⁹ Ultimately, Gray’s *Confessions* “embeds simultaneous but incommensurable languages of moral order.”²⁰ Similarly, within Weeks’s

defense of pornography, two separate texts arose that created different meanings for both pornography and feminism. There is no clear linear temporality that distinguishes amongst Weeks's different rhetorics. She does not transform from a structurally-conscious Weeks into a decontextualized Weeks; rather, these two texts exist at the same time. Although both texts do indeed compete for meaning as the two texts within *The Confessions*, I will argue that Week's decontextualized defense of pornography severely hampers the efficacy of her feminist stance because it prescribes individual solutions to collective problems. When Weeks lost sight of the structural, she also lost sight of the structural *solutions* necessary to combat the problems she identified.

Chapter two will explore the first rhetorical pattern, which focuses on explaining the driving forces that contributed to Weeks's decision to act in pornography and her justification for doing so. Chapter two's analysis takes on an intersectional and structural character; Weeks attended to the various power systems that she had to navigate in order to make particular choices as well as the consequences of those choices. Primarily, her analysis of college tuition prices and Duke culture grounded her decision to act in pornography in an intersectional, multi-faceted way. By situating pornography within a web of other factors, Weeks constructed a pornography that is stratified. Indeed, the pornography in this version of Weeks's story is similar to other social institutions: stratified along lines of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Additionally, Weeks's attentiveness to power structures changed the way feminism functions; it understood feminism as related to class, race, education, and a variety of other factors that nuance the ways in which gender is experienced by different bodies. In short, feminism and pornography shift in tandem with a particular vision of economics. Weeks's understanding of the economic nuances that exist within the pornography industry helped temper her construction of

feminism; similarly, her understanding of feminism helped expose the gendered, raced, and classed contours of pornography.

In chapter three, I explore the second pattern that emerged in Weeks's rhetoric. This rhetorical pattern is neoliberal in character, premised on individualized market rationality. A common line of argument emerged time and time again throughout Weeks's media tour: I chose to do pornography freely, it makes me feel sexually empowered; therefore, acting in pornography is a feminist act. Ultimately, Weeks argued that a fundamental characteristic of feminism is affirming that women have the agency to make whatever choices they desire. Her defense of pornography emphasized that individual women should be supported in their individual choices, no matter what those choices are. Weeks's description of choice as the ultimate litmus test for feminism constructed a different version of her story that ultimately changed the force and consequence of her rhetoric. Pornography is constructed as if it is a non-unique business, indistinct from any other capitalist enterprise. Factors such as gender, race, and class are stripped from this construction of pornography. Not only that, feminism is constructed as a one-dimensional system, only addressing gender without thoughtfulness to the factors that could modify how an individual experiences gender. Just as in chapter two, here again, three sets of factors shift in tandem: pornography, feminism, and their interaction with the economic order.

This thesis will not attempt to definitively answer the question of pornography's empowering potential, because as previously noted, empowerment and liberation are discursively constructed and malleable. As such, the pro-pornography / anti-pornography binary does little to advance academic research that delves into the contours and complexities of the various pornographies at work. The pro-pornography / anti-pornography binary is insufficient for rich, textured analysis because it assumes a singular, stable pornography. To answer the question of

whether pornography is good or bad is to assume pornography is a variable that can be independently manipulated, absent factors such as feminism and the economy. My argument, here, is about the *work* that Weeks's *rhetorics do* in constructing both pornography and feminism. My analysis of Weeks's rhetoric illuminates the destabilizing nature of pornography, particularly with regard to its relationship to feminism and capitalism.

The remainder of this introduction will explore some of the broader contexts and academic conversations that help situate both Weeks and her rhetoric. First, I will broadly map the field of pornography studies, both as a field of study as well as how it relates to communication and rhetoric. Next, I will review intersectional feminist theory, which informs my analysis of Weeks's rhetoric in chapter two. Finally, I will explore neoliberalism and choice rhetoric, which provides the basis for my analysis in chapter three.

Pornographies, Feminisms, and Neoliberalism

Academically, pornography has received attention from a variety of angles, but Linda Williams, editor of the foundational anthology, *Porn Studies*, and author of *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible"* argues that pornography studies has not been "serious and substantive" in its "historiography, theory and analysis."²¹ She goes on to say that rather than pornography studies being a "thriving field," it is one that is "sporadic, always about to happen."²² It is not surprising, then, that the field of pornography studies did not host a dedicated journal until 2014 when the first volume of *Porn Studies* (distinct from the anthology above) was published by Routledge, co-edited by Feona Atwood and Clarissa Smith.²³ *Porn Studies* represents the first academic journal that solely focuses on the study of pornography, and it includes arguments from a wide variety of academic disciplines, such as communication,

gender, sociology, and film studies. In its introductory issue, Smith and Atwood situate contemporary research about pornography within a broader historical lineage and debate that has progressed for decades. They discuss ‘anti-porn’, ‘pro-porn’, ‘sex-positive’ and ‘sex-critical’ approaches in relation to current framings of pornography as well as postfeminism and neoliberalism.²⁴

Smith and Atwood’s introduction to the *Porn Studies* journal provides helpful groundwork for understanding the types of research questions and methods that are central to studying pornography with a critical lens. They argue that critical approaches to pornography are able to unpack what is at stake in the construction of particular views and practices. Crucially they [critical pornography studies] draw on insights from disciplines that acknowledge the complexity of culture and are aware of the shifts and continuities in the ways that sex and media are constructed historically. They use methods in a way that shows understanding of what tools are needed to carry out different kinds of analysis and an awareness of how research is framed by asking particular kinds of questions and what advantages and problems arise from doing things in particular kinds of ways.²⁵

Smith and Atwood draw attention to a central characteristic of studying pornography: it is not so much about a singular “pornography,” but rather, a plethora of “pornographies.”²⁶ Pornography does not have a coherent or singular meaning or representation; rather, it is constructed by “particular views and practices” which are further modified by broader socio-cultural complexities. The existence of a plethora of pornographies is fundamental for understanding why the pro-pornography / anti-pornography binary is regressive and unproductive in its analysis of pornography and feminism. It assumes a stable pornography that does not exist. There is no

ultimate answer to the question of pornography's empowering potential, and there never will be because the meaning of pornography shifts based upon its positioning within matrices of power. Pornography could be empowering in one instance while being disempowering in another. In short, pornography's instability means that analysts must pay particular attention to the complex context at play.

Contextualizing pornography studies more specifically to rhetoric, Jonathan Elmer agrees that "pornography" is not a coherent term with singular meanings. Pornography is constructed both materially and discursively. It is the "persistent limit-case of acceptable discourse."²⁷ Given pornography's material and discursive construction, he argues that pro-pornography and anti-pornography positions are dependent on ever-shifting contexts which inevitably create slippage among terms and ideas, making it difficult to find a definitive answer to the question of pornography's liberating potential. Quoting Kenneth Burke, Magnus Ullén clarifies this position by arguing that pornographic works must be analyzed "just like other imaginative works" because they arise from particular situations, thus, contain particular contours that are not generalizable to every individual act.²⁸ Ultimately, despite the binary that has been constructed between pro-pornography feminists and anti-pornography feminists, the empowering potential of pornography crucially depends on the contextual factors that implicate both the decision to act in pornography as well as the pornographic act itself.

Not only are there pornographies, there are feminisms. Hildy Miller notes that the plurality of feminisms has caused tension within the feminist movement, particularly because feminists critiquing other feminists often ignore the socio-cultural factors that contribute to particular constructions of feminism at various historical moments.²⁹ In this thesis, I will explore two feminisms that Weeks constructs: intersectional feminism and neoliberal feminism. The first

feminism is characterized by its attentiveness to what Patricia Hill Collins calls the “matrix of domination,” which encompasses a variety of social power systems that create both privilege and marginalization for a variety of groups.³⁰ Collins argues that the matrix of domination codifies how particular bodies interact within civil society. Secondly, neoliberal feminism is premised on individualism. The activation of personal choice and responsibility is the fundamental characteristic of this form of feminism.

Intersectional feminist theory came into existence, in large part, due to mainstream (white) feminism’s failure to theorize how factors like race and class implicate how gender is experienced. Kimberle Crenshaw coined the term “intersectionality” in her article “Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color.” This work has been foundational in critiquing mainstream feminism’s ignorance of the ways in which race and class implicate the function that feminism serves for particular women. She argues, “Feminist efforts to politicize experiences of women and antiracist efforts to politicize experiences of people of color have frequently proceeded as though the issues and experiences they each detail occur on mutually exclusive terrains. Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices.”³¹ The fundamental problem identified, here, is that feminism has treated gender as *the single vector* that determines and scripts the oppressions that women experience. Deborah King contextualizes this idea further. Discussing the common slogan “sisterhood is powerful,” she argues that this “assertion of commonality, indeed of the universality and primacy of female oppression, denies the other structured inequalities of race, class, religion, and nationality, as well as denying the diverse cultural heritages that affect the lives of many women.”³²

King blames, in large part, the phenomenological approach to women's liberation, arguing the motto "the personal is political" privileges "a few women's personal lives over all women's lives by assuming that these few could be prototypical."³³ Given white, middle-class women's relative privilege in comparison to other women, the flattening of experience to gender ensured that the goals of the women's liberation movement most closely aligned with improving the lives of white, middle-class women, rather than *all* women:

Feminism has excluded and devalued black women, our experiences, and our interpretations of our own realities at the conceptual and ideological level. . . . These theoretical blinders obscured the ability of certain feminists first to recognize the multifaceted nature of women's oppressions and then to envision theories that encompass those realities. As a consequence, monistic feminism's ability to foresee remedies that would neither abandon women to the other discriminations, including race and class, nor exacerbate those burdens is extremely limited.³⁴

Fundamentally, mainstream, white feminism's lack of attentiveness to race and class robs it of its liberating potential for a broad sample of women. Feminism that focuses solely on gender may, indeed, be liberating for middle-class, white women, but it will not have the same effect for women who do not share this social location.

To explain further, Betty Friedan's landmark work *The Feminine Mystique* explores "the problem that has no name." For Friedan, "the problem that has no name" was the malaise that white, primarily upper-middle class, educated, heterosexual, married women experienced during marriage. She argued that women were growing bored and unsatisfied with their lives as housewives, but did not have the language to articulate what the "problem" was, thus, "the

problem that has no name.”³⁵ Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique* is often credited with sparking the Second Wave of feminism, but it is equally as notorious for sparking scathing criticisms of feminism’s inability to theorize outside of gender. bell hooks in the first chapter of her 1984 book, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, begins with one such critique:

Friedan's famous phrase, "the problem that has no name," often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle- and upper-class, married white women—housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life. Friedan concludes her first chapter by stating: "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my house.'" That "more" she defined as careers. She did not discuss who would be called in to take care of the children and maintain the home if more women like herself were freed from their house labor and given equal access with white men to the professions. She did not speak of the needs of women without men, without children, without homes. She ignored the existence of all non-white women and poor white women. She did not tell readers whether it was more fulfilling to be a maid, a babysitter, a factory worker, a clerk, or a prostitute than to be a leisure-class housewife.³⁶

The effect of Friedan’s ignorance, hooks argued, was that feminism was flattened to only one vector of analysis, rather than taking stock of the plethora of factors that implicate how women experience sexism. The feminism that Friedan constructed was inaccessible and even counterproductive for a huge sample of women. The very idea that a woman could be “bored”

with her life as a housewife relied upon a vast amount of privilege that many women are unable to access.

Delia D. Aguilair, in her article “From Triple Jeopardy to Intersectionality: The Feminist Perplex,” traces the historical lineage of intersectional feminism, and argues that one of feminism’s contemporary problems is its lack of intersectional and systemic analysis. Historically, she points to the “onslaught of neoconservatism” that occurred during the Reagan / Bush era of the 1980s that aided in “eviscerating” feminism’s “revolutionary content,” leaving a “populace trained to think and act in individual, fragmented terms.”³⁷ Specifically, she notes that the proliferation of feminist blogging has been entirely decontextualized from a broader analysis of power structures. “It is being conducted as if feminism exists in a vacuum.”³⁸ Aguilair’s historical reading of intersectional feminism echoes King’s initial claim that over-emphasis on the personal and individual are precisely what strips feminism of having an intersectional or systemic focus. The primary reason Aguilair claims this personal tilt in feminist theorizing has occurred is due to the delinking of feminist analysis from the context of capitalism. Not only has capitalism been delinked from feminist analysis, but for Aguilair, capitalism has co-opted feminism entirely. She uses the example of microlending to explain this process. Although microlending has given women in developing countries access to material wealth, it is controlled by big business. Microlending became popularized as “social entrepreneurship,” seamlessly integrating women into the capitalist fold without questioning capitalism’s role in the continuing degradation of women globally.³⁹

The delinking of feminism and capitalism has caused a host of problems. Least of all is the neoliberalization of feminism, representing another type of feminism that is constructed in Weeks’s story. It is difficult to distinguish between terms like “capitalism” and “neoliberalism,”

particularly when both represent academic conversations that have only continued to multiply. For the purposes of this thesis, I will draw a distinction between these two terms. When I say capitalism, I mean a system of economics that relies upon the smooth functioning of markets with limited state intervention. When I say capitalism, I only am referring to a system of economics. In contrast, neoliberalism is much more all-encompassing. When I mention neoliberalism, I mean the infiltration of market-rationality into every aspect of life. Alison Phipps in her book, *The Politics of the Body: Gender in a Neoliberal and Neoconservative Age*, offers a helpful definition of neoliberalism. She argues, “neoliberalism, which developed first in the United States and then rapidly in Western Europe (Duggan 2003: xi-xii), is premised on the absolute freedom of capitalist markets and trading relationships which was a central tenet of classical liberal thinking, but has cascaded these principles into the social realm with a central assumption that societies function best with a minimum of state intervention (Harvey 2005).”⁴⁰ This definition is appropriate given the context of the topic at hand; Phipps developed her definition contextually within her analysis of sex work, feminism, and their interaction with capitalism, which is precisely the context in which I will apply neoliberalism. Neoliberal ideology maintains that minimal state intervention is best not just for economics, but for every aspect of life. For example, rather than funding governmental assistance programs to aid students struggling to pay for college, neoliberalism would instead prescribe market-based solutions to solve the college affordability problem. Similarly, neoliberalism would mandate market-based solutions to fix problems associated with inequality, such as poverty or the gender pay gap.

Not only does neoliberalism prescribe market-based solutions to all social problems, it also demands specific bodily performances. Phipps argues that the exchange value of particular bodies is fundamental to the smooth functioning of neoliberal consumer markets. The

“consumption of sexualized bodies” is central to “profitable markets,” and as a result, neoliberalism structures both embodiment and subjectivity.⁴¹ The body is central to the ways in which neoliberalism prescribes acceptable comportment:

Through channels such as government policy, advertising and popular culture, neoliberalism has become a normative framework, based on the idea of citizens as rational and self-interested economic actors with agency and control over their own lives. Within its architecture political and social problems are converted into market terms, becoming individual issues with consumption-based solutions (Brown 2006: 704). The body is a key site at which this process occurs, a vehicle for the ‘appropriate’ consumption practices which are put forward as a panacea for contemporary social problems (Evans and Riley 2012: 3). Success is measured by individuals’ capacity for self-care via the market, and those who do not achieve their potential are viewed as failures rather than as victims of oppressive social structures.⁴²

Neoliberalism treats people as individuals who are rational and self-interested. In this vision, regardless of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, or ability, individuals are assumed to have absolute agency over their actions, and as a result, are exclusively responsible for solving their own marginalization. This framework mandates that individuals solve their problems using *market solutions*. Rather than problems being conceptualized collectively or as resulting from power structures, problems are conceptualized individually. This idea is similar to the “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” mentality that has permeated much of American politics. Activation and affirmation of individual agency is foundational to neoliberalism.

Not only are agency and choice central to neoliberalism, they are also central to certain constructions of feminism. Pro-pornography feminists oft argue that pornography is empowering because pornography actors utilize their sexual agency to do with their bodies whatever they please. Questions of agency and choice are concepts frequently explored by communication scholars, particularly with regard to feminism. Bonnie Dow's landmark essay, "Feminism, Miss America, and Media Mythology" exposes a common rhetorical strategy used to delegitimize feminist critique: "the mythology of individualism" which posits that if individual women find something feminist or empowering, then critiques that argue the contrary are irrelevant.⁴³ Throughout the article, Dow tells the story of the conflicting narratives between Miss America contestants and the feminists who critiqued the pageant's existence. On the one hand, contestants argued that they were not exploited and, in fact, had the agency to compete in pageants without perpetuating damaging notions of beauty. On the other, feminists who protested the pageant argued that it reified beauty standards that not only damage women, but also encourage the societal belief that women should be seen as beautiful objects, not as acting subjects.

Dow highlights the difficulty of maintaining a systemic critique of patriarchy and other oppressive power systems, "in the face of general media norms toward personalization, a problem made even more acute when the topic at hand lends itself so easily to a focus on the personal."⁴⁴ Second, Dow shows that feminists experience a mediated double-bind: either beauty pageant contestants are "fooling themselves" or feminists are "out of touch with average women," thus, attaching themselves to extremist feminist positions and *alienating* the "average woman."⁴⁵ Despite media's constructed double-bind, Dow argues that agency is much more complicated than what appears in mediated reports. Ultimately, external factors such as gender, class, race, and sexuality restrict the choices that are available to a given agent. Third, Dow

traces the ways in which media tropes of feminism attempt to flatten it to liberalism, with its accompanying emphases on “individualism, self-actualization, and achievement within existing social hierarchies.”⁴⁶ Each of these conclusions are important starting points for my project because they underline a few vital characteristics of feminism as it relates to agency: 1) Systemic critiques of power structures are foundational to effective praxis, but increasingly difficult to maintain due to the ways in which feminism is discursively constructed. 2) Agency is mediated by a variety of factors that determine the options available to the agent. 3) Feminism and liberalism have become discursively intertwined.

To summarize, pornography studies is a nascent academic field. Although scholars have analyzed the effects of pornography for decades, it has not been until recently that the pornography studies field has developed a set of core research questions that scholars tackle. In this thesis, I adopt the fundamental premise that pornography does not have a singular, monolithic meaning, but rather, is constructed by a host of contextual factors that script meaning and change the work that pornography does. Particularly, I explore pornography’s relationship to feminism as mediated by capitalism. Intersectional/systemic feminism is a helpful theoretical tool to unpack the ways in which pornography is constructed when capitalism is factored in to the analysis. On the other hand, neoliberal feminism is a helpful theoretical tool to conceptualize how pornography is constructed absent attentiveness to capitalism.

The relationships among pornography, feminism, and capitalism can be explored by analyzing Weeks’s defense of her pornography career. As explained above, Weeks’s structurally conscious rhetoric constructed pornography within a system of hierarchies that implicate which bodies can achieve success in the industry. Given pornography’s construction within hierarchal systems, its interaction with feminism also changes the meaning of feminism itself. Rather than

feminism being a movement solely focused on gender, it is also concerned with other social factors, like race and class, that create marginalization for particular bodies. Intersectional feminist analysis helps explain how this iteration of feminism differs from the other rhetorical text that emerged within Weeks's defense. When speaking about Weeks's intersectional rhetoric, I will refer to her as Miriam Weeks. In contrast to Weeks's intersectional rhetoric is Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric, which I will textually distinguish by referring to her in these instances as Belle Knox instead of Miriam Weeks. The rationale for this change in name is twofold. First, I want to be clear which "text" I am referencing at a given moment, which is difficult given the lack of linearity to Weeks's different rhetorics. Using the name Weeks when she employs intersectional rhetoric and the name Belle Knox when she employs neoliberal rhetoric will make this distinction plain. Second, as I will argue in chapter three, part of the neoliberalization of Weeks's rhetoric is due to the removal of her identity as a student and the context that Duke provided; referring to her by her porn star name, Belle Knox, rather than her birth name, Miriam Weeks, helps make this distinction apparent.

Chapter 2: Lauren the Student, Aurora the Pornography Star

“When I’m in porn land, I feel at home. Like this is where I’m supposed to be.”

“What about Duke?”

“It’s really not like that at Duke. I feel like girls at Duke have to hide their sexuality. And we’re caught in this whole virgin-whore thing. It doesn’t exist in porn. When you go to porn land, you lose that very intense virgin-whore pressure we put on girls. So when I get back to Duke, you’re hit with this pressure. Being a virgin, and being innocent, and being prude. While at the same time, being slutty, basically, and having sex. . . . Being a woman at Duke is extremely difficult. Being a sexual woman at Duke is extremely difficult.”⁴⁷

This chapter will analyze the first text that emerged from Weeks’s rhetoric, which is distinguished by its emphases on myriad factors that implicate both pornography and feminism, particularly, capitalism. As explained in the introduction, intersectional feminism is premised on understanding gender as situated within a broader matrix of power that implicates the ways in which gender is experienced by particular bodies. Weeks’s intersectional defense of pornography created different meanings for both pornography and feminism. When Weeks discussed pornography alongside Duke and economics, she changed the work that pornography did in calibrating the meaning of feminism. Throughout Weeks’s intersectional text, she attended to a variety of factors that drove her decision to act in pornography as well as some of the patriarchal expectations that women must navigate not only in pornography, but on college campuses throughout the country. When pornography is contextualized within this broader framework, Weeks’s rhetoric does the work of constructing visions of feminism and pornography that are

distinct from the construction of these concepts when Duke and other contextual factors are not present (which will be explored in chapter three).

In her first public interview with the *Duke Chronicle*, Duke's student-run newspaper, reporter Katie Fernelius met Weeks (identifying herself as Lauren) for lunch and Fernelius received a first look into Weeks's rationale for pornography. Weeks-as-Lauren stated, "For me, Lauren is nerdy, she's intelligent, she's aspirational. So is Aurora—but she's sexy and innocent, too. She gets to be more open than Lauren, more vulnerable. I feel totally and completely myself as Lauren and as Aurora. An alter-ego is liberating. It's probably the most empowered I have ever felt."⁴⁸ Weeks-as-Lauren attempted to maintain some separation between her two identities: Lauren the Duke student and Aurora the pornography star. Present, here, was a level of social consciousness that grounded Lauren's description of Aurora's pornography career. Weeks's preservation of her two alter egos, pornography star and student, revealed that she understood her career as a pornography performer as another identity layered on top of her identity as a student. This layering of identity is foundational to intersectional politics; it understands identity not as grounded in one particular category (such as gender), but instead, as a compilation of a variety of identity categories (gender, education, class, etc.). Weeks's-as-Lauren's analysis of her student persona allowed her to discuss the expenses associated with higher education as well as the culture of misogyny and sexism that has festered not only at Duke, but throughout college campuses across the country. Her porn star identity also forwarded a conversation about money; the only reason Lauren acted in pornography, as Aurora, was to avoid student loan debt. At this stage, Weeks's analysis noted that market factors such as college tuition prices drive as well as constrain her decision-making. As Weeks's identity is fractured, compartmentalized, and multifaceted, so too, are her constructions of both pornography and feminism. The existence of

Lauren and her alter ego, Aurora, helped couch Weeks's analysis within the social factors that implicate her ability to both act in pornography and function as a student at Duke. Pornography and feminism, as a result, are also couched within these social factors. Weeks clearly distinguished Lauren's existence at Duke with Aurora's existence within the pornography industry. This distinction helps draw attention to the broader context that situates both Weeks and her rhetoric; pornography is placed in direct opposition to Duke, which illuminated the broader social dynamics that Weeks navigated to make decisions about both pornography and feminism. This placement also changed the work that pornography did in constructing feminism; pornography is stratified along lines of class, race, and gender, all of which shape its interaction with feminism.

In order to reveal Weeks's intersectional rhetoric, I will analyze three texts, in addition to *The Duke Chronicle* article above, within which Weeks utilized an intersectional lens to explain both pornography and feminism: Weeks's piece published on *Jezebel* on July 2, 2014, titled "Tearing Down the Whorearchy From the Inside"; Kat Stoeffel's interview with Weeks titled "Q&A: The Duke Freshman Porn Star" on February 24, 2014, and the article that Weeks published on *Time* on June 16, 2014, "'Duke Porn Star': I Lost My Financial Aid". First, in the Whorearchy article, Weeks analyzed the pornography industry, arguing that it is deeply stratified by class, race, and gender. Throughout this essay, Weeks criticized the ways in which the social locations of individuals engaged in pornography implicated the work that was available, the payment received, and how the work was received by consumers. Next, in the Stoeffel interview, Weeks is profoundly connected to the context that Duke provides. Throughout this interview, Weeks argued that the culture present at Duke is one that objectifies and slut shames women, which she argued is a result of male privilege as well as class-based entitlement. Additionally,

she discussed the shame that women experience as a result of sexist culture that controls and mandates particular performances of female sexuality. Finally, in the *Time* article, Weeks analyzed her own incentive for performing in pornography: exorbitant college tuition costs.

In all of these texts, Weeks attended to a multitude of factors that implicate pornography and feminism. Although her analysis is certainly not at the level of a seasoned academic engaging in intersectional feminist analysis, her attentiveness to structures of power is still enough to change the rhetorical meanings that are constructed for both pornography and feminism. I argue that Weeks's incorporation of economic analysis changes the work her rhetoric does, nuancing the accessibility of the pornography industry as well as the work necessary to make feminism an effective social movement that combats the structures that do violence to women. Said in another way, Weeks attended to the role that capitalism plays in both the pornography industry in and of itself, as well as the rationale for why individuals would decide to engage in pornography in the first place. Weeks's explanation of oppressive social stratifications as they relate to pornography helped ground pornography within a broader context of power relations that revealed, rather than mystified, the impact pornography has on sexist society and vice versa. Similarly, feminism is constructed as an ideology that is attentive to a plethora of factors that implicate women, particularly class. Not only that, the feminism that is constructed in this narrative is not merely an instantiation of affirming individualism; rather, Weeks discussed an entire system of gendered expectations that prescribe which courses of action are available to women. To be clear, Weeks's rhetoric is far from ideal intersectional analysis. For example, although she paid homage to the racism that exists in pornography in the Whorearchy article, her analysis of race is not sustained in other pieces, and entirely disappears when her rhetoric is neoliberal. Despite this, Weeks's inclusion of class-based analysis is still

enough to change the force and consequence of her rhetorical constructions of pornography and feminism.

This chapter will proceed in two parts. First, I will analyze the ways in which pornography is constructed when Weeks utilized intersectional analysis. Primarily, she constructed a pornography that is attuned to the social hierarchies that must be navigated in order to achieve success in the industry. The second section explores the implications of Weeks's intersectional analysis on feminism, arguing that feminism is constructed not merely as an analysis of gender, but instead, incorporates a variety of factors that implicate women's ability to navigate the world.

Whorearchies and Intersections: Weeks's Construction of Pornography

Weeks (writing as Belle Knox) penned "Tearing Down the Whorearchy from the Inside," published on *Jezebel*, in order to explain and deconstruct some of the hierarchies that exist within the sex work industry itself. Although Weeks often mentioned that the pornography industry has issues, the Whorearchy article represents the most detailed account of her feelings about sex work writ-large. Throughout this piece, Weeks discussed her personal experiences with pornography, but directly connected her experiences to the broader construction of the sex industry and its accompanying hierarchies. She argued, "Since filming my first porn scene, I've discovered that sex work segregates itself along perceived social and legal lines ranging from phone-sex operation to stripping and porn to prostitution."⁴⁹ Following this claim, she explained that sex work is arranged by closeness of contact to clients and police. "The closer to both you are, the closer you are to the bottom."⁵⁰ For example, those at the "top" of the hierarchy are those with no direct contact to clients or police, i.e. cam models, who are paid to strip or pleasure

themselves on camera for remote viewers. On the opposite side of the hierarchy are those “closest” to clients and the police. Weeks argued that street-level prostitution represents this “bottom.” This hierarchy produces competition and internalized stigma amongst sex workers, which Weeks argued prevents sex workers from allying against criminalization and advocating for social, legal, and political reform. Important to note is that Weeks conceptualized the struggle for sex worker liberation as a *collective* movement, rather than an individualized process of autonomous decision-making.

Weeks’s analysis of pornography’s stratifications produced a particular discursive construction of sex work: it is attentive to factors that exist within the industry itself, rather than treating sex work as a non-unique capitalist enterprise equally-accessible to all. Emphasizing the unique gendered and classed nature of sex work helped situate workers within a broader understanding of how labor functions. It noted that sex work is not a monolithic entity in which workers are genderless, classless, raceless, but rather, a job that stratifies along these lines. The hierarchies that Weeks observed in pornography also apply to feminism, which aids in the construction of feminism as a movement that goes beyond gender as its sole vector of analysis. As will become more apparent in the section on feminism, Weeks likened these hierarchies to sexual hierarchies that women experience while navigating college or other social settings where gender norms do the work of disciplining feminine performances. Weeks’s connection of everyday sexism to sexism in the industry produced a more complex understanding of the ways in which sexist ideals in society permeate every aspect of life and are re-enforced by sex work.

After laying out the general idea of sexual hierarchies within sex work generally, Weeks turned her attention to the particular hierarchies that exist within pornography itself. Weeks was

clear that the stratifications she identified coalesce with social stratifications along similar lines of race, class, and gender. She explained:

Women who engage in specifically interracial or edgier scenes are viewed as somehow "lower" by other performers. I was marginalized within the industry for my work on a rough sex website. I've witnessed colleagues receive racist epithets for their work on interracial productions. Gay or trans performers are particularly ostracized by the mainstream due to the AIDS stigma attached to their work.⁵¹

Although Weeks did not go into detailed explanations about how these stratifications function, her rhetorical centering of race, perceived social status, sexual orientation, and gender changed the work her rhetoric did in constructing pornography. Rather than pornography functioning as a fluid, open, and accessible industry that is available to anyone who desires to engage in sex work, Weeks highlighted the discrimination and accessibility issues present within the industry. It might be easy to argue that *any* capitalist business holds these same hierarchies; however, Weeks's analysis is particularly important for pornography given its inherently gendered and classed nature. For example, *BusinessInsider's* Aly Weisman interviewed Mark Spiegler, one of the top agents for female pornography performers; he explained that although female pornography performers generally make more than their male counterparts, the amount that a woman is paid crucially depends on the appearance and desirability of the woman herself. The more "desirable" the woman according to mainstream standards (white, thin, conventionally attractive), the more money she will make.⁵² The gendered, raced, and classed expectations are unapologetically built into the payment scale itself. Although gender and race pay-gaps exist regardless of the industry, they are rarely codified into the business model itself. Weeks's attentiveness to these dynamics helps nuance the accessibility of success in pornography. Here,

she complicated the notion that any woman can freely make the choice to engage in pornography.

Weeks's discussion of high and low status within the pornography industry helped frame the stratification she described. Sociologist Max Weber's theory of stratification helps explain how status functions to both promote and limit an individual's ability to navigate particular social circumstances. He argues that race, ethnicity, gender, and/or membership in particular professional or political groups, among a host of other factors, contribute to an individual's perceived status group.⁵³ To be clear, he distinguishes these status markers from economic class, arguing that economic class certainly contributes to social status, but can also be concealed by achieving status in other categories. For example, although an individual may be economically disadvantaged, if she is white, educated, and heterosexual, she would likely achieve higher status than an economically disadvantaged individual who is black, un-educated, or queer. Weber's multifaceted analysis of status helps explain how Weeks's rhetoric functions in this instance: her emphasis on status and stratification highlighted that a variety of factors implicate an individual's success or access to success in the pornography industry. She argued, "I understand that the hierarchy originates from outdated, pernicious ideas about sex, gender, and class."⁵⁴ Here, she directly connected the hierarchies present in pornography to the hierarchies that are maintained in capitalist heteropatriarchal society. Her attentiveness to these factors helped situate pornography within the broader matrix of power. Given the gendered, raced, and classed nature of pornographic work in and of itself, attentiveness to these hierarchies is fundamentally important in constructing a pornography that is textured with hierarchies that implicate who can and cannot access success, particularly economic benefits, from engaging in the industry.

In addition to her analysis of pornography as an industry, Weeks discussed the decision-making process that performers engage when determining whether or not they wish to engage in sex work. She argued that the decision is determined by weighing the economic benefits of acting in pornography with the relative shame and stigma that sex workers experience as a result of popular representations of their work throughout media. In the Whorearchy article, Weeks explained:

Sex work's stigma — the negative connotations, the misogyny, double-standards and slut-shaming — are reasons many women who have other options avoid associating with it. This leads to a vicious cycle. When sex work is dominated by people who think they have no other options, you're going to see a lot of bad behavior and self-destruction. Regardless of the reality, the pop-culture representation of a sex worker is "something went wrong." This further justifies the stigma and ostracization of sex workers. There is nothing intrinsically damaging about sex work. But the stigma scares away most people who aren't self-destructive.⁵⁵

Here, Weeks identified a whole host of factors that contribute to women's willingness to engage in sex work. The categories she identified can be divided into two broader categories: stigma and misogyny. Weeks's iteration of the pornography decision-making process, here, is much different than the process she constructed elsewhere, which generally boiled down to the idea that engaging in pornography is an individual choice that women make. First, Weeks argued that stigma is central to the process that actors engage when determining whether or not they should act in pornography. As discussed above, status or perceived status has much to do with the process of stratification and stigma, which Weeks integrated into the decision-making calculus.

Misogyny is also central to this process. Weeks contended that double standards and slut shaming often dissuade women from engaging in sex work. Taken together, the stigma and misogyny associated with pornography generally drive women away from the industry, which Weeks argued leaves an industry full of women who “think they have no other opinions,” thus, creating self-destructive behavior. In this instance, Weeks constructed pornography’s problems not only as resulting from social hierarchies, but also as resulting from pop-cultural misrepresentations of sex work itself. She said “regardless of the reality,” implying the common representation of stigma and shame is inaccurate, “the pop-culture representation of a sex worker is “something went wrong.”” Here, she stirred up common media images of sex work as a last resort or as a profession that no one would rationally engage in; thus, re-perpetuating the cycle of stigma and misogyny that sex workers experience. Immediately following, she asserted her own representation of sex work: “There is nothing intrinsically damaging about sex work.”

Not only did Weeks broadly discuss sex workers’ decisions to engage in the industry, her *Time* piece, went into detail about her own decision-making process for acting in pornographic films. In this article, she argued that the wrong question to ask is why she does *pornography* (as opposed to a different job); but, rather, the best question to ask is “what got me here.”⁵⁶ She explained, “Demand for education, kind of like demand for porn, is pretty inelastic. Kids like me have been told our whole lives that higher education is the only way to be successful in America.”⁵⁷ Following, she claimed that not only is there already high demand, but due to the economic depression that began in 2008, more and more folks have delayed entering the workforce, thus, exacerbating demand for college. To top it off, she reasoned that governmental subsidies and loans have created a disincentive for colleges to lower tuition and make college more affordable. “Either way, demand is high and the money will keep flowing. So why bother

with thrift?”⁵⁸ Her argument about thrift is that colleges have no incentive to decrease tuition prices because state-funded grants and loans will insure universities get paid, thus, “why bother with thrift?”

Putting the accuracy of her analysis of the government’s role in soaring tuition prices aside, her argument, here, centered economic factors that drive individuals to make particular decisions. Whether or not she is correct about the government’s role in this process is irrelevant; her attentiveness to economic factors still changes how pornography is discursively constructed. Rather than emphasizing “why *pornography*,” it emphasizes “what *drove me* to pornography.” The distinction is subtle, but important for the work it does in rhetorically constructing pornography: focusing on the factors that drive a person to make a decision rather than the decision itself re-focuses attention not on the act, but on the broader context that justifies and drives that particular act in the first place. Here, rather than Weeks positing pornography as an individual, autonomous choice that feels “liberating,” she posited pornography as more of a “last resort” that she was driven to by economic factors over which she has no control. The central character of the economy that her analysis of college tuition provided made way for an analysis of the way economic class determines what options are available to particular agents.

Not only did Weeks explain her decision-making process to engage in pornography within a structural framework in these instances, she also acknowledged that her experience is fortunate and unique in comparison to the experiences that many women have in the sex industry. Here, rather than Weeks projecting her individual experience onto the pornography industry broadly, she is careful to acknowledge that her experience is privileged, unique, and that others engaged in sex work have had experiences that were exploitative, rather than empowering.

I want to say I'm very fortunate with my experience in the industry. Some girls get what we call a "suitcase pimp." It's when somebody pretends to be an agent and then scams a girl and literally pimps her out to people. Some girls aren't as lucky as me and don't have an agent. They're left to deal with these transactions on their own, and they're often scammed or exploited. These are the narratives you aren't hearing because society has deemed sex workers untouchable. The reason you don't hear about these women getting scammed is because they're scared, because for so long they've been told to be ashamed of their jobs.⁵⁹

The narrative that Weeks highlighted here was also highlighted at the roundtable conversation that I mentioned in the introduction. Consent in pornography is incredibly complicated. As Melissa Gira Grant explained, there are two forms of consent that are conflated: "consent to different kinds of sexual activity, and consent to performing different kinds of sexual activity in particular working conditions. . . . what's going on isn't just sexual consent, but consent to labor."⁶⁰ A pornography performer may consent to particular sexual activities in certain circumstances (i.e. in the bedroom with a partner and no cameras) but not consent to those same activities in particular working conditions (i.e. on a pornography shoot). The conflation of these two forms of consent is where the pernicious idea arises that pornography performers are "unrapeable." Weeks's analysis of her experiences as they relate to other pornography performers' experiences helps reveal the complex nature of consent practices within pornography; thus, complicating the narrative that pornography is always safe, consensual, and accessible to all.

In addition to the conversation about consent, the group at *RedWedge* discussed the connection between sex worker rights and patriarchy more broadly. Cathryn Berarovich

explained, “The affirmation of sex workers' rights and the end of rape culture are absolutely connected, since both are about the bodily autonomy of human beings, especially women.”⁶¹ Berarovich’s comments highlight the interconnected nature of pornography and feminism. Each touch on similar questions: agency, consent, sexual empowerment, and bodily autonomy. As shown in this section, the first rhetorical text that emerged within Weeks’s defense of her pornography career is attentive to these questions. She constructed a pornography that is stratified along social hierarchies that modify the success that is available to the agent. Not only that, this text is attentive to the fact that pornography, for a lot of people, is exploitative and oppressive. Rather than a blanket affirmation of pornography’s empowering potential, Weeks’s rhetoric, here, is contextualized to many factors at play, and thus, represents an intersectional understanding of oppression. The pornography constructed here is complex and far from monolithic. Rather than treating pornography as an openly accessible industry, regardless of class, race, and gender, Weeks constructed pornography within social hierarchies that determine the success that a pornography actor will receive as well as the relative danger and shame she will experience as a result. Pornography is constructed intersectionally. Now, I will turn to the work this construction of pornography does in constructing feminism.

“A lady in the street, but a freak in the bed”: Weeks’s Intersectional Feminist Rhetoric

Kat Stoeffel asked Weeks, “You’re not the first woman at Duke who has come under intense scrutiny for her sexual choices. Is there something about the environment that explains why the rumor prevailed over your humanity?”⁶² Following this question, Weeks explained that at Duke, “We are a culture that disrespects and slut-shames women. . . . and I blame the Greek system a lot for this — culture of objectifying women.”⁶³ She continued, “The median income of

students at Duke is \$350,000. So you have these rich, entitled males coming to Duke and what that translates to is a sense of entitlement over women's bodies and women's sex."⁶⁴ Here, Weeks cited gendered and classed power structures as primary reasons for Duke's toxic culture. The question that was asked allowed Weeks to connect her own experience at Duke to broader trends of gendered and classed behaviors that justify violence toward women. Weeks's discursive orientation away from her individualized experience and toward broader analyses of the structural factors that implicate women's engagement in particular communities provided a more nuanced explanation of the ways in which power functions to oppress particular bodies. In particular, the feminism that is deemed necessary to combat the problems Weeks identified is attentive to not only gender, but also class. Liberation, in this instance, is not achieved on an individual level, but rather, can only be achieved by collectively addressing the structural and systemic factors that implicate women.

The above example shows how subtle changes in description can have profound rhetorical consequences. Although Weeks is not completing a thorough intersectional analysis (for example, she fails to mention that the majority of the male students in fraternities at Duke are white), her situatedness within Duke's male entitlement culture changed the way she described both patriarchy as an oppressive system as well as the feminism necessary to combat it. Rather than flattening the oppression she described to a single vector, gender, she noted another factor that contributes to processes of oppression and marginalization, class. In this section, I will show the ways in which Weeks's rhetorical construction of feminism shifted when she incorporated broader analyses of power that go beyond her own individual experiences. Particularly, the ways in which Weeks systematized gender and class-based oppression helped

ground her arguments in an understanding of gender and class as *structural* dynamics, rather than dynamics experienced on an *individual* level.

In the same Stoeffel interview, Weeks argued, “You have this extremely intense school that’s really competitive academically and then you add into the mix a social scene that’s rooted in social hierarchy and wealth, and then you combine that with male privilege and chauvinism and misogyny and what you have is this really horrible rape culture.”⁶⁵ Weeks’s analysis of the construction of patriarchal oppression incorporated much more nuance in this statement. Not only did she mention male entitlement, but she noted that the social hierarchies present at Duke are rooted in wealth. Her explanation of rape culture in this example highlighted the particular context that college provides, which is a distinct form of patriarchal rape culture that college-aged women experience.

Returning to the article that Weeks wrote about the whorearchy, she explained that the stratification she identifies not only exists in pornography, but is one that all women must navigate at some point in their lives:

We’re hardly the only ones suffering from such stratification. All women are taught from an early age, through religion, media, and socialization that men do not respect women who are sexual outside of marriage, but require they be hypersexual within it. They want someone they can bring home to their mothers, “A lady in the street but a freak in the bed,” according to hip-hop artist Ludacris. Be a whore, but be respectable. Be slutty, but not too slutty. Use sexuality to sell perfume, food, clothing, cars but never, ever sell the sex itself.

Women who fail to meet these standards will be punished. But, of course, it’s never just about sex. Earlier this month *Slate* covered a study showing that rich

girls and poor girls use the word "slut" more to maintain class positions than to accurately describe sexual behavior. The rich girls used it to keep poor ones in their place, while working-class women used it as a term of derision seemingly borne of envy.⁶⁶

Weeks attended to a whole host of complex factors in her analysis, here. First, she explained that ideas and expectations surrounding female sexuality are not just constructed by gender norms, but are constructed through a whole host of social institutions such as religion and media. Although she did not go into much detail about how this process occurs, her acknowledgement that these factors contribute to societal opinions about women and sex helped ground her analysis in a multidimensional way, rather than flattening feminism to merely one vector of analysis (gender).

In addition to her acknowledgment of other vectors of power, Weeks explained that the double-bind she articulated puts women in a position that is nearly impossible to occupy successfully: simultaneously be sexual and innocent. The virgin-whore dichotomy is well researched and documented in feminist theory. As Wyman and Dionisopoulos explain, the virgin-whore dichotomy creates a lose-lose situation for the women who must navigate it: both the virgin and the whore are powerless in this calculation. The virgin is powerless because she is posited as needing protection from dangerous sexuality. The whore can take one of two routes: either she is powerless because she is a victim of sexual exploitation or she is "powerful," but evil and poses a threat to those around her, thus, ultimately powerless.⁶⁷ Weeks's attentiveness to this malicious dichotomy grounded her pornography career within the feminist ideals she espouses. Rather than coding her pornography career as nothing but an activation of her personal feminist agency to do as she pleases, she explained her career in terms of the social expectations

that women face, which produced a rhetorical vision of feminism that attended to a variety of factors that implicate the choices that are available to women in patriarchal society. Rather than merely affirming her own individual choice as feminist, she argued that pornography helps deconstruct the wicked virgin-whore dichotomy that all women experience, which is why pornography could be considered feminist. This distinction is important. Theorizing pornography and thus, feminism, in relation to broader social dynamics such as the virgin-whore dichotomy placed it within external power systems. Rather than understanding feminism as merely an activation of women's individual agency, Weeks understood feminism as combatting *society-wide* problems that *all* women navigate, regardless of their relationship to pornography.

Finally, in the quotation above, Weeks attended to the class dynamics that implicate how gender is coded for different women. She explained that the “whore” portion of the virgin-whore dichotomy is tied up as much in class as it is in sex and gender. Women who are labeled “sluts” are branded as such in order to preserve class-coded sexual expectations. Elizabeth A. Armstrong and her research team explored the same phenomenon as it related to undergraduate women, finding similar results. They argued that although slut shaming is certainly related to ideas about sex and gender, it is as connected to ideas about status and class. Using a Weberian approach, they argued that status is fundamental to placing individuals within a social hierarchy based on “esteem and respect.”⁶⁸

Duke is the vehicle by which Weeks explored gendered and classed constructions of female sexuality, particularly within Greek life. Armstrong et. al. argued that “status is produced and accrued in the dominant social world on campus—the largely Greek-controlled party scene.”⁶⁹ Weeks also highlighted this status-seeking community. In her interview with Fernelius, Weeks was clear that much of the slut shaming and ridicule she experienced was at the hands of

the large Greek population on Duke's campus. She said, "Gender norms are very intense here and I feel like that's particularly carried out by frats."⁷⁰ In the Stoeffel interview, Weeks made an even stronger claim about the Greek system at Duke, arguing, "If you look at the anonymous CollegiateACB forums of other schools, there are maybe four topics. At Duke, there are 800 topics. All of them are "rate freshman girls on a scale of one to 10" or "which Asian has the biggest boobs." So Duke has this — and I blame the Greek system a lot for this — culture of objectifying women."⁷¹ Although she, of course, does not go into the level of detail that Armstrong and her colleagues do about the construction of status and accompanying slut shaming, it is clear that Weeks is attuned to the power dynamics at Duke that determine which sexuality is available to particular women. When Weeks discussed pornography in relation to Duke culture, she attended to the gendered and classed systems that perpetuate oppression for particular women. This is distinct from her arguments about individual choice because she paid attention to the broader context that scripts the options that are available to women.

The feminism that Weeks's constructed, here, is intersectional, attentive to factors, such as class and race, that implicate the ways in which women experience gendered oppression. In particular, Weeks's recognition of the classed nature of gendered oppression helped couch her feminism within broader matrices of power, such as capitalism, which changed the work necessary for achieving feminist liberation. In this iteration of feminism, liberation is understood as more than the affirmation of women's individual choices; but rather, as a broader goal that can only be achieved when the systems that oppress women are dismantled or fundamentally reformed. For example, Weeks's version of feminism here, would argue that in order for women to achieve liberation, rape culture and its connections to class-based shame and stigma need to be dismantled. Weeks's systemic focus produced a feminism that is embedded within its broader

social context and as such, for this version of feminism to be effective, it must also attend to the broader social factors that do violence to women.

Conclusion

When Weeks described pornography and feminism using an intersectional lens, her rhetoric has the effect of constructing a multifaceted and stratified pornography and feminism. In the texts analyzed in this section, Weeks hardly mentioned her individual experiences with pornography. Rather than universalizing the superior position of choice and individualism in her analysis, Weeks emphasized the social factors that drive particular women to make particular decisions. Weeks's iteration of both pornography and feminism, here, makes way for analysis and critique of both pornography and feminism themselves. Rather than focusing on the affirmation of individual choices, Weeks questioned the factors that drive women to act in pornography. Particularly, she incorporated class into her analysis of both pornography and feminism, which situated both within a broader system of economics that implicated the decision to act in pornography as well as the relative success that may be experienced by the pornography performer. Feminism, too, is directly related to capitalism, incorporating an analysis of the ways in which gender and class modify the options that are available to particular women. Weeks's situatedness in broader power systems rhetorically constructed a pornography and feminism that are amenable to system-based analysis, which makes way for collective actions that have the potential to change systems at a fundamental level, rather than navigate them individually without attention to the systemic nature of oppression.

Chapter 3: Working with Footnotes

“It’s Belle because I like the name Belle from Beauty and the Beast and also Belle from Secret Diary of a Call Girl.”

“Belle de Jour, right? And Knox?”

“I’ve always had this fascination with Amanda Knox; her case really fascinates me.”

“You’re named after Amanda Knox, this is all a bit creepy, hmm?”

“She’s just a really interesting person. I mean, I’m not saying I support her or anything. But she seems like a really cool person to talk to. Very intelligent.”⁷²

Belle from *Beauty and the Beast*: A Disney princess who, ultimately, tames the beast. Belle de Jour: British call girl with millions of fans, later revealed to be a Bristol University research scientist, Dr. Brooke Magnanti who wanted to support her “London lifestyle,” through sex work.⁷³ Amanda Knox: charged and found guilty of murdering her roommate, Meredith Kercher, in Italy.⁷⁴ In her interview with Piers Morgan of *CNN*, Weeks explained that all of these various identities and characters coalesced and contributed to her porn star name: Belle Knox. Although Weeks maintained various personas throughout the Duke Porn Star media craze, eventually, Weeks takes ownership of her pornography career, owning the fact that she is, indeed, the Duke Porn Star, Belle Knox.

In several pieces, Belle Knox defended pornography as a “choice” that should be universally affirmed as feminist and empowering. Remember, there is not a clear temporal distinction between Weeks’s and Belle Knox’s different rhetorics. There is no undeviating tale of transformation from a structurally-conscious Weeks into an individually-focused Belle Knox;

there are many points in which she fluctuated between these two rhetorics. The co-existence of these distinct rhetorical texts illuminates the shifting nature of terms like pornography and feminism. The unstable nature of both concepts is precisely what allowed Weeks and Belle Knox to construct different iterations of both simultaneously. The co-existence of both texts helps prove the very shifting and unstable nature of pornography and feminism in and of themselves.

This chapter focuses on texts in which Belle Knox defined feminism as the universal affirmation of the choices made by women, regardless of what those choices are. When Belle Knox's rhetoric took on a neoliberal tenor, the ways in which pornography constructed feminism and vice versa transformed the construction of each concept and the work each does. In the first section, I will analyze the neoliberal rhetoric within the texts that posit pornography as an individual choice that ought to be affirmed. Belle Knox posited "choice" as foundational to her politics. She argued that in American society, individuals have the freedom to do with their bodies whatever they desire. As I will show throughout the first section, this focus on individual choice is rhetorically neoliberal. Additionally, the ways in which Belle Knox connected choice to bodily freedom and autonomy re-created the conditions in which neoliberal systems exploit the bodies of particular workers to maintain the smooth functioning of the market. The second section will utilize this analysis to show the ways in which it altered the construction of pornography. Finally, I will apply Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric to feminism, arguing that her neoliberal rhetoric diminished the capability of feminism to produce collective and systemic changes that improve the lives of women.

Belle Knox and Neoliberalism: A Rhetorical Alliance

Although much of Belle Knox's rhetoric throughout the Duke Porn Star saga could be considered neoliberal, it is the context that Duke, tuition costs, and rape culture provided that changed the *work* that Belle Knox's rhetoric did in constructing different versions of pornography and feminism. A fundamental difference emerged when Weeks contextualized pornography with factors such as Duke, tuition, and rape culture, and when Belle Knox de-contextualized pornography from those factors entirely and argued that pornography is merely a "feminist choice." Choice is the cornerstone of Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric. She argued that the choices of women should be universally affirmed, regardless of what those choices are, because feminism is about supporting and empowering individual women to do with their bodies as they wish.⁷⁵ Although, on the surface, this seems like a non-controversial tenet of feminism (and it often is), I will show that Belle Knox's emphases on individual choice gave her rhetoric a neoliberal flavor. In this section, I will analyze a few critical texts in which Belle Knox's rhetoric closely aligns with neoliberal ideology, and show why these particular rhetorics are neoliberal in character.

The first time Belle Knox wrote on her own behalf was for popular feminist blog, *XOJane*, which describes itself as a place "where women go to be their unabashed selves, and where their unabashed selves are applauded."⁷⁶ Her first piece is titled "I'm the Duke University Freshman Porn Star and for the First Time I'm Telling the Story in my Words," published on February 21, 2014. Throughout this essay, Belle Knox emphasized her own individual freedom and right to act in pornography. She argued, "I can say definitively that I have never felt more empowered or happy doing anything else. In a world where women are so often robbed of their choice, I am completely in control of my sexuality. As a bisexual woman with many sexual

quirks, I feel completely accepted. It is freeing, it is empowering, it is wonderful, it is how the world should be.”⁷⁷ Here, Belle Knox is explicitly individual in her assessment of pornographic empowerment. She argued that she, personally, has never felt more empowered or happy doing anything else. Although there is nothing inherently neoliberal about Belle Knox’s emphasis on her own personal enjoyment, her transcription of this personal enjoyment onto sex work broadly as a defense for its empowering potential ignored that individual experiences within pornography are just that, individual.

One of the fundamental functions of neoliberalism is the abstraction of bodies; all individuals are to interact within the market in the same rational, economically self-interested way, regardless of social location. It assumes that individuals are non-unique, and have the ability to interact within the market in the same manner; however, as shown in chapter two, this is not the case. Pornography is stratified along race, class, and gender lines, which constrains the ability for individuals to succeed in the business. It may be true that pornography is empowering for Belle Knox (I will not negate this claim), but the way in which she posited her personal experience as cross-applicable to other women ignored other factors that implicate the choice to act in pornography.

Individualism is foundational to the formation of capitalist society. Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner, in their 1986 analysis of sovereignty and capitalism describe the ways in which individualism has become a key discourse that serves in the preservation of capitalism. They posit four different characteristics that define capitalist individualism: 1) Freedom, “individuals should ... be free to sell property or labour to anyone without legal or customary impediment. Such freedom is the natural state of [hu]mankind and is only not achieved because of pressures from repressive institutions, such as those of the state or church;” 2) activity, “individuals have

the capacity for action in the transformation of their environment, natural and social;” 3) economic rationality; 4) self-motivation, “The notion is that, if individuals act freely and rationally, they do so by virtue of some inner drive and they take responsibility for their actions.”⁷⁸ Belle Knox’s rhetoric exemplifies three of these characteristics: freedom, economic rationality, and self-motivation.

First, Abercrombie et al. argue that “freedom” and “human liberty” define the human’s ability to labor within the market, and any constraints upon that liberty by “the state or church” are repressive.⁷⁹ There are several instances in which Belle Knox appealed to ideals of freedom and human liberty in precisely this way. She argued, “It’s completely freeing and liberating for me to have that choice to make decisions about my own body.”⁸⁰ Belle Knox is clear that the reason pornography is liberating is because it allowed her to act as the master and controller of her own body, which meant that if she chose to sell her body, it is her liberty to do so.

Next, Abercrombie and his colleagues argue that rationality is essential to individualism, which means cost-benefit analyses are foundational to capitalist efficiency.⁸¹ In Belle Knox’s interview with Howard Stern, Stern’s partner asked if she would do pornography if it were not for needing the money, and Belle Knox aggressively challenged the very assumption that acting in pornographic films is at all unique from any other job, “People like to pit porn and sex work as this desperate exchange. There would be no labor if we didn’t need money. So it’s non-unique.”⁸² Understanding pornography simply as “any other job” deemphasized the gendered location of the pornography actress within the scene, which allowed for “rational choice” to fill in as the only legitimate reason someone would act in pornography. In the purest of economic logics, Belle Knox stated, “Porn is like any other job. It’s labor. And I think liking it is irrelevant.”⁸³ Alison Phipps, in her analysis of body politics in neoliberal societies argues,

“Notions of rational choice which underpin the idea of sex work as ‘just a job’ rely on a decontextualized, unified, and rational notion of the self and do not engage with ideas about how power constructs subjectivities and choices.”⁸⁴ This aligns with Belle Knox’s construction of pornography; she argued that pornography was “just a job,” no different than serving as a waitress in a restaurant. Not only that, she argued that her decision to act in pornography was profoundly individual, unmediated by external factors which implicate decision-making. Her construction ignored the ways in which power structures create the conditions by which certain choices are available to particular subjects.

Finally, individuals act by “virtue of some inner drive and they take responsibility for their actions. Individuals are self-actualizing. The energy that there is in society, in this view, comes from individuals and society or the state perpetually threaten to block this energy by controlling individuals.”⁸⁵ This rings true for Belle Knox’s rhetoric as well. First, in several of her March 2014 interviews, Belle Knox discussed her desire to take responsibility for her own education rather than apply for federal loans or ask her parents for assistance. In several of her pieces about college tuition prices, notably her piece for *Time*, she argued that *state-based* college funding/assistance has created the tuition crises in the first place.

Individualism is directly connected to choice throughout Belle Knox’s defense of pornography. She argued, time and time again, that the reason pornography is feminist is because she autonomously chose to participate, which warrants affirming and praising her individual choice as feminist.⁸⁶ The concept of individual choice directly relates to rational choice theory, a cornerstone of economics, as Eric Aune explains, “people weigh costs and benefits based on their subjective tastes and their available information.”⁸⁷ This is precisely the case for Belle Knox; she weighed the costs and benefits of acting in pornography and determined it was the

most lucrative method to pay her tuition bills. Wendy Brown explains that this economic analysis is profoundly neoliberal, arguing,

The extension of economic rationality to formerly non-economic domains and institutions extends to individual conduct, or more precisely, prescribes citizen-subject conduct in a neo-liberal order. Whereas classical liberalism articulated a distinction, and at times even a tension, among the criteria for individual moral, associational, and economic actions . . . neo-liberalism normatively constructs and interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life. It figures individuals as rational, calculating creatures whose moral autonomy is measured by their capacity for “self-care” — the ability to provide for their own needs and service their own ambitions. In making the individual fully responsible for her/himself, neo-liberalism equates moral responsibility with rational action; it relieves the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences. In so doing, it also carries responsibility for the self to new heights: the rationally calculating individual bears full responsibility for the consequences of his or her action no matter how severe the constraints on this action, e.g., lack of skills, education, and childcare in a period of high unemployment and limited welfare benefits. Correspondingly, a “mismanaged life” becomes a new mode of depoliticizing social and economic powers and at the same time reduces political citizenship to an unprecedented degree of passivity and political complacency. The model neo-liberal citizen is one who strategizes for her/ himself among

various social, political and economic options, not one who strives with others to alter or organize these options.⁸⁸

Brown highlights a fundamental characteristic of neoliberalism: it has been disseminated throughout every aspect of social life, not just economics. Belle Knox's argument that the best method for feminist empowerment is through the affirmation of individual choices highlights neoliberalism's invasion into non-economic realms. Connecting this directly to feminism, Catherine Rottenburg argues, "Individuated in the extreme, this subject is feminist in the sense that she is distinctly aware of current inequalities between men and women. This same subject is, however, simultaneously neoliberal, not only because she disavows the social, cultural and economic forces producing this inequality, but also because she accepts full responsibility for her own well-being and self-care."⁸⁹ This aligns precisely with Belle Knox's description of feminism in her neoliberal idiom. She acknowledged inequality between men and women and prescribed individual, market-based solutions to the problems she identified.

Although this is not an exhaustive reading of all of Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric, it is enough of a primer to understand what is meant when I describe Belle Knox's rhetoric as neoliberal. In the next two sections of this chapter, I will analyze how Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric transformed the meaning of both pornography and feminism.

"I Did it Out of Professionalism": Pornography, Choice, Agency

The neoliberalism present in Belle Knox's rhetoric constructed a different pornography than the pornography that is constructed when Weeks discussed structural factors that implicate her ability to freely choose pornography and practice feminism. No doubt, pornography is a business. No one denies that the primary purpose of pornography, regardless of the rhetoric used

to describe it, is to make money. Despite this, the work that pornography does, its placement within a broader scheme of social factors, and particularly, its contribution to constructing feminism are all modified by the neoliberalism present in Belle Knox's rhetoric. In this section, I will trace the ways in which Weeks's neoliberal rhetoric does the work of discursively constructing pornography. First, I will discuss the ways in which neoliberalism preconfigures which bodies can access pornography as well as be successful in the industry. Belle Knox articulated her choice to act in pornography as equally accessible to all bodies, but I will show that this is not the case, and in fact, reifies the industry's exclusion. Not only that, Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric constructed the industry in a glamorized way, as alluring, elegant, and bourgeois. This construction of pornography ignored the gendered division of labor that creates exploitation. Finally, Belle Knox's emphases on choice within pornography dangerously conflated "choice" and "consent" which created a faulty understanding of how agency functions.

In Belle Knox's interview with Howard Stern, Stern asserted, "You look really young, you could pass for 15 or maybe even 13. That's a real asset in porn. Guys want that."⁹⁰ All creepiness aside, Stern pointed out an important variable that is ignored throughout the Belle Knox saga: she is precisely what the pornography industry demands, produces, and commodifies. "The market shapes the content of what is bought and sold and very often defines the 'sexy'."⁹¹ Despite Belle Knox's belief that she has the free choice to make empowered decisions about pornography, those decisions are driven by structural factors that create market supply and demand. For example, if Belle Knox were black, as Robert L. Reece explores in his short forum post, "The Plight of the Black Belle Knox," it would be highly unlikely that she would have the same level of unfettered access to the industry as well as success and popularity.⁹² Given the way that pornography functions within a system of neoliberalism, supply

and demand can be rationally calculated via a cost-benefit analysis, which is precisely the type of calculation that allowed Belle Knox to pay for her prestigious Duke education.⁹³

Belle Knox viewed her work as an issue of supply and demand: actresses like her (young: there is a huge market for “teen” pornography stars, petite, and college co-ed: Duke) are in high demand, but the supply is low. When she lamented her frustration: “I love how the same people who are shaming me are the same people who are jacking off to me,” she acknowledged that her body and pornography performances are in high demand, but she did not grasp how this could also lend itself to her being shamed for the same body and performances.⁹⁴ Here, she can be simultaneously valued for her bodily work yet shamed due to the structure of a patriarchal society in which women are seen as objects that must be always-already sexual, but appear innocent; “a lady in the street but a freak in the bed.” She attempted to distance herself from the violence that occurs when women’s bodies are coopted by neoliberal demand and rendered commodities.⁹⁵

In one of her pieces for *XOJane*, Belle Knox wrote, “The adult industry racks up \$13.3 billion in the U.S. alone, and do we honestly wish collective evil, shame and condemnation upon every human being involved in this gigantic (and I would add, legitimate) business? Because that is incredibly disturbing to me. I don't even care if you are condemning me, but look at the thousands of other women who you are condemning as well.”⁹⁶ Belle Knox is correct, pornography is a massive capitalist enterprise. Kassia R. Wosick explains that pornography is a “highly lucrative and expansive business. There are hundreds of production companies and studios throughout the United States and internationally that produce a range of films, videos, and print porn that reflect particular genres and subgenres and cater to specific consumers. . . . The industry has its own trade journals, media networks, organizations, a wide range of

corporations, small businesses, news outlets, conventions, industry awards, and trade associations.”⁹⁷ Belle Knox asserted the legitimacy of pornography solely based on its position as a “legitimate business” within capitalist society. Although it might be true that the pornography industry is a legitimate business, shutting down criticisms of the industry based on a utilitarian calculus (thousands of women engage in the industry) served to reinforce the idea that women cannot be critiqued, ever, for the decisions they make. I do not disagree with Belle Knox’s argument that women should not be condemned or shamed; however, her uncritical defense of pornography papered over all of the ways it lends itself to discrimination and violence as explored in chapter three.

Belle Knox further defended herself by arguing, “I’m just getting money for doing something that every other girl, ya know, does, or wants to do.”⁹⁸ Belle Knox suggested that she is doing something that “every other girl” “does or wants to do,” positioning herself as an exemplar of capitalist business sense. Even if she is only referring to the idea that every girl wants to have sex, she implied that every girl, ideally, would like to be *paid* for that sex. Although she may assert that every other girl does it or wants to do it, this could not be further from the case. As explored in chapter three, pornography is a stratified industry with demarcations along lines of class, race, and gender. It is interesting that she can simultaneously acknowledge the shame and stigma that sex workers navigate within the field of sex work, but then assert that “every other girl wants to do” pornography, thus, stripping the intersectional analysis of the industry she conducted previously, and ignoring the social location of the “girls” she speaks of. Phipps contextualizes this, arguing that workers in pornography are increasingly white and middle-class, creating “a new petit bourgeoisie who seek fun, pleasure and freedom in their work and for whom, due to their relative social privilege, sex work has become a lifestyle

choice.”⁹⁹ This could not be more true of Belle Knox. In her first piece for *XOJane*, she said sex work “is freeing, it is empowering, it is wonderful, it is how the world should be.”¹⁰⁰ Her description here, directly aligns with Phipps’s argument that sex work is a lifestyle choice that is accessible due to relative social privileges. Indeed, Belle Knox’s experience is unique, yet she attempted to cross-apply it to all the other “girls who want to do it.” A few months after her initial media spectacle, Belle Knox was interviewed by *Rolling Stone* about her opinions on sex work. She said, “While it's true that paying my tuition at Duke was my initial motivation for entering the porn industry, I've grown to appreciate the empowerment opportunities that sex work has provided me. In porn, I can speak openly about my experiences without fear of punishment, work in a safe and professional environment and play a vital role in the creative process.”¹⁰¹ She conceded that her initial motivation was monetary, to pay her Duke tuition, but now, she appreciated the empowerment and freedom, making pornography a “lifestyle choice.”

Turning now to the ways in which Belle Knox constructed agency within pornography, she articulated what Roland Bleiker calls a “heroic” or “romantic” form of resistance, which posits the individual, autonomous actor as having complete agency to resist oppression, bestowing all power of transgression onto the individual.¹⁰² Dating back to the Enlightenment, the ability for ‘man’ to reason was viewed as the “Archimedean foundation that modern ‘man’ had long searched for: an objectified Humanism.”¹⁰³ What is important about this articulation of unfettered individualism, which Belle Knox advocated throughout her neoliberal idiom, is that the individual is *stripped* of any social character that may impact what choices are available to the agent. This view of agency reflects contemporary neoliberal values, “constructing sex workers as entrepreneurs and positioning agency in economic terms, granted by the conditions of a free market.”¹⁰⁴ Individuals are to act in their own economic self-interest; thus, sex work is

posited as a viable and desirable option to deal with economic shortcomings. It is up to the individual to resist and solve their oppression, and oppression is understood as an individual problem rather than a collective or structural condition.

Given the ways in which Belle Knox's construction of agency obscured factors that constrain autonomous decision-making, the idea of "consent" must be analyzed. Due to the autonomous, socially-stripped character that Belle Knox personified, gender and class power relationships are left out of the equation because it is her individual "choice" to act in pornography. She wrote, "A woman who transgresses the norm and takes ownership of her body -- because that's exactly what porn is, no matter how rough the sex is -- ostensibly poses a threat to the deeply ingrained gender norms that polarize our society."¹⁰⁵ The transference of agency onto Belle Knox's body individuated her decision-making from the structural factors that she criticized throughout chapter two. Not only that, "discourses of choice, agency and empowerment have become central to neoliberalism" because the *appearance* of individual choice is precisely how neoliberalism functions to sell specific products to specific audiences.¹⁰⁶ In the case of Belle Knox, she is given the illusion of choice, but in reality, her petite, young appearance is precisely the type of product that pornography seeks to produce.

Yvonne Zimmerman clarifies this position, arguing that much of sex work advocacy and analysis frames consent and choice as "one and the same," but "equating consent and private choice obscures the very important ways that surrounding social factors always work to condition consent. . . . to represent consent as a matter of private choice frames consent as a radically individuated act."¹⁰⁷ Indeed, Belle Knox claimed that her choice to act in pornography was fundamentally an individual one. Belle Knox insisted, "In a world where women are so often robbed of their choice, I am completely in control."¹⁰⁸ Belle Knox's assertion of complete

autonomy over her choices is precisely what Zimmerman means when she argues that the surrounding social factors that *condition* choice are entirely removed from the analysis. Belle Knox becomes trapped in an illusion of free choice that obscures and conceals the structural dynamics that prompt her to make those decisions in the first place. For example, Belle Knox told a story in her documentary series about a day when she arrived at a pornography shoot only to find out that her agent had scheduled her a scene with a 50-year-old man. She claimed, “If I had left the scene then, I would have had to pay a 300-dollar kill fee. The director would have hated me. And I would have never gotten hired for the company again. So I did it kind of out of professionalism.”¹⁰⁹ When a monetary “kill fee” prevented her from stopping a scene in which she felt uncomfortable with her co-star, her pornography career is no longer her “choice.” The gender and class dynamics are clear: she felt uncomfortable acting with an older man and telling her male director “no” would damage her pornography career. The power dynamic effectively coerced her into making a decision that she otherwise would not have made. “Money is positioned as more important than happiness,” which “underline[s] the relationship between contemporary sex-radical politics and the neoliberal context.”¹¹⁰ The monetary consequences of Belle Knox saying “no” were more important than her lack of desire to have sex with the 50-year-old man; thus, her “happiness” and satisfaction were overshadowed by the monetary benefits of completing the scene. Belle Knox’s sexual freedom is only granted insofar as her contracts allow; thus, the sexual freedom she constructed is one mediated by neoliberal control over subjectivity and sexuality.

Belle Knox’s conflation of choice and consent constructed a fluid, uncritical, and openly-accessible pornography. In this construction of pornography, women (and men) are able to engage in pornographic acts freely and safely, with the expectation of fair payment following the

pornographic labor. Although this might be the *ideal* construction of pornography, it papers over many features of the industry that create violence and constrain actors' ability to perform freely. Belle Knox's construction of pornography cannot explain her own experience with the 50-year-old man and the kill fee that prevented her from saying 'no.' This is demonstrative of Zimmerman's point that consent and choice are both conditioned on social factors that are external to individual control. Belle Knox's neoliberal pornography is merely another capitalist business, open and accessible to all. It lacks any gendered, raced, or classed contours; rather, it is but one among many options available to women to deal with their economic deficiencies.

Neoliberal Feminist Rhetorics

In Belle Knox's piece, "I'm the Duke University Freshman Porn Star and for the First Time I'm Telling the Story in my Words," published on February 21, 2014, she claimed to have penned a "feminist manifesto," which described her pornography career in terms of personal empowerment, individual choice, and ultimately, the activation of her own personal agency.¹¹¹ She contended "I can say definitively that I have never felt more empowered or happy doing anything else. In a world where women are so often robbed of their choice, I am completely in control of my sexuality. As a bisexual woman with many sexual quirks, I feel completely accepted. It is freeing, it is empowering, it is wonderful, it is how the world should be."¹¹² Here marks a distinct difference from the rhetoric outlined in chapter two: Belle Knox's defense of pornography and feminism is no longer situated within her social location. She no longer articulated an understanding of her choices as constrained as well as driven by a variety of contextual factors such as Duke, the expenses associated with higher education, and her position within broader patriarchal culture. Now, Belle Knox posited her decision-making as being

entirely independent of those social factors, and instead, premised on the activation of her individual agency. This difference in Belle Knox's rhetoric has several implications for feminism that will be explored in this section: First, it created a false understanding of agency; second, it obscured the structural criticism that is necessary for effective feminist praxis; and finally, it reified a neoliberal ideology that posits personal economic responsibility as the ultimate determining factor for economic (in)justice.

While being interviewed by *The View* on March 17, 2014, Belle Knox introduced her followers to her arguments about subjective understandings of empowerment and degradation.¹¹³ Now, she was correct that views of empowerment are subjective; however, the ways in which she posited her claims universalized the superior position of "choice" in feminist politics. That is not to say that choice is unimportant or irrelevant for feminism, but what is faulty in Belle Knox's understanding of feminist agency is her idea that agency is ever completely granted or unconstrained by external factors. One never has complete agency or none at all. Belle Knox's understanding of agency obscured the ways in which structures of power impact and coerce particular choices that may *seemingly be* autonomous and/or liberating. The hyper individualism present in Belle Knox's defense of her sex work as well as her kink serves to "fetishize the personal in politics" because her arguments begin with her personal agency and the acknowledgement and legitimization of her individual voice, which thus, "creates a framework which valorizes the experiential and invisibilizes the structural."¹¹⁴ Rebecca Stringer argues that within the context of sex work specifically, one of the most insidious effects of neoliberalism is what she calls "anti-victim talk" which is marked by an insistence that individual choice and responsibility must be universally affirmed, which is "profoundly depoliticizing" and obscures how social and political factors implicate the ability to make autonomous decisions.¹¹⁵

Belle Knox's rhetorical individualism profoundly colored her arguments about feminism. "Whatever choice a woman is making and she is the one deciding to do -- reclaiming the agency behind the decision to do, even if it is a degrading sexual act -- is absolutely feminism. To me, feminism is about women not being shamed but rather being empowered."¹¹⁶ Here, Belle Knox claimed that feminism is fundamentally about affirming women's choices, regardless of what those choices are. This feminism is one that becomes untouchable. The choices made by women are free from critique so long as they were autonomous and "empowering." Indeed, criticizing women's choices would be *anti-feminist*. Although this iteration of feminism could appear to be the silver-bullet to all former critiques made of the feminist movement (non-inclusive, patronizing, disciplining), the critical mistake that "Belle Knox feminism" makes is its ambivalence toward system-based critique.¹¹⁷ She ignored the very social and systemic factors that construct what choices are available to women in a given moment.

In Belle Knox's second article for *XOJane*, published on March 4, 2014, she argued, "I stand for every woman who has ever been tormented for being sexual -- for every woman who has been harassed, ostracized and called a slut for exerting her sexual autonomy -- and for every woman who has been the victim of The Double Standard."¹¹⁸ Belle Knox claimed she could represent every woman who had negative experiences based on their sexual choices. But Belle Knox is not every woman, nor is her experience easily generalizable. Representative here, is a "univocality and largely glossy take on the industry" which "constructs the sex worker as a professional 'everywoman' with a variety of alluring and elegant personas and a ready flow of income."¹¹⁹ Belle Knox's brand of feminism can quickly stand in for *all feminisms* because it is intimately premised on the universal affirmation of individual choice. The universalism that Belle Knox relied upon is reminiscent of calls for solidarity and sisterhood, which have been

staples of feminist rhetoric since the First Wave. As Crenshaw and King both remind us, this call for universal sisterhood will leave out many women's experiences and allow for the most privileged of experiences to fill in as the norm. What is interesting and important about Belle Knox's iteration of sisterhood, however, is that it then becomes *anti-feminist* to critique any choices that a woman makes, regardless of the context or systems in which particular choices operate. In her interview with Howard Stern, Belle Knox argued, "Feminism is not one-size-fits-all. There's (sic) so many different waves of thought in feminism."¹²⁰ Belle Knox's version of feminism, despite occurring many criticisms, is shielded from critical inquiry because the women and men who criticize her are simply expressing *their own form* of feminism, which can certainly be different from Belle Knox's form of feminism. Feminism is reduced to an affirmation of individual women's choices, regardless of what those choices are.

Feminism, here is reduced to a single variable: gender. If feminism is only about affirming the individual choices of women, then it cannot take stock of how those options become available and to whom. It also ignored the other power systems that implicate the choices women must make, particularly capitalism. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty explains, the category "woman" is not coherent or universal. The privileging of individualism within feminist politics personalizes feminist advocacy and flattens feminist differences among women, which creates a variety of issues that hamper the efficacy of feminism. She explains further,

The experience of struggle is thus defined as both personal and ahistorical. In other words, the political is limited to the personal and all conflicts among and within women are flattened. If sisterhood itself is defined on the basis of personal intentions, attitudes, or desires, conflict is also automatically constructed on only the psychological level. Experience is thus written in as simultaneously individual

(that is, located in the individual body/psyche of woman) and general (located in women as a preconstituted collective). There seem to be two problems with this definition. First, experience is seen as being immediately accessible, understood, and named. The complex relationships between behavior and its representation are either ignored or made irrelevant; experience is collapsed into discourse and vice versa. Second, since experience has a fundamentally psychological status, questions of history and collectivity are formulated on the level of attitude and intention. In effect, the sociality of collective struggles is understood in terms of something like individual group relations, relations that are commonsensically seen as detached from history. If the assumption of the sameness of experience is what ties woman (individual) to women (group), regardless of class, race, nation, and sexualities, the notion of experience is anchored firmly in the notion of the individual self, a determined and specifiable constituent of European modernity. However, this notion of the individual needs to be self-consciously historicized if as feminists we wish to go beyond the limited bourgeois ideology of individualism, especially as we attempt to understand what cross-cultural sisterhood might be made to mean.¹²¹

Belle Knox's explanation of feminism as constituted solely by individual choices is precisely the ahistorical, detached feminism that Mohanty articulates. Mohanty argues that this feminism is bourgeois and ineffective in promoting sisterhood that transcends cultural boundaries. Despite Belle Knox's assertion that she can stand-in for every sexually tormenting experience that a woman has had, her experience is profoundly privileged by her social location (white, middle-class, educated).

The combination of Belle Knox's view that unfettered markets are critical to both the emancipation of women as well as solving economic injustice plus her view that women must be able to practice feminism in any way they choose creates the perfect condition in which neoliberalism can resignify feminism to perpetuate capitalist accumulation.¹²² Belle Knox viewed liberation only as it is *attached* to capitalist production. Her argument, foundationally, is that women should be free to work / use their bodies in whichever way they find empowering; the ultimate method for activating agency is complete, autonomous, economic liberation.¹²³ This ignores the ways in which neoliberalism and patriarchy work as interlocking systems that perpetuate each other: Belle Knox's hope of economic liberation via sex work perpetuates the capitalist system that has historically devalued women's work and will continue to do so, so long as women's bodies remain a commodifiable object.¹²⁴ "Male dominance is intrinsic rather than accidental to classical capitalism."¹²⁵ Celeste Michelle Condit explains that the turn to individualism within women's liberation discourses is a result of political philosophies that closely align with (neo)liberalism. She argues that "the acceptance of the premise that women must make personal, individual, choices meant also that women must be indecently responsible for everything, particularly, economically."¹²⁶ This means that all responsibility for economic vitality must come from the individual; women should "pull themselves up by the bootstraps" and find ways to work within capitalism, rather than organizing to create collective resistance to both gender and class oppressions.

The separation of feminist critique from a systematic critique of capitalism meant that the multifaceted feminist critique of "economic, cultural, and political" inequality has been lost and manipulated, "legitimat[ing] the transition to a new form of capitalism: post-Fordist, transnational, neoliberal."¹²⁷ Belle Knox made the argument that her choice to act in

pornography is one rendered from purely economic calculations. She wanted to avoid student loan debt; therefore, pornography is a “rational choice.” But treating sex work in purely economic terms serves to ignore the “gendered construction of demand for sexual services.”¹²⁸ Obscured in the entire discussion is the choice of the client to consume, which, is where Belle Knox feels the societal shaming she criticizes. “The same society that consumes me is also condemning me.”¹²⁹

Although it may appear that Belle Knox conducted both economic and gender analysis, her economic analysis did not analyze the ways in which systems of capitalism foster and exacerbate women’s inequality; rather, she argued that economic freedom is critical to women’s liberation. In order to solve gender-based oppression, women should independently and individually engage in capitalism. For example, one of the foundations of capitalism is what has been called “the second shift” for women, in which gender roles mandate that if women labor outside of the home, they are still expected to cook, clean, and care for children upon return. This “second shift” devalues women’s work in the home and also creates a system in which women’s work outside the home is seen as less valuable because it does not align with gendered expectations for women.¹³⁰ Nancy Fraser further contextualizes this argument within contemporary neoliberalism, arguing:

One contribution was our critique of the "family wage": the ideal of a male breadwinner-female homemaker family that was central to state-organised capitalism. Feminist criticism of that ideal now serves to legitimate "flexible capitalism." After all, this form of capitalism relies heavily on women's waged labour, especially low-waged work in service and manufacturing, performed not only by young single women but also by married women and women with

children; not by only racialised women, but by women of virtually all nationalities and ethnicities. As women have poured into labour markets around the globe, state-organised capitalism's ideal of the family wage is being replaced by the newer, more modern norm – apparently sanctioned by feminism – of the two-earner family.

Never mind that the reality that underlies the new ideal is depressed wage levels, decreased job security, declining living standards, a steep rise in the number of hours worked for wages per household, exacerbation of the double shift – now often a triple or quadruple shift – and a rise in poverty, increasingly concentrated in female-headed households. Neoliberalism turns a sow's ear into a silk purse by elaborating a narrative of female empowerment. Invoking the feminist critique of the family wage to justify exploitation, it harnesses the dream of women's emancipation to the engine of capital accumulation.¹³¹

This “flexible capitalism” that Fraser describes is precisely the type of economic liberation that Belle Knox desires and affirms. For Belle Knox, if women could engage in the market freely and autonomously, then women could achieve equity and liberation. This version of liberation, however, is a profoundly privileged one. As explored throughout chapter two, the ability to succeed economically in pornography depends on a whole host of factors that implicate women's ability to thrive in the industry. Treating pornography as an autonomous, purely economic choice leaves out a whole host of other factors that implicate women's ability to gain benefits from the industry. Not only that, Belle Knox's version of feminism places liberation squarely within the capitalist matrix. If only women could engage in the market, they could be free. As Fraser

highlighted above, this version of feminism ensures the continuation of capitalist exploitation of women's bodies and labor.

Important for understanding why feminism must encompass an economic critique in order to be effective is Fraser's understanding of politics that seek "recognition" in contrast to politics that seek "redistribution."¹³² Feminist politics, traditionally, seek "recognition," arguing that women must be accepted and valued as political and social equals to men. Belle Knox makes claims for recognition at several points during her feminist advocacies. The clearest evidence of her recognition-based politics is her ultimate demand: "I, like all other sex workers, want to be treated with dignity and respect. I want equal representation under the law and within societal institutions. I want people to acknowledge our humanity. I want people to listen to our unique narratives and dialogues."¹³³ Belle Knox posited "equal representation" as a primary goal for her feminist advocacy.

Endowing their daily struggles with an ethical meaning, the feminist romance attracts . . . sex workers . . . seeking not only income and material security, but also dignity, self betterment, and liberation from traditional authority. . . . The dream of women's emancipation is harnessed . . . to the engine of capitalist accumulation.¹³⁴

So long as Belle Knox can feel "empowered" or make enough money under neoliberal conditions, the structural critique of neoliberalism will be absent. "Choice feminism" becomes "untouchable feminism," perpetuating neoliberalism's commodification of women's "empowerment" into another product to be sold (pornography). Feminist success is directly harnessed to economic success. Women are "empowered" if they make money under ideal market conditions. This ignores the ways in which neoliberal economics are directly interwoven

with patriarchal domination. Fraser notes, “Feminine and masculine gender identity run like pink and blue threads through the areas of paid work, state administration, and citizenship, as well as through the domain of familial and sexual relations. Lived out in all arenas of life, gender identity is one (if not the) “medium of exchange” among all of them, a basic element of the social glue that binds them to one another.¹³⁵ Belle Knox’s account is one that lacks an analysis of gender *in relation* to class, which ignores how her social location as a woman in neoliberal society constrains her choices; after all, gender is *the* “medium of exchange.”

Belle Knox’s once pointed critique of rising tuition costs as well as Duke culture completely disappeared in favor of an argument that can be boiled down to this: pornography is empowering; therefore, pornography must be feminist and valuable.

Thus, feminists absolutized the critique of culture at precisely the moment when circumstances required redoubled attention to the critique of political economy.

As the critique splintered, moreover, the cultural strand became decoupled not only from the economic strand, but also from the critique of capitalism that had previously integrated them. Unmoored from the critique of capitalism and made available for alternative articulations, these strands could be drawn into what

Hester Eisenstein has called “a dangerous liaison” with neoliberalism.¹³⁶

It is clear that Belle Knox’s feminism is riddled with neoliberalism. Her arguments about sex worker recognition within the market, individual empowerment, and sexual liberation all serve to reify the affliction that neoliberalism imposes on feminist politics. “After all, this capitalism would much prefer to confront claims for recognition over claims for redistribution, as it builds a new regime of accumulation on the cornerstone of women’s waged labor and seeks to disembed

markets from democratic political regulation in order to operate all the more freely on a global scale.”¹³⁷

Tania Modelski in her book *Feminism Without Women: Culture and Criticism in a Postfeminist Age* argues, “we are in danger of forgetting the crucial fact that like the rest of the world even the cultural analyst may sometimes be a ‘cultural dupe’ – which is, after all, only an ugly way of saying that we exist inside ideology, that we are all victims, down to the very depths of our psyches, of political and cultural domination.”¹³⁸ Despite the *appearance* of Belle Knox’s understanding of economic, social, and political structures, her insistence that she transcended them is precisely what trapped her within them: ignoring their existence only further entrenched her within ideological constraints. Aguilar, tracing the disappearance of intersectional feminist analysis adds that many contemporary feminists are “confident in their self-centeredness, personally empowered, sassy, and most disquieting, quite comfortable with, if not totally immersed in, market values and capitalist consumerism’.”¹³⁹ Aguilar maintains that this individualist tilt to feminist theorizing leaves out any analysis of the “social relations of production.”¹⁴⁰ The impact of this individualized, market-driven feminism is that it places complete responsibility on women to “solve” their own oppression using market-based solutions. There is no revolution or change in how the market functions. Neoliberalism has produced an individuated understanding of identity and resistance. By “disembedding” identities from their social contexts, freedom and resistance are articulated individually rather than collectively.¹⁴¹

Rosalind Gill argues:

Yet one of the problems with this focus on autonomous choices is that it remains complicit with, rather than critical of, postfeminist and neoliberal discourses that see individuals as entrepreneurial actors who are rational, calculating and self-

regulating. The neoliberal subject is required to bear full responsibility for their life biography no matter how severe the constraints upon their action (Walkerdine et al., 2001). Just as neoliberalism requires individuals to narrate their life story as if it were the outcome of deliberative choices so too does some contemporary writing depict young women as unconstrained and freely choosing. . . . it simply sidesteps all the difficult and complex questions about the relationship between culture and subjectivity.¹⁴²

At a fundamental level, Belle Knox's version of feminism placed complete responsibility on women to solve their own oppression and seek market-based solutions. Her lack of attentiveness to factors like race and class made her feminism accessible to very few, and ensured that the systems that oppress women maintain smooth operations. Absent a systematic critique of the role capitalism plays in the oppression of women, Belle Knox feminism will only ever re-circulate neoliberal solutions to neoliberal problems.

Conclusion

Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric fashioned distinct versions of both pornography and feminism than are constructed when she attended to the positioning of economics and class in her descriptions of pornography. The reduction of her decision-making solely to an affirmation of individual, autonomous choices served to reinforce market rationalities that determine which options are available to women, and the appropriate avenues that should be sought for feminist liberation. Rather than conceptualizing oppression as an interlocking matrix of domination as Collins articulated in her explanation of intersectional feminism, Belle Knox feminism is premised on finding market-based solutions to market-based problems. Absent an analysis of the

role neoliberalism plays in women's oppression, Belle Knox feminism will only be accessible to a very limited group of women. Not only that, the universal individualism Belle Knox posited meant that the choices made by individual women are free from critique, thus, perpetuating a construction of untouchable feminism.

Chapter 4: Conclusion

Nearly a year after Weeks was outed as Belle Knox, the Duke Porn Star, *BusinessInsider's* Hunter Walker caught up with Weeks to ask her where her pornography career had taken her and if she still felt that pornography was empowering for women. In this interview, instead of Weeks focusing on the empowering nature of pornography, she instead discussed her current political career as a libertarian activist. She said, "I think that my work and being in the porn industry definitely hits on so many libertarian themes like free speech, and censorship, and, you know, choice and autonomy over our bodies. . . . So I think that I've really become passionate about libertarian issues because of the intersection."¹⁴³ The intersection Weeks identified, here, is precisely the intersection explored throughout this thesis. The convergence of pornography and feminism with political and economic systems is the rhetorical relationship that Weeks navigated in two distinct ways.

Weeks's decision to move into libertarian political work betrays much about her conceptions of economics. Libertarian political ideology is premised on minimal-to-no state intervention into the lives of citizens. This ideology is the same one that undergirds her descriptions of pornography and feminism in chapter three; market-based solutions are the best option for dealing with both gender and economic inequality. This ideology is in direct contradiction to the rhetoric she articulated throughout chapter two, which was premised on a reading of the economic factors that help explain why certain women would decide to work in pornography while others do not.

In chapter two, Weeks constructed pornography and feminism in relation to broader power systems, particularly, economics. In this text, Weeks situated her pornography career within a web of factors that contributed to her decision to act in pornography in the first place.

This text constructed pornography as a system demarcated along lines of race, class, and gender, hampering the ability for many women to engage in the industry successfully. In particular, pornography is not understood in a vacuum; rather, it is understood as deeply embedded within broader social institutions that create particular expectations for women. Not only that, Weeks's construction of pornography in this text changed the meaning of feminism. Rather than feminism being posited as the universal affirmation of women's individual choices, feminism is constructed as a response to a whole host of social factors that implicate women's ability to feel empowered or liberated. For example, she argued that one of the critical avenues necessary for achieving liberation and equality for sex workers is collective advocacy and solidarity that attends to the diverse identities that make up the sex worker community. Attentiveness to factors such as race, class, gender, and sexual orientation situated feminism within a broader matrix of power.

On the other hand, the second rhetorical text that emerged from Weeks's defense of pornography are Belle Knox's neoliberal descriptions of both pornography and feminism. The version of pornography articulated throughout this rhetorical text is premised on pornography's position as a "legitimate" business under the capitalist economic system. In this version, pornography is posited as a universally-accessible option for women who are attempting to solve their own economic woes. Belle Knox's construction of pornography also does work in constructing a neoliberal iteration of feminism. When pornography is constructed in this way, feminism is also premised on the activation of individual agency. In this version, it is individual women's personal responsibility to seek market-based solutions for their perceived gender inequality. Rather than analyzing patriarchy and capitalism side by side, capitalism is posited as the solution to patriarchal domination. So long as women are able to engage economically and

earn money, they are able to “solve” gender oppression and become empowered in their economic decisions.

The fundamental difference between Weeks’s and Belle Knox’s rhetoric is the relationship to economics they each posit. When Weeks analyzed the ways in which economic inequality drove women to make particular decisions regarding sex work, she attended to factors external to gender that create inequality for women. Pornography is posited as a complex system that is stratified along lines of race, class, and gender. Rather than representing access to the industry as universal, Weeks, in this iteration, illuminated the difficulty in navigating the pornography industry successfully. In contrast, when Belle Knox premised pornography and feminism on individual choice, regardless of economics, capitalism is assumed to be a system that is equally-accessible to all, rather than intimately linked with patriarchal domination. In this iteration, Belle Knox posited pornography as universally-accessible and permeable, assuming anyone who engages in the industry can do so equally and to equal success. As shown in chapter three, this delinking of gender from class creates a feminism that evades system-based critique.

The simultaneous existence of both pornographies helps illuminate the discursive nature of pornography itself. Rather than pornography representing a single, monolithic, stable entity, pornography shifts as it interacts with the power systems it navigates. In the same way, feminism shifts its meaning based upon the social systems it interacts with. Differential understandings of capitalism are essential to both of these processes. Throughout this thesis, I explored two distinct iterations of both pornography and feminism. In the Belle Knox tale, pornography is constructed as inaccessible to many, but simultaneously universally accessible to all. Similarly, feminism is posited as a movement dealing with many factors external to gender, but simultaneously only

about gender. Despite acknowledging the stratified nature of pornography, she still articulates the choice to engage in sex work as deeply individual and broadly-accessible.

Research into the relationships among pornography and feminism will continue to be important for unearthing the ways in which the slippery definitions of each concept can be utilized to different ends. Capitalism is particularly important for analyzing this relationship because it provides the backdrop for how pornography functions materially. In particular, more research is needed that unpacks the ways in which race intersects these relationships. Although I mention race in chapter two, my analysis is primarily of gender and class. As Crenshaw and King both noted, race is the third vector of the triad that determines much of how oppression is experienced. Closely analyzing the role Weeks's whiteness plays in her construction of feminism would add another texture to the ways in which pornography and feminism are both constructed.

In addition to race-based analysis, the rise of amateurism has been under-analyzed within academic scholarship on pornography. In the documentary *Hot Girls Wanted*, the rise of amateur pornography is explored by splicing narratives of various amateur porn stars, discussing how they entered the industry as well as their experiences acting in pornography.¹⁴⁴ Women who have similar stories to Weeks's (economic need) are increasingly engaging in pornography because of the potential to make large sums of money in short amounts of time. Although this may be true in the short term, the documentary illuminates that one of the results of the rise in amateurism is that women can no longer work in pornography for sustained periods of time, because viewers are interested in the "unknown" or "new" actors in the industry. One agent commented that women who could find work in pornography for three months were lucky to have found work for even that long.¹⁴⁵ This rise in amateurism has changed much of how pornography functions as a business, which deserves critical scrutiny from pornography scholars.

What can be learned from the co-existence of Weeks's structural rhetoric and Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric? It would be easy to dismiss the co-existence of both Weeks's and Belle Knox's rhetorics as resulting from her individual inconsistency and immaturity (after all, Weeks was nineteen when her identity as Belle Knox was revealed); however, this conclusion would give power to the argument about individualism; her feminism is inconsistent and contradictory because she, as an individual, is inconsistent and contradictory. This thesis acts as an intervention into this conception of Weeks's rhetoric, instead, arguing that the co-existence of both rhetorics illuminates an important lesson about feminism as it relates to neoliberalism.

Instead, the co-existence of Weeks's structural rhetoric and Belle Knox's neoliberal rhetoric is facilitated by the very individualism present within Belle Knox's neoliberal defense of pornography itself. If feminism is premised on affirming each individual and her choices, then the structural rhetoric analyzed within chapter two can co-exist with the rhetoric outlined in chapter three because both can be understood on an individual, personal level. On face, Weeks's structural analysis of class, the hierarchies present within pornography, and campus rape culture would seem to be at odds with her rhetoric in chapter three, but individualism can facilitate both a structural critique and an individual critique because Weeks's version of feminism is just that, individual. Although the co-existence of a structural rhetoric and an individualist rhetoric is contradictory, Belle Knox's emphasis on affirming each woman's individual feminism would facilitate this contradiction. Miriam Weeks is expressing Miriam Weeks feminism; it does not have to be coherent because it is her own and no one else's.

In this equation, feminism is emptied of any meaning as a collective movement, and in effect, neoliberalism co-opts feminism, placing its foci firmly on individual market solutions to collective problems. As Rottenburg reminds us, neoliberal feminism can, indeed, comment on

the inequalities present between men and women, but the solutions that are prescribed will be profoundly individual. Weeks *does* conduct structural feminist analysis, as evidenced in chapter two, but her emphasis on individualism, as evidenced in chapter three, obscures this structural critique and prescribes individual solutions to collective problems. “The neoliberal feminist subject is thus mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair.”¹⁴⁶ Neoliberalism is precisely what *accommodates* Weeks’s structural critique in chapter two.

The emptying of feminism’s meaning occurs rhetorically. Miriam Weeks’s structural constructions of both pornography and feminism exist only in the ways she describes and molds them in essays and interviews. Similarly, Belle Knox’s neoliberal iterations of pornography and feminism also occur *vis-à-vis* her discursive constructions. In the case of Belle Knox, rhetoric exposes one of the key functions of neoliberalism: its ability to absorb structural critique and co-opt movements like feminism. Nancy Fraser reminds us that if feminism has any hope of combatting the structures that oppress and do violence to feminine bodies, it “requires theorizing both the gendered character of the political economy and the androcentrism of the cultural order, without reducing either one of them to the other.”¹⁴⁷ The fracturing of Weeks’s structural rhetoric into an individual, neoliberal rhetoric disconnects her arguments about gender from her arguments about class. Both must be theorized side-by-side in order for feminist politics to attack the underlying structures and institutions that do violence to women. Fraser clarifies what this feminist politics could look like, “feminism's ambivalence has been resolved in favour of (neo)liberal individualism. But the other, solidaristic scenario may still be alive. The current crisis affords the chance to pick up its thread once more, reconnecting the dream of women's liberation with the vision of a solidary society.”¹⁴⁸ The solution that Fraser prescribes for

feminism's ailment is fundamentally collective; it understands that in order to free women from the violence of capitalist patriarchy, collective, solidaristic solutions must be found that address structures of capitalism and patriarchy, simultaneously.

Notes

- ¹ Katie Fernelius, "Portrait of a Porn Star," *The Duke Chronicle*, February 24, 2014.
- ² Kat Stoeffel, "Q&A: The Duke Freshman Porn Star," *The Cut*, February 24, 2014.
- ³ Belle Knox, "I'm The Duke University Freshman Porn Star And For The First Time I'm Telling The Story In My Words," *XOJane*, February 21, 2014.
- ⁴ Meghan Murhpy, "Feminism is the new misogyny: On 'Belle Knox feminism' and the new backlash," *FeministCurrent*, April 4, 2014.
- ⁵ Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, New York, NY: Perigee Books, 1979.
- ⁶ Gayle Rubin, "Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality," first published in Carol S. Vance, ed., *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984).
- ⁷ Stoya, "Feminism and the mainstream," *Porn Studies*, 1, no. 1-2, (2014): 201.
- ⁸ Brit Schulte, interview with Cathryn Berarovich, Michelle Z. Chen, Margaret Corvid, Melissa Gira Grant and Miss Lydia, "The Myth of 'Unrapeable' Women: Sex Work as Work, Porn as Art, and Radical Consent," *RedWedge*, February 23, 2016.
- ⁹ See Janice G Raymond, *Not a Choice, Not a Job: Exposing the Myths about Prostitution and the Global Sex Trade*, (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2013).
- ¹⁰ Catharine A. MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, *In Harm's Way: The Pornography Civil Rights Hearings*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).
- ¹¹ Fernelius, "Portrait of a Porn Star."
- ¹² Lynn Comella, "From Text to Context: Feminist Porn and the Making of a Market," in *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure*, ed. Tristan Taormino, Celine Parreñas Shimizu, Constance Penley, Mireille Miller-Young (New York, NY: Feminist Press, 2013), 81.
- ¹³ Miriam Weeks, "'Duke Porn Star': I I Lost My Financial Aid," *Time*, June 16, 2014.
- ¹⁴ Stoeffl, "Q&A: The Duke Freshman Porn Star."
- ¹⁵ Fernelius, "Portrait of a Porn Star."
- ¹⁶ Belle Knox, "I'm The Duke University Freshman Porn Star. . . ."
- ¹⁷ Belle Knox, "In Defense of Kink: My First Role as the Duke Porn Star Was on a Rough Sex Website, And No, That Doesn't Make Me a Bad Feminist," *XOJane*, March 8, 2014.
- ¹⁸ Stephen Browne, "'This Unparalleled and Inhuman Massacre': The Gothic, the Sacred, and the Meaning of Nat Turner," *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, 3: no. 3, (Fall 2000), 310.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 328.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 310.
- ²¹ Linda Williams, "Pornography, porno, porn: thoughts on a weedy field," *Porn Studies*, 1: no. 1-2, (2014): 32.
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ Taylor and Francis Online, *Porn Studies*, accessed June 10, 2016, <http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rprn20#.V2GyQOYrJo4>.
- ²⁴ Clarissa Smith and Feona Atwood, "Anti/pro/critical porn studies," *Porn Studies*, 1 No. 1-2, (2014): 7.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* 11.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*

- ²⁷ Jonathan Elmer, "The Exciting Conflict: The Rhetoric of Pornography and Anti Pornography," *Cultural Critique*, 8 (Winter, 1987-1988): 46.
- ²⁸ Magnus Ullén, "The Solipsism of Pornography: Speech Act Theory and the Anti-Porn Position." *Sexuality & Culture*, 17 (2013): 323.
- ²⁹ Hildy Miller, "Realizing the Truly Postmodern: Valuing Multiple Feminisms," *Third Space*, 8, no. 1 (Summer 2008).
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- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Betty Friedan, *The Feminine Mystique*, (New York City: Bell Publishing, 1964).
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