Transformations in sex and race: Black women and sex work

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Introduction

Sex work has traditionally been viewed as detrimental to Black women's racial identity and self-worth. Given the history of racialized violence against bodily autonomy and Black women's sexual exploitation, Black feminist scholars condemn commodified sexuality as a vehicle for racism. For early Black feminists, participation in sex work contributes to the view of Black women's bodies as commodities and reinforces subordination. Part of this subordination is sustained through stereotypes of hypersexuality and aggression that are amplified through commodification. Black feminism's critique of gendered sexual representation has focused, especially, on sex work and pornography because of their damaging effects (Miller-Young 2014, Collins 2000).

However, the landscape of sexual commerce has changed markedly over the past several decades, including its diversification and commercialization on the internet. Newer scholarship points to the potential for social mobility, increased self-confidence, and pleasure in new forms of sex work (Miller-Young 2014; Jones 2020; Weitzer 2009). Therefore, the expansion of the industry portends a significant impact on Black women's intersecting identities, but the effects remain unclear. While we know that sex is a landscape for the construction of Black racial identity (Davis 1981), given that the landscape of sex work has transformed, we do not understand currently how sex work is affecting Black women's racial identity. To understand its effects, this research asks the question: Given the expansion and reconfiguration of sexual commerce, how does participation in sex work shape racial identity and feelings of self-worth for Black women?

To answer this question, I interviewed and observed Black women about their experiences and interpretations of sex and race, including some who self-identify as sex workers and others who do not. As one of the first of its kind to explore racial identity in a changing sexual landscape, this project contributes to the racial identity literature by exploring how capitalism and sex intersect to inform meanings of race. By utilizing a Black feminist lens that centers pleasure and agency, this project disrupts dichotomous thinking, seeking to understand the complex ways that Black women navigate pervasive capitalistic racism in the labor force and how and when they experience sex work as a site of agentic self-expression, exploitative commodification, or something entirely different. Given the expansion of the sex work industry, this project contributes to timely and essential conversations around race, sex, intimacy, and the commodification of identity.

Sexuality, Racial Capitalism, and Black Women

Sexuality is an essential site for understanding how identities are created and maintained through relationships. In "Uses of the Erotic," Audre Lorde (1984) describes the erotic as a site of creation and as a "lens through which we scrutinize all aspects of our existence" (1984: 136). Her commentary positions sexuality as a site for constituting both the "inner world" of identity and emotion and the "outer world" of our shared realities. Scholars of feminist and queer theory acknowledge the erotic for its potential to (re)construct realities (Munoz 2013; Nash; Allen 2011) and identities (Connell 1992; Munoz 1999). Empirical studies demonstrate how the erotic is a site to produce new realities through the subversion of social identities (Lindemann 2011), the troubling of binary gender categories and sexual identities (Williams and Weinberg 2014), and the destabilization of socially desirable subjects (Munoz 2009).

Racial identity and meanings are among those created, contested, and maintained in sexuality. In traditional Black feminist thought, theorists have illuminated sexuality's deployment as a technique of power, creating meanings of race through reproductive violence (Davis 1983; Collins 1990), sexual objectification (Spillers 1987, hooks 1981), and through sexual controlling images that posit Black culture and bodies as impure and culturally malignant (Collins 1990; West 1995). To understand the construction of race in sexuality, it is important to view it in the context of racial capitalism, which scholars have noted shape meanings of Black sexuality and identity.

Racial capitalism describes "...the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person" (Leong 2013: 2158). The concept was first used and developed by activists during anti-apartheid Black freedom struggles during the 1970s and 1980s (Leong 2012, Keeanga-Yamahtta 2022, Levenson and Paret 2023). Since Cedric Robinson's influential *Black Marxism,* scholars have used the concept of racial capitalism to understand how the modern world system of capitalism is dependent on slavery, imperialism and the exploitation of Black people (Robinson 1983; Hall 2022).

Black feminists have long articulated how capitalistic racial formations have imprinted on the bodies of Black women historically. Perhaps most famously, the work of Angela Davis (1981) illustrates how Black women's reproductive labor was exploited in the slave economy, and how, currently, Black women's labor continues to be exploited under capitalism. According to Davis, capitalistic racial formations were embedded in the bodies of Black women, and racial slavery depended on the denial of sexual and reproductive autonomy of this group. Scholars insisted that rape against Black women was a tool of terror *and* of capitalistic reproduction (Davis 1981; Roberts 1997). For these reasons, sexuality and reproductive rights became central

to Black feminist freedom struggles (Combahee River Collective 1987). Because of this history of stripped autonomy in which Black women were not in control of their sexual and reproductive labor, Black feminists have expressed strong disapproval of sex work (Lorde 1984, Hill Collins 2004, Morgan 2015).

An example of such disapproval is Audre Lorde's distinction between the "pornographic" and "the erotic" in her famous essay "Uses of the Erotic." She names the erotic as "...an assertion of the lifeforce of women; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives" (Lorde 1984: 55). For Lorde, the erotic is a spiritual, relational energy that is a source of knowledge about the self and one's relationship to others. She contrasts this with the pornographic which she describes as "...a direct denial of the power of the erotic, for it represents the suppression of true feeling" (Lorde 1984: 54). As a canonical Black feminist theorist, Lorde's understanding of porn as capitalistic objectification that is antithetical to the pleasurable, liberatory space of the erotic has influenced later scholarly writing on Black women in sex work. For example, In *Black Sexual Politics*, Collins contrasts "the erotic" with "fucking," writing that the former requires engagement with "an honest body that is not alienated from itself" (Collins 2004: 298). The implication of her argument is that commodified sex is inherently alienating, and thus lacks the potential for pleasure, exploration, and freedom, particularly for Black women who are racialized in the context of racial capitalism.

The concern over commodified sexuality is also linked to Black feminists' critique of objectification, representation and stereotypes. Scholars have used the concept of the controlling image to understand the connections between racial capitalism, objectification, and the role of stereotypes in sustaining oppressive regimes of power. Controlling images can be defined as

generalizations of Black women that serve as ideological justifications for race, class, and gender oppression (Gilkes 1983; Collins 1990). Controlling images must be understood not only for their objectifying content, but for the cultural and power dynamics underlying their formation as well. To understand the significance of these stereotypes it is important to consider their histories and their purposes in the maintenance of unequal power dynamics. The Jezebel stereotype reflects an attempt to justify sexual violence against Black women and to maintain normative ideals of sexuality by positioning them as morally inferior and hypersexual (Davis 1980). The Sapphire stereotype functions to denounce assertiveness, reflecting an effort to keep women in a subordinate position (Collins 1986). To ridicule strong mothers by labeling them matriarchs reflects an attempt to neutralize any threat to patriarchal views of familial power dynamics (Higginbotham 1982). Finally, scholars argue that the Strong Black woman concept (SBW) contains many traits, but most agree that the major tenets include strength, emotional stoicism, independence, and self-sacrificial caregiving (Woods-Giscombé, 2010).

Controlling images contribute to the devaluation of Black women in society. Moya Bailey coined the term "misogynoir" to delineate how racism and sexism converge and affect Black women, particularly in digital spaces (Crunk Feminist Collective 2010). Misogynoir also describes how controlling images and normative expressions of gender and sexuality impact Black women's experiences in their intimate lives. Research has established that misogynoir contributes to the devaluation of Black women in sex and dating due to sexualized racist stereotypes; for example, Black women are more likely to be single (Clarke 2011; Moorman 2022) and less likely to marry (Teachman et al 2000; Salisu 2021), and among the least desirable on popular dating platforms (Kleinman 2014; Alhabash et al 2014; Kao et al 2019; Tsunokai et al 2014).

The relationship between racial capitalism and controlling images can be understood through a feminist analysis of the nature/culture dichotomy. If Marxists argue that Western progress can be understood through attempts to objectify the natural world to gain control and exploit it (Brittan and Maynard 1984; Salzinger 2003), feminists build on this idea by noting that women's close identification with nature is central to men's subordination of women. The perception of women's bodily functions (i.e., menstruation, childbirth and related processes) as more in tune with natural life, alongside the lower esteem these functions are held in comparison to cultural processes (i.e., technology, innovation, industry), have contributed to women's subordination throughout Western history (Beauvoir 1949; Ortner 1974). Relatedly, race scholars argue that defining Black, indigenous, and other non-white groups as "natural," or closer to nature, denies their subjectivity and supports domination (Keller 1983; Asante 1987; Hill Collins 2004). In Western thought, nature is viewed as something to be conquered and manipulated for the needs of men. Thus, the symbolic associations between women, indigenous groups, and nature justifies the domination of all three.

Domination always involves attempts to objectify the subordinate group. As bell hooks asserts, "As subjects, people have the right to define their reality, establish their own identities, name their history…As objects, one's reality is defined by others, one's identity created by others, one's history named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (1989: 42). Defining and naturalizing characteristics of marginalized groups are central to objectification, which is necessary for domination. Scholars have documented how sexuality is deployed in projects of objectification to control reproduction and the bodily autonomy of subordinated others (Laqueur 1992; Foucault 1979). Thus, sexual controlling images are central to Black women's objectification, a process that is illuminated through commodified sexuality.

However, recent scholarship creates a more complicated understanding of controlling images by pointing out that they sometimes have utility for Black women. Oppressive stereotypes inform how Black women assign meaning to their gendered racial identity (Jones et al 2018). While controlling images do impose a risk to Black women's racial identity (Plummer 2007; Thomas et al 2013), studies have also found that "strong Black woman" stereotypes have been embraced by Black women, showing that Black women socialize their daughters to be self-reliant, independent, and self-determined (Thomas et al 2011; Jones et al 2018). Girls and women who have this sense of self-determination have healthier psychological health outcomes (Shorter-Gooden and Washington 1996). Meanings of racial identity gleaned from these stereotypes serve as buffers against racism and sexism (Banks & Kohn-Wood 2007; Moradi and Subich 2002). Additionally, stereotypes around nurturing and care work contribute to Black women's propensity for community engagement and supporting other Black women, which has positive effects for the group (Brown et al. 2017). These studies show that Black women respond to and manipulate controlling images to their own benefit, demonstrating that the impact of controlling images on Black women's racial identity is complex.

The commodification of intimacy

While sexuality has long been understood as a site of racial identity meaning-making, that site has been transformed in recent years. Over the past 50 years, scholars have documented a transformation of intimacy on and off the market, involving the spread of neoliberal ideas of freedom and egalitarianism that lead people to seek sexual relationships that meet newly configured personal needs (Giddens 1992; Nelson & Robinson 1994; Bernstein 2007).

Cultural sociologists have argued that we are currently in the late stages of capitalism where all relationships are subject to commodification (Hochschild 1983; Giddens 1992; Illouz 1997). Considering the commodification of personal relationships, scholars have identified how emotions including love, affection, family, and care (Hochschild 2012) have become market commodities. Additionally, intimacy scholars argue that emotional life is increasingly governed by economic considerations, with money playing a significant role in shaping social bonds (Illouz 1997, Zelizer 2005).

Scholars also suggest that commodification has a negative impact on people and relationships, most important, that it produces a flattening of social relationships (Hochschild 1983; Giddens 1992; Illouz 1997). Hochschild argues that the commodification of emotions can lead to alienation that makes it difficult for individuals to distinguish between their authentic feelings and those they perform for their work. This can cause emotional fatigue and reduced capacity for genuine connection (1983). Considering the impact of commodification on intimate relationships, Illouz argues that in modern capitalism relationships are assessed based on market criteria, such as return on investment and efficiency, which diminishes the authenticity of intimate relationships (1997). These scholars would agree that under the logic of late capitalism, relationships become calculated ties that are assessed based on cost-based analysis of what the relationship has to offer the individual (Illouz 1997, 2007). Given these realities, Bernstein (2007) argues that sex work provides a version of intimacy that meets late capitalism's individualistic requirement of placing personal development over all else (Bernstein 2007).

Bernstein argues that in late capitalism, relationships are assessed through a market logic, where people assess intimate connections based on efficiency and their ability to contribute to their personal goals. Sex work, she argues, matches the logic of late capitalism by offering

"bounded intimacy" (Bernstein 2007). One consequence of this change is the proliferation of the sex work industry and the commodification of intimacy. Borrowing from anthropological research, this commodification can be defined as: "...the ways in which intimacy or intimate relations can be treated, understood, or thought of as if they have entered the market: are bought or sold; packaged and advertised; fetishized, commercialized, or objectified; consumed or assigned values and prices…" (Constable 2009: 50). As we know, meanings of race are constructed through interactions and recurring relationships (Ausdale and Feagin 2001). Thus, the commodification of relationships is likely to influence meanings of race as well.

Scholars have argued that the commodification of intimacy affects identity in three ways. First, the commodification of sex creates *a sexual economy* in which bodies are evaluated based on race, gender, and sexuality, which could lead to problematic feelings towards one's identities. Second, sex work calls for the *creation of constructed realities*, making it a site for identity meaning-making in the realm of fantasy (Giddens 1992, Cruz 2006, Sanders 2008). Finally, sex work requires *refashioning oneself* in marketable ways, which could lead to alienation, creative expression, or both through the creation of hybrid identities.

A Sexual Economy

Valuation based on race, gender, and sexuality is pervasive in society, but these identities are iterated explicitly when they are being bought and sold. As people who sell fantasies of identity, sex workers are vulnerable to alienated feelings toward their identities. Borrowing from the literature on racial capitalism, Leong (2013) understands commodification as reduction of an identity to something that can be bought or sold, which leads to identity harm for the seller. For Leong, commodification "damages integrity of individual identity, demands certain types of

identity performance, and results in tangible material harm" (Leong 2013: 2158). Scholars have

further established that environments where individuals feel the need to contort or veil certain

aspects of themselves can be psychologically damaging (Ashforth & Tomiuk 2000; Hochschild

1979; Harter 2002; Gino et al 2015). The pressures of performance could lead to negative

identity development for sex workers. Moreover, if a woman internalizes the valuation system

of sex work, they may learn to only value themselves based on what is attractive to the largely

white, male, heterosexual consumer base of pornography. Finally, scholars argue that the sexual

economy of commodified sex reifies whiteness, especially white femininity (Nagel 1997). Thus,

women of color generally occupy a lower space compared to idealized white performers (Miller-

Young 2010, Nash 2014, etc.). For these reasons, Black women sex workers are particularly

vulnerable to experiencing negative feelings towards themselves.

Selling Fantasy and Liminality

        The commodification of intimacy also involves selling sexual fantasy, or constructed

realities based on the desires of the consumer. As scholars have pointed out, identity is

constructed in the realm of sexual fantasy (Allen 2011; Cruz 2016; Munoz 2013). In her study on

BDSM and race, Cruz (2016) states that "…the structures of our reality and our fantasies are

indissociable. Fantasy is a contested realm of self-making: we produce fantasy and are produced

by it" (387). The fantasy produced by sex work is somewhat paradoxical as clients prefer

connections that feel organic but are also emotionally contained by the transaction (Bernstein

2007, Sanders 2008).

        While social expectations for sex and relationships are suspended in the exchange of

market sex and workers can be honest about what they want despite societal taboos, the fantasy

of sex work is also characterized by feigned chemistry and expectations of mutual desire and pleasure. This paradox presents a challenge to the sex worker who must respond to these contradictory expectations. Sex workers already occupy a marginalized position in society; illegality and taboos around the occupation make them seem more disposable and thus, more vulnerable to violence. Additionally, the suspension of societal expectations around sex and dating could contribute to interactions that are harmful to workers. Because they are paying for services, clients may assume unlimited access to sex worker's bodies, justifying harassment and sexual assault. Also, sex work can require significant emotional labor (Bernstein 2007, Berg 2021). Stemming from the ambiguity of sex work, clients sometimes cross emotional boundaries, asking to know more about sex worker's personal lives and stories. Some confusing situations require the workers to do relational work and assent to or limit their sharing, which could lead to feelings of anxiety and frustration towards their commodified identities (Sanders 2008).

It is also possible that the commodification of sex opens constrained avenues for autonomy and control. Singer (1993) argues that both the person giving and receiving money for sexual services often feel empowered by the market-mediated interaction. The client feels empowered because they are given control of the conditions to satisfy their desires free from the expectations of regular dating practices, making them feel more in control (Singer 1993). For a male client, the power to purchase the bodily use of a particular kind of woman who will act in an already decided-upon way without any commitments or obligations diminishes the complications of regular dating practices (Frank 1998). Research also suggests that paying for sex supports the construction of hegemonic masculinity and masculine sexuality. For example, Priot and Peled found that men who pay women for sex feel more masculine in their ability to direct the sexual behavior of another (2021). On the other hand, the person receiving the

payment may feel that they have the upper hand because they are benefiting from the sexual

interaction in a clearly socially marked way-through monetary payment. The transaction is

particularly meaningful in a society where women's objectification and sexuality are often

appropriated for free. Thus, we might predict that client interactions and the exchange of money

would have complex and contradictory effects on sex workers.

The Construction of Hybrid Identities

To maintain the fantasies of desire, sexual availability, and masculinity that are bought

and sold in sex work, workers perform identity in strategic ways. It has been well established that

some sex workers "act out" certain sexual scripts to maximize their profits (Sanders 2008; Frank

2006; Brewis and Linstead 2000). However, these scripts are enacted in a dynamic process,

where identities are not static but are "fractured constructions" of sexual identities performed

strategically for different purposes (Hubbard 2002: 366). Therefore, the line between "real" and

"fake" identities are often blurred. In her interview-based, autoethnographic study of strip clubs,

Frank (1998) describes the dual production of identity in the interplay between reality and

fantasy. These personas are not entirely fake; actors "act out" exaggerations of *their own*

identities connected to the structural positions they occupy. For example, the client may "play

up" his identity as a heterosexual, sexually available man who could afford to pay women

generously for their services, embodying a manhood that is real *and* exaggerated or sometimes

feigned. The dancers also exaggerated aspects of their identities that would be appealing to

certain men. For example, a young woman might "play up" her identity as a hard-working

student with an older man who would be attracted to that personality but act more unencumbered

for a group of young men at a bachelor party. Both these identities may be authentic to the

worker, but she utilizes them and amplifies them strategically. As stated earlier, sex work can involve substantial emotional labor, as workers are tasked with maintaining the barriers between real and manufactured intimacy. Yet, these relationships likely provide opportunities for creative expression as workers can create personas and accentuate different parts of themselves at different times. How sex workers *feel toward* these "hybrid" identities is yet to be explored by scholars; their emotional perspectives are important for understanding the effects of commodification on identity.

Types of Commercialized Sex

The internet commercialization of sex work has led to a bifurcation of niches and genres that involve different working environments. On the one hand, in conventional sex work before the internet, "streetwalkers" used the outdoors to solicit and provide sex. The visibility of an outdoor working environment makes workers more vulnerable to violent encounters and police interactions leading to arrest and sometimes sexual assault (Davis 2015). Outdoor work is particularly dangerous for Black women who are more likely to experience police sexual violence (Sankofa 2016). Sex workers who are phone sex operators, webcam models, or engage in other technology-mediated work have more control over working environments (Weitzer 2009).

These conditions have been found to affect identity-making; studies show that sex workers' self-concept depends on their working conditions. A small number of studies suggest that sex work can increase women's positive self-concept, a finding that varies depending on the type of sex work (i.e., phone sex operator, masseuse, erotic dancer, brothel worker, streetwalker), where it is done (indoors or outdoors) and the age and conditions under which one started

working as a sex worker (Benoit et al 2018; Scull 2015). Sex workers who enter the trade out of material necessity have significantly different experiences compared to those who enter in with already established financial stability. People that sell sex out of dire need are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, use addictive drugs, and engage in unprotected sex (Church et al 2001, Harcourt & Donovan 2005), leading to lower self-esteem and job satisfaction (Weitzer 2009). Conversely, sex workers with comfortable incomes have higher job satisfaction and self-esteem related to their work (Bernstein 2007). Thus, class status is a significant factor when considering the impacts of doing sex work. These studies do not consider feelings towards identities like gender and race, but they demonstrate how an individual's feelings towards themselves are influenced by their work. Because sex work is diversifying in ways that allow for people to work independently, setting their own rates and controlling the means of production, the transformation of sexual commerce is intertwined with class in ways that are bound to have implications for identity meaning-making.

Thus, identity is created in the realm of sex work. The expansion of sexual commerce, including the diversification of sexual services and their expansion into e-commerce, has opened new possibilities for how identity is constructed. While research has explored more traditional kinds of sex work such as street prostitution, there has been relatively little work on Black women's involvement in newer types such as camming (see Jones 2020 for an exception), BDSM[1], or sugaring. By considering these three types of sexual commerce, this study interrogates how the expansion of sex work may differentially impact Black women depending on the type of work they do.

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[1] BDSM is an umbrella term that stands for bondage/discipline, domination/submission and sadism/masochism. BDSM is a diverse practice that doesn't always involve physical violence or sex. Practitioners explore a range of domination that could include, for example, domestic servitude, body worship, and caregiving relationships that mirror paternal/maternal power dynamics.

The erotic webcam industry (colloquially called camming) that emerged in the late 1990s can be described as "...a genre of indirect sex work, in which cam models sell interactive computer-mediated sex online" (Jones 2020: 1). Using sites like Only Fans, Chatturbate, and Cams.com, cam models sell a variety of services ranging from flirtatious conversation to erotic stripteases to explicit sexual acts. Jones argues that the technology-mediated nature of camming provides more protection and autonomy for workers (Jones 2020). This is particularly relevant, as Black women are particularly vulnerable to sexual violence (Ullman & Lorenz 2019), especially those working in gray market economies who might face police surveillance (Sankofa 2016). Thus, as more sex workers move their services to online platforms, the potential for positive sex-worker experiences may be greater, particularly for Black women.

BDSM is an umbrella term that stands for bondage/discipline, domination/submission and sadism/masochism. A popular category in the adult entertainment industry, BDSM was reintroduced, albeit with criticism from feminists, intellectuals, and laypeople, beginning with the sexual revolution in the 1970s (Cruz 2006). During the sex wars that followed, feminists who disapproved of pornography argued that BDSM glamorized patriarchal fantasies through portrayals of women enjoying physical violence, often at the hands of men (MacKinnon 1982). Conversely, sex-positive feminists of the time sought to liberate sexuality from conventionality they considered repressive, arguing that the anti-pornography movement supported a conservative moral panic that threatened all sexual minority groups, including LGBTQ people (Rubin 1984). During this time, Black feminists like Audre Lorde and Alice Walker presented an anti-BDSM stance, considering it a problematic act that reinforces domination and subordination of all marginalized groups outside of the sexual practice.

Contemporary BDSM scholarship argues that domination in sexual interactions does not foreclose the possibility of pleasure, and that BDSM could potentially be therapeutic, and healthy for practitioners (Cruz 2006; Lindemann 2011). Professional dominatrices have re-entered public discourse recently due to portrayals of such relationships in popular films and series (e.g., "Fifty Shades of Grey," "Bonding" and "Pleasure"). While sociology has yet to acknowledge the rise in Black dominatrix communities, popular media outlets have reported on it extensively. In 2018, for example, *the Huffington Post* interviewed the late Mistress Velvet, a non-binary dominatrix who would "force" their white "subs" to read Black feminist theory:

> I am now given this platform to make white, cis men think about things in certain ways. Just allowing them to be submissive doesn't always allow for the more drastic shift in the framework and thinking that I want. So, I have to bring in my girls, like Audre Lorde and Patricia Hill Collins, and make these men actually read about black feminism. Then, it's moving from them simply fetishizing black women, to realizing: "This is a systemic issue I'm contributing to by the virtue of being a white man and being rich" (Mistress Velvet, 2018).

While it's unknown how many Black dominatrices take such an approach to their services, several prominent accounts use Black feminist language in their online profiles. For example, a 2021 New York Times article featured Mistress Marley, a sex worker who thinks of her work as a source of activism, pleasure, and reparations (New York Times 2021). As these popular examples indicate, in sex work that fetishes power dynamics, race and gender identities are amplified. Thus, it is important to explore how race is constructed in these proliferating arenas of sexual commerce.

Sugaring refers to sugar baby/daddy relationships in which an older person provides financial support in the form of allowances and gifts for the romantic company of someone typically much younger. Because most "sugar" relationships consist of an exchange of sexual services for money, some would define it as sex work (Miller 2011). However, others understand sugaring as "instrumental intimacy," not very different from traditional types of sexual exchange in marriage and long-term heterosexual relationships involving men who generally have had financial power over women. Therefore, sugaring can be considered a hybrid activity that bridges both transactional sex and heterosexual dating in a context characterized by neoliberal financial insecurity (Nayar 2017; Leclerc-Madlala 2003). Because sugaring closely resembles non-commodified dating, the racial context here is particularly interesting to explore. Like other forms of sex work, sugaring may involve the strategic use of controlling images related to race and sexuality for profit. Yet, sugaring resembles non-commodified dating where Black women are often devalued and considered less desirable because of negative controlling images (Clarke 2011; Salisu 2021, Kleinman 2014; Alhabash et al 2014). Thus, sugaring presents an intermediary case to think about how sex work impacts Black women's racial identities.

As demonstrated by the sex workers mentioned above, racial stereotypes are particularly amplified in the world of sexual commerce. Also, because of the pervasiveness of racism, such stereotypes play a significant role in workers' experiences in a variety of occupations. While gendered racial stereotypes about strength and aggression may be helpful for some Black people in some professions (for example, Black men working in blue collar jobs like corrections and policing (Harvey-Wingfield 2007)), Blackness is often associated with negative occupational traits. Occupational stereotypes depict Black workers as less hardworking, ethical, intelligent, and moral than other racial groups (Feagin 2006). Thus, sex work might be one of the only

industries where stereotypes about Blackness are strategically amplified by workers to increase their profits and marketability[2]. Because sex workers profit off their racialization, the identity meaning-making that takes place here may be tied to feelings of empowerment in their marginalized identities (Miller-Young 2014, Nash 2014). To be sure, racism, exploitation, and precarity mean the sex work industry is no utopia for Black women workers. Yet, doing sex work may have complex effects on women beyond what is easily articulated as being positive or negative.

Marx-influenced Black feminists argue that capitalism necessitates the sacrifice of pleasure and agency, but new scholarship on the changing world of sexual commerce calls that into question. While scholars have discussed how commodification impacts identity, the recent expansion of sexual commerce raises new questions for its effect on Black women. Sex worker industries are highly racially marked, as racial identities are paramount to clients' preferences and worker's experiences, marketability, and success in the industry (Miller-Young 2014, Nash 2014, Jones 2020). Thus, the expansion of sex work, and the transformation of the industry in ways that heighten racial salience as well as possibilities for worker autonomy, demand a reevaluation of these consequences. This project seeks to examine the consequences of sex work for Black women in the new landscape of commercialized intimacy, exploring not just whether it is good or bad, but how the women create meaning for themselves and navigate the racialized and transformed terrain of modern intimate connection.

Methods

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[2] Scholars have also identified hip hop as a space where Black women use controlling images or dramatizations of race to their professional benefit (Rose 1994, Love 2017 . For example, in *Black Noise,* Rose argues that Black women in hip hop create a "relatively safe-play zone" where they create personas that address questions of sexual power and racism

I investigated the experience and understandings of racial meaning-making in sex work for Black women through in-depth interviews and observations. I conducted 65 interviews with Black women ages 18-40, 40 with women who identify as sex workers as well as 25 in non-sex work gig economy type jobs (such as food delivery, carpool services, and TaskRabbit), the latter group to help identify what was unique about sex work's impact upon racialized meaning-making. To control for class, I conducted about half of the interviews from each group with participants who have at least a Bachelors' degree for a total of 4 groups: 20 sex workers who are college educated and 20 sex workers who are not, 15 gig workers who are college educated and 10 gig workers who are not.

Because I sought to understand the impact of the expansion through technology and diversification of the sex work industry, I included workers who offer a wide range of services. The industry of sexual commerce includes a wide variety of sex workers including but not limited to street prostitutes, indoor prostitutes, escorts, and brothel workers who provide clients with sexual services in-person (Weitzer 2009). There are also sex workers who provide services remotely, including porn actors, phone sex and sexting operators, and webcam models who interact with clients fully online. Furthermore, some sex workers provide a mix of in-person and remote services. To reflect this diversity, this dissertation includes full-service in-person workers who have sex with clients, "sugar babies" and escorts who sell sex and/or companionship, and fully online camgirls and models who interact with clients remotely. I also included sex workers who engage in BDSM to further understand the impact of racialized fantasy on identity. I also interviewed Black women who participated in gig economy jobs that are not sex-work related to investigate racial identity meaning-making in their sex/dating lives. Finally, the project also includes an observational component, as I also attended four Exxxotica conventions in DC and

New Jersey where I witnessed how the Black women marketed to and interacted with their publics. I include more information about my sample and methods in the Methods Appendix.

Conclusion

Sexuality is a crucial site for racial identity meaning-making, and sex work is a domain where racial identity is particularly salient. Yet prior work assumes that the commodification of sexuality only has negative effects on identity, particularly for Black women who have a history of sexual exploitation rooted in capitalistic reproduction. While it is important to articulate the ways sexuality is utilized in projects of racial domination, it is also important to consider whether and how people act agentically in pursuit of their own desires and material needs, especially given a transformed sex industry. As demonstrated by newer Black feminist literature on Black women in pornography and sex work, the exchange of money does not make the potential for pleasure and agentic sexual expression disappear. The changing landscape of sex work requires a new examination of Black women's racial identity meaning making in the intimate realm.

As the realm of sexuality transforms, we might predict that its impact on identity meaning-making will likely change too. Current research does not fully articulate the implications of recent changes in sexual commerce and the complex relationships between commodification, race, intimacy, and identity in these spaces. The world of sexual commerce has transformed through internet commercialization and a vast diversification of services available, offering new opportunities for reassessing the impact that it has on Black women's racial identities. Due to the convergence of sex with the market, sex work is increasingly less siloed from other types of intimacy. Sex work is also more accessible as the internet has opened more possibilities since the emergence of e-commerce in the late 1990s. Technology has allowed workers to have more control over the means of their production. Additionally, the variety of

services available gives workers more options for what services to provide and how they want to express their sexual selves.

This project explicates these relationships using interview data from Black women involved in sex work. By including women who perform a variety of sexual labor, this project explores how different types of sex work (traditional sex work, sugaring, professional BDSM, and camming) impact how people make sense of their racial identities in relation to their sexual selves. We know that sex work affects how workers view their identities depending on the type of work being done. However, previous research does not center racial identity meaning-making in their understanding of how sex work affects those involved. The contribution of this project lies in its intersectional analysis of a highly racialized industry that has been understudied by the sociology of race and of sexualities.

The findings of this dissertation project contribute to sociological literature of both sexuality and race. Using a Black feminist lens of agency and pleasure, this project breaks with dichotomous understandings of sex work as being good or bad. By embracing the complexities of pleasure and work in a capitalistic mode of sexual production, this dissertation provides a nuanced account of the expansion of sex work, examining experiences of commodification without foreclosing the possibility of pleasure, creativity, and counter-appropriation. The changing realm of sex work is a window into identity meaning-making against the backdrop of sexuality, capitalism, race, and pleasure.

Chapter 2

Advantaged Sex Workers: Authenticity and Sensual Critiques of Power

"I love to help people on their healing journey–as much as I can for a 19-year-old."

       I met Kima, a precocious student, when she was finishing up her first semester in college. For our interview, she took the Zoom call from her dorm room, a small cozy space decorated with string lights, plants on the windowsill, and a Nicki Minaj poster in the background. I began by asking her how college was going. At the time, she was deciding between a major in psychology or sociology. She was happy and excited about her prospects after having taken classes with some inspiring professors. Kima was proud of being a college student, and with a smile, she explained to me that she worked hard to pay for her first year in school all by herself without needing help from her parents. This pride and excitement remained mostly consistent throughout the interview as we discussed her work as a camgirl and dominatrix.

       Kima became interested in doing sex work at 16 years old. She came from a relatively stable economic background: both of her parents make good money– her father works as an engineer and her mother runs a small business. The daughter of Nigerian immigrants, Kima described her upbringing as "typical" for first generation children–she grew up in a strict household that emphasized hard work and education. While her parents took care of her material needs, they were not interested in funding trips to the mall and concerts that she wanted to attend with her friends. Her parents also did not approve of her getting a job, concerned that it might take away from her studies.

While considering ways to make money secretly, she came across the Instagram account of Codename Chanel, a Black content creator who makes popular videos about living a luxurious life as a sugarbaby. Immediately intrigued, Kima began looking on Reddit, and at YouTube videos, doing research about how to get started. She eventually was drawn to financial domination[3], which she perceived as a fun and simple way to earn extra cash.

Eventually, Kima created social media accounts under the pseudonym Madame Cocoa. Through the persona Madame Cocoa, Kima enjoyed facilitating pleasurable experiences for her clients, incorporating parts of her own background into her work: strict but meaningful discipline, respect for authoritative women, and importantly, taking responsibility for the emotional wellbeing of her submissives. The beliefs that she holds towards her persona and practices is intimately tied to the meanings she attaches to her identity as a Black woman.

This chapter discusses the experiences of the most economically and educationally advantaged people in my sample. Of the 20 women in this subgroup, 18 hold college degrees or were taking college classes at the time of our interview. Like Kima, they come from relatively privileged backgrounds–financially supportive parents and partners, and/or good jobs with financial stability. Twelve of the women were gig workers with multiple streams of income. About half were part-time sex workers that decided to "turn their kinks into coins" to supplement their already sufficient income. Thus, this chapter addresses a gap in sex work scholarship, a literature that tends to focus on material need as a primary driver for participation in the industry.

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[3] Financial domination or "findom" is a niche in BDSM in which sexual submissives become aroused by the idea of being financially dominated or exploited. For example, a "findomme" or financial dominatrix might slowly "drain" the wallets of their submissives, by demanding money or gifts in exchange for their attention. Findom has been popularized on platforms like Twitter and TikTok, where dommes may post about receiving gifts and money in exchange for relatively little work. According to some of my informants, findom's popularity on TikTok is leading to an oversaturation of the market with people who have no knowledge of BDSM (including consent and aftercare practices) looking to make quick money.

Given pervasive social stigma and sanctions, why would financially stable, socially advantaged women be interested in pursuing sex work? I argue here that the answer lies in the constructions of personas, or personalities constructed strategically through the negotiation of their identities, as well as the social meanings attached to being a Black woman.

Women who have financial stability and prospects in addition to sex work have a different orientation towards the work they do. Compared to the less advantaged sex workers—those who come from challenging social backgrounds with economic precarity and no college education–the sex workers I discuss in this chapter construct and manage their personas by drawing from controlling images and personal history, integrating both in ways that highlight the denigrating effects of misogynoir and Black women's creative critiques of it.

Scholars who study Black erotics have discussed the possibility for pleasure and exploration in sex work (Nash 2014, Miller-Young 2014, Jones 2020). In her study of Black women in porn, Miller-Young (2014) develops the concept of "illicit eroticism" to describe the ways in Black porn stars derive pleasure from erotic labor, by 1) working with and resisting against problematic representations of Black sexuality, by 2) using erotic performance for personal development and exploration, and 3) by learning the industry and getting involved in production to allow for more control over their work. For Miller-Young, pleasure in commercial sexual interactions can stem from profiting off one's sexuality, controlling the means of pornographic production, and exploring new and exciting sexual experiences.

Adding to this robust conversation, here, I highlight sex work as a site of racial identity meaning-making. Like claims made by the scholarly work above, the advantaged sex workers I spoke to reported having fun playing with their personas, exploring themselves sexually in ways that felt empowering. Importantly, this group explicitly sought what they referred to as

authenticity in the work that they do–an emotional objective that reflects the meaning they attach to Black woman identity.

Authenticity and the performance of identity

Sociologists have wrestled through various meanings of authenticity and identity. In the postmodern tradition, identity has been framed as increasingly self-deterministic with people playing an active role in identity management (William & Schwarz 2021). Power and hegemonic discourses also shape identities, particularly for marginalized groups (Foucault 1978). Scholars have pointed out an increased interest in authenticity as evidenced by the cultural language of "being yourself," and the popularity of self-help books and related media aimed at unearthing a "truer" or less socially determined identity. These phenomena are representative of a psychoanalytic and clinical psychological understanding of authenticity anchored by a "core self" (Kernis & Goldman 2007). From these perspectives, we understand that not "being yourself" is damaging to one's mental health and can lead to an unfulfilling life. In contrast, feminist theorists argue that there is no core "true self" that operates unobstructed by social forces (Butler 2006).

Sociologists offer various frameworks for dealing with the question of authenticity and identity. Social constructionists point out that people are rarely concrete, so it is more analytically useful to focus on identification and authentication as processes, acknowledging how identity emerges situationally (Altheide 2000). Sexuality scholars use the concept of "hybrid identity" to describe the dynamic process in which identities are exaggerated or performed strategically for different purposes, relying on creativity and identity manipulation based on specific clientele (Sanders 2008; Frank 2006; Brewis and Linstead 2000). Similarly, race

scholars utilize a constructionist approach to conceptualize Blackness as an identity that is deployed and negotiated by social actors who strive for "realness" by defining Blackness in ways that challenge and reinscribe racial meanings (Jackson 2007; Cox 2015). Writing from a constructionist perspective, Carroll (2015) turns our attention towards the meaning-making processes around identity. She argues that the goal of social constructionism is not to decipher when identity is authentic or not, but to understand how and why people come to identify themselves and authenticate identities in different ways. Scholars do so by asking which parts of identity are highlighted at different times, how various groups interpret them, what are the stories created around them to provide meaning, and asking how people benefit from their own interpretations of these identities.

Thus, my goal here is not to decipher between "true" identity versus personas, or to adjudicate between what is genuine or real. Rather, this project seeks to understand the meanings participants construct around their identities and personas, the discourses they mobilize, the stories they tell around it, and what these stories do for them and their orientations towards the world. For the women in this chapter, personas allow for creative exploration into identity that sheds light on the meanings they ascribe to being a Black woman.

With their financial necessities covered, these women articulate alternative motivations: they say they prioritize opportunities that allow them to express themselves and explore different aspects of their identity. For them, sex work is a space where identity can be modeled, reshaped, and played with in exciting ways. Yet, their responses highlight a complicated understanding of authenticity, because it involves a true self that can be accessed through the embodiment of a persona.

Camila, a stripper and camgirl, described herself as a typical high-achieving student in high school. She was hardworking and very concerned about pleasing her teachers and her parents. As a Black girl honor student in a predominately white school, she was particularly invested in maintaining a certain image of Blackness to avoid stereotyping and problems with fitting in. After experiencing her identities as being bound to such expectations, she told me that she felt "lost" after graduation. She described how she was able to reconnect with parts of herself she felt estranged from through embodying a '"completely different person."

> For me, I was such a leader in high school, as soon as I left I lost all sense of myself.— I don't know what it was…I spent my entire life trying to please my parents through school that I had lost myself because I'd fought so hard to prove myself not only to them, but also just, like, as a black girl in honor school, a mainly white honor school. It was just a lot. So being a stripper allowed me to express myself through dance, which I'd never done. Yeah, with camming and dancing, I got to put on makeup and do my hair however I wanted to and dress, however. I got to like embody a completely different person and find power through that.

Camila credited her sex work for her ability to detach herself from expectations that felt inauthentic. She found power in the ability to distance herself from racialized expectations, including pressures related to her physical presentation and body comportment. She specifically mentioned her hair, which is meaning-laden, as Black women's hair has historically been a site of control and contentious debates related to respectability politics. Black scholars point to how hair is linked to the derogation of Black people through Eurocentric standards for professional presentation and beauty standards (Collins 1990; Byrd and Tharps 2001; Bellinger 2007). For instance, Ngandu-Kalenga Greensword (2022) tracks the sociohistorical significance of Black hair. From pre-colonial West Africa to contemporary America, she traces Black hair as a site for

racial terror through dehumanizing hair-cutting practices, and as a site for political resistance in contemporary politics, considering, for example, legislation like the 2022 CROWN Act, which responds to workplace discrimination based on (Black) hair texture.

Camila's statement speaks to the constraining and alienating nature of white spaces and the political significance of doing whatever one wants to with their hair as a Black woman. For her, persona-making facilitated a closer connection to her racial identity that felt more authentic. Additionally, it felt reorienting, and she found a "self" that was suppressed due to her socialization. As they reflected on their journeys into sex work, many of the women I spoke to discussed coming from backgrounds that kept them from being their "true selves."

Black women and the politics of respectability

Black girls often undergo socialization governed by respectability politics, an ideology that emerged during the Civil Rights movement claiming if Black people were to appeal to whiteness by presenting as respectable good citizens, their social status would improve. This agenda also encouraged sexual conservatism, particularly among women, to safeguard against stereotypes about hypersexuality that have been integral to Black people's exploitation and oppression (Higginbotham 1993). To protect themselves and their bodies, Black women have adopted ideas of sexual conservatism.

Many women in this sample shared a similar cultural upbringing around sex and pleasure that left them feeling shamed and alienated from their bodies and sexualities. For example, Alicia, a 45-year-old pro-domme[4] described her upbringing as stable yet stifling. She grew up in a close-knit Southern Baptist community with several family members involved in the ministry.

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[4] Professional dominatrix

She generally felt loved and supported–but growing up under these conditions fostered intense discomfort in the realm of sexual expression. She gave the example that as a teenager, she was ashamed for wanting to wear clothes that her community considered not feminine enough or too revealing. She internalized tremendous shame for her growing interest in exploring her body as a teenager.

For the past 16 years, she has worked as a dominatrix–offering camming and in-person services at a dungeon in her city. When I asked what influenced her choice in starting sex work, specifically as a domme, she answered with the following:

> "I've just always liked the clothing! [*laughs*] Even as a teenager, I would just be like "Oooh I would love to wear that!" And my mother, she was very religious, and very against it. But she was against *anything* that wasn't religious. I'll just say it like that. So, yeah, that's why [this work] is important to me, because I think it's important for mental health. Because I couldn't express myself growing up, it was like… keeping it all in was… I'm just gonna say– it was driving me crazy!"

For Alicia, sex work opens her up to exploring parts of herself that felt muted and inaccessible. Importantly, she highlighted the emotional toll of embodying religious expectations that were not aligned with her beliefs and desires. Through sex work, she was able to express herself in ways that felt authentic, which contributed to her improved mental health.

These conversations introduce a new meaning of authenticity–the ability to explore and try out different "versions" of the self. This conceptualization of authenticity is analytically aligned with a vision of identity composed of transitory beliefs, behaviors, and preferences. As scholars have established, meanings of identity shift through time and through social contexts. So, because identity has these transitory properties, a social constructionist definition of

authentic identity could include exploration, or the ability to shift through different versions of the self that are all considered "true" to one's self concept in different contexts. According to my informants, it feels empowering being able to play with these different versions of the self.

Kima also described a complex understanding of authenticity, explaining that embodying someone different who is *also* a "true self" is one of her favorite parts about being a sex worker. The inability to do so previously was due to her sexually conservative upbringing:

> "I grew up, like, *very* religious. We're West African. So, growing up religious–that's not necessarily what resonates with me today. There was so much sexual shaming, I felt guilty. But then at the same time, I felt like this [her sexual profession] was coming. But doing this feels natural…Like, I didn't feel like I was straying away from who I was doing this. I didn't have to; I didn't have to act like a new person. It was like I was acting myself in a way that I've always been, deep within me, but I was given the chance to…put her out there."

She described the process of becoming "Madame Cocoa" as unearthing something that was already in her, that was more authentic than the version of herself that she was socialized into being. According to her account, sex work functioned as a bridge to a personality and way of being that was inaccessible due to race-related pressure to be respectable, Christian, and chaste. This point is particularly important given the fact that Black women are one of the most religious cohorts in the United States.

From a social constructionist approach, identities are always in flux, but research participants do not often see them this way; they often have a more essentialist understanding of their own identities. For example, in studying young feminists, Calder-Dawe and Gavey (2017) found that their participants understood their feminist identity to be rooted in an essential core that had always been there but was unknown to them. Similarly, the sex workers in this chapter

spoke about playing with various identities and finding versions of themselves that were always present, but muted due to social pressures to behave and present in certain ways. For Black women sex workers, persona-making against the backdrop of such pressures reflects their making and remaking of race, as they mobilize power-laden meanings of Black womanhood, meanings that constitute what scholars call "controlling images."

Controlling images

As noted in the previous chapter, Black women have a unique history of contending with gendered-racial discriminatory stereotypes: the hypersexual Jezebel, the verbally aggressive Sapphire, the Matriarch, the Mammy, or the resilient Strong Black Woman (West 1995, Higginbotham 1982). Portrayals of Black women as rude, loud, overbearing Sapphires, dutiful and sexless Mammies or hypersexual Jezebels reflect efforts to discourage assertiveness, uphold patriarchal values and exploitative expectations related to care work, and justify sexual violence respectively (Collins 1984; Christian 1985; West 1990).

There is extensive research that demonstrates the negative consequences of the strong Black woman stereotype for Black women. It has been shown to have damaging effects on mental health; women who endorse SBW are less likely to seek help with intimate partner violence (Avery et al 2022) and report higher levels of stress (Woods-Giscombé, 2010; Nelson et al 2022). In comparison, there are relatively few studies that consider the potential for any emotional benefits related to self-efficacy, the perceived ability to withstand hardship, or other SBW traits.

Yet there are apparently some potential benefits. While controlling images do impose a risk to Black women's racial identity (Plummer 2007; Thomas et al 2013), studies have found

traits related to SBW have been embraced by Black women–that they socialize their own daughters to be self-reliant, independent, and self-determined (Thomas et al 2011; Jones et al 2018). Meanings of racial identity gleaned from these stereotypes can also serve as buffers against racism and sexism (Banks & Kohn-Wood 2007; Moradi and Subich 2002). Additionally, stereotypes around nurturing and care work contribute to Black women's propensity for community engagement and supporting other Black women, which has positive effects for the group (Brown et al. 2017).

Thus, this research suggests that the consequences of internalizing SBW expectations might have ambivalent effects for Black women. How might this ambivalence be expressed in the project of racial identity meaning-making? The rest of this chapter will explore how controlling images manifest in sex work and the meaning ascribed to them by this group of advantaged Black women sex workers.

Selling the Strong Black Woman

Black girl exceptionalism: strength and resilience

The women in this sample endorsed traits that are named under SBW, particularly strength and the ability to overcome hardship. While creating her persona, Madame Cocoa, Kima drew inspiration from Black women in her life:

> "So, I get inspiration from the women in my family–that's the number one thing– the women in my family in Africa. Then I definitely get inspiration, surprisingly from my mother, because my mother is an entrepreneur. And so, seeing my mom run shit and [take charge] around her business is one of the biggest things that was so inspiring to me as a little girl."

Like Kima, many of the women in this chapter praised Black women for embodying elements of SBW. Kima adds "surprisingly" because her religious mother is not aware of Kima's sex work and would probably be shocked to learn that she is an inspiration in that area of Kima's life. Her experience speaks to Evans-Winters concept of "daughtering" which she uses to describe the specific ways that Black women are taught to draw meaning from a collective past and use these meanings to name themselves and shape their own understanding of racial identity outside of racist interpellations of Black womanhood (2019). Kima demonstrates this daughtering by positively associating herself with traits named under the SBW concept. By drawing from the experiences of women in her life, she positions herself squarely within the lineage of strong, resilient, Black women–a position that gives rise to pride in her Black woman identity.

More than others I spoke to, the advantaged women in sex work endorsed ideas related to Black woman exceptionalism. They took pride in their race and gender identity and the perceived heightened ability to overcome. For example, 28-year-old May is an escort and a student that works part-time as an intern for a housing rights advocacy organization. When asked about the meaning she ascribes to being a Black woman, she responded:

> "It's like just having the weight of the world on your shoulders, sometimes. And having very few people acknowledge the difficulties of that. People always say, doing twice the work to get half the credit. And it really does feel like that most of the time. So, yeah. But my family, you know, overcame a lot as an African American family. And so, I'm proud of the progress that my people went through."

She describes the challenges that racism produces in her various roles of being a student, sex worker, and an advocate, as she feels pressure to "do twice the work to get half the credit." For

May, sex work is a space where she does not feel overlooked or unacknowledged but sought after and appreciated in her Black womanness.

For many of the women in this sample, awareness of racial politics and history produced racial pride and heightened feelings of resilience. Amelia, a 21-year-old camgirl and sociology student shared her reflections on the seemingly superhuman mental and emotional grit of Black women:

> "Um, so me being a black woman means to be strong, resilient. Definitely empowered because we had been through so much. And they say that the black woman is the most disrespected. So, we're like, really, really strong and like, resilient, and we can withstand anything. So honestly, I feel like black women are– we're magical."

Like May, Amelia is also a student who grew an awareness of racial politics through exposure to various readings on the topic. Like all the women in this chapter, they share advantages that distinguish them from the less privileged sex workers I discussed in the following chapter. Their education produced an orientation towards their racial identity that included pride, especially in Black women's perceived ability to overcome. Perhaps they feel this way because most of them came from middle-class families that fit the image of racial progress. Like the strong but conventionally successful women in their lives, they were proud to be Black women.

Some of the sex workers spoke more explicitly about the connection between cultural expectations for Black women and the type of sex work they do. For Kima, her domme persona was linked to racial pride and supremacy:

> "I wish I could be a bit more articulate in my words to be able to explain this…but honest to God I'm really big on black female supremacy mainly because of our roots–There's so many things that we were conditioned specifically as black girls that we can grow up and

not all of us grow up to become dommes, but us who are now dommes can start to put [those skills] into our work. And seeing how typically we've been *adultified* in our lives to the point where we mature more–we don't put our pain on others, *we actually carry other people's pain*. We understand how to control ourselves, as far as like putting something that was mainly traumatic in our past in a session, we know when to like have our boundaries and limits with that"

Here Kima describes the socialization of Black women that researchers have described as being particularly focused on strength. Black mothers are more likely than others to teach their daughters to be self-reliant as a coping mechanism against misogynoir and related stress (Allen et al, 2019; Brown et al 2017; Leath et al 2023). It is also true that young Black women today are more likely to have ambivalent views of SBW because it clashes with burgeoning cultural ideals that emphasize self-care and mental health hygiene (Jones et al 2021). However, the interviews from the women in this project demonstrate that strength continues to be a relevant aspect of Black womanhood.

The Mammy-Matriarch: care, education, and fostering growth
Kima's response reflects another aspect of the SBW concept: emotional caretaking. For her, being a Black woman means having a unique capacity for mental toughness, and importantly, the ability to "carry" the emotional weight of others. Throughout my interviews with these more advantaged women, themes related to care work emerged frequently as sex workers saw themselves as caretakers and providers of emotional labor to those who need help in their own journeys of self-discovery. In this next section, I link the embodied caretaking of Black women to controlling images related to care work that continue to shape the lives of Black women: The Mammy and the Matriarch.

Scholars describe the Mammy and the Matriarch as caretaking-related controlling images that denigrate Black women. The Mammy refers to a particular caricature of Black women that justifies the exploitation of their domestic labor (Gilkes 1983, Harris 1982). Considering portrayals of Black women in film and popular culture, the mammy is described as a submissive, faithful domestic servant that has accepted her subordination. As described by Harris-Perry, "She was a trusted adviser and confidante… She represented a maternal ideal, but not in caring for her own children. Her love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for white[s]" (Harris-Perry 2011 p.1073). As a grateful, dutiful caretaker who knows her place, the Mammy represents the ideal relationship between Black women and white patriarchy.

Conversely, the Matriarch is a "failed mammy" who fails to model the appropriate feminine behavior of deference. Patricia Hill Collins describes the Matriarch as an "overly aggressive, unfeminine women, Black matriarchs allegedly emasculated their lovers and husbands" and "dangerous, deviant, castrating mothers" who threaten the stability of the mythologized American family (Hill Collins 2010, p. 75, 77). She argues that the matriarch also serves to influence white women's gendered behavior; for example, during period following WWII when more white women entered the workplace, the Black matriarch served as a warning of what could happen when white patriarchy is challenged–referring to the idea of unstable, financially struggling, fatherless households of single Black women.

In this next section, I describe how these controlling images are reinscribed through Black women sex workers whose practices recall stereotypes around Black womanhood, mothering, and domestic labor, specifically involving caring for, educating, and fostering the growth of their mostly white clients. Unlike the mammy or the matriarch trope, these women are

explicitly sexual in their presentations, allowing us to interrogate the reconceptualization of controlling images through self-commodification projects.

Lisa, 38-year-old content creator and cam model, described herself as an erotic hypnotist. We met at the very beginning of my fieldwork and interviewing for this study, and at the time, I had no idea what that meant. During our conversation, she explained that her services include online sessions and phone sex with clients where she sensually guides them through masturbation. Lisa is well versed in hypnotherapy and uses those methods to connect with the subconscious desires of her clients. She stated that her goal is to address the "social programming" that inhibits people from exploring and embracing themselves fully. Under the persona, The Pleasure Coach Mae, Lisa has cultivated an online presence on Twitter and Reddit. At the time of our interview, she was in business school and actively promoting her brand as a lifestyle coach. When I asked what drew her to sex work, she responded that she wanted to find fun work that would marry her skills in marketing with her passion for helping others and providing pleasurable experiences. While in business school, she realized that she had no interest in a conventional working schedule. After years spent working in various industries, she looked for ways of making money that brought her joy:

> "And so ultimately, I knew that I wanted to be in both [marketing and sex work]. And I definitely wanted to understand marketing and I wanted to do something that was fun…I definitely liked the idea of being able to help people in a non-traditional way. I love pleasure. I love joy. So, I love, you know, just helping people with that."

Lisa considered herself to be a strong advocate for pleasure and emphasized this in her various online biographies. In addition to sensual pictures of herself in dominating positions, she enjoyed posting about practices meant to foster self-awareness.

When I asked Lisa what she enjoys most about being the Pleasure Coach Mae, she responded stating that she liked providing services that helped others embrace who they "truly are." Echoing feminist critiques of heteropatriarchy, Lisa considers the broader culture to be repressive and stifling, especially for those who have unconventional needs and desires. She is also deeply critical of capitalistic expectations of work that alienate workers from their own pleasure and creative expression. So, while embodying these caretaking qualities, Lisa offers critiques of these broader power structures while contributing to her positive sense of self as an advocate and inspiration to those in need. She also related sex work to her own journey in self-discovery, stating that doing this work helped her embrace different parts of herself as well:

> "I like the idea of helping people, including starting with me, right, embrace all of themselves. I help people really just embrace themselves fully, unapologetically, though it may be a secret to them. I encourage it not to be–but everybody has a different reason for why, you know, they can't share, they might lose their work or lose their family…it can get a little crazy for some people. So yeah, I like to help people get through that. I like to help people embrace it. That's in my own work in my own life"

Lisa attributes her capacity to assist others with finding themselves to her identity as a Black woman, demonstrating an underexplored function of the SBW concept. She explained that being a Black woman grants her the ability to be empathetic towards the experiences of others. She was explicitly concerned with how women are treated in sex and dating, and the role that patriarchy plays in relationship dynamics she felt were problematic. One thing that stands out about her social media bio is her listed role as a "male trainer." While this label is not uncommon amongst dommes in sex work, her reasoning behind the label pointed to a distinct orientation towards community care and what some might refer to as erotic freedom (Nash 2012; Stallings).

She described her favorite online sessions, which were sensual Q&As where clients would ask her sexual advice, specifically on how to pleasure women and be better partners. Lisa was most proud of this work because she felt helpful contributing to the better treatment of women through the men she interacted with. This was a common theme among the more advantaged women I talked to. Part of the pleasure they felt in their work was feeling they were not just reversing patriarchal power dynamics, but "training" men in the service of women.

In these ways, Lisa's work criticizes white male patriarchal power dynamics and capitalism. She is committed to prioritizing empathy and pleasure in work, breaking capitalistic distinctions between work and play, and norms that place productivity over personhood. Lisa's work demonstrates the radical potential for Black women in sex work to challenge these larger regimes of power. At the same time, she reinscribes controlling images about Black women and caretaking by embodying elements of the Mammy/Matriarch trope and turning these embodiments into erotic critiques of patriarchy and capitalism.

Like Lisa, Kima offered male training services to clients and similarly, she enjoyed being a disciplinarian. For Kima, her pleasure was connected towards work that she feels uplifts women's position in society. She was proud to share with me her "slave manual," a collection of rules and expectations on how to treat her as a dominant. While Kima explained that writing the manual was a pleasurable process for her, she also stated that her goal with writing a manual was to educate men on being more respectful to women more generally:

> "I created the male slave manual for male subs on how to treat women in their vanilla life–not just the dominatrix that they serve. So, like, seeing some situations and not looking at themselves and patterns of behavior as superior to what women may do. But seeing us as equals…I try to reverse all of that…. And so that's why I like to do routine. And that's why I like to teach men to respect women's cycles and what we're capable of

doing, like respect the fact that we are the ones who are like spiritual warriors in this world, respect the ones who birth people and bring them into this world– like even take them out, shit, like we could do whatever we want."

Kima recalls the image of the Mammy/Matriarch through her work that involves enforcing rules, routine, and discipline for her mostly white male clients. She enjoyed getting creative, for example, she liked to discipline clients by making them stand on one foot with books written by Black women balanced on their heads for long periods. Importantly, how she views Black women is integrated into her sex work persona in ways that she feels pays homage to them. Her endorsement of Black female supremacy functions as a source of pride while simultaneously challenging the societal devaluation of women, including misogynoir. She saw herself as an educator that made her clients more respectful and empathetic people. The emotional benefits she gained from being Madame Cocoa demonstrates the potential for sex work to provide more than just monetary benefits.

Kima was committed to making men understand the importance of respecting Madame Cocoa, who operates as both a persona and a kind of composite character for Black womanhood. By teaching clients to respect and admire her, she is teaching them to respect and admire all Black women. By utilizing tropes of the strict but maternal Mammy and the emasculating Matriarch to challenge heteropatriarchy and cultivate her own pleasure, Kima offers another example of reinscribing controlling images through sex work.

While some sex workers I spoke with enjoyed contributing to the personal growth of their clients through discipline, others took pride in doing so by facilitating exploration. Reina, a project manager and sex worker, for example, reflected on one of her favorite activities to do

with male clients–pegging[5]. By (consensually) sodomizing straight men, Reina thought of her

work as a critique of hegemonic masculinity. Scholars define the concept as the normative

definition of American manhood that is white, middle class, able-bodied, relatively young, and a

heterosexual (Connell 1992; 1995). Hegemonic masculinity is made up of implicit rules

including no participation in anything feminine (Kimmel 1994). Thus, Reina saw herself as

helping to disrupt hegemonic masculinity by encouraging men to take sexual positions that are

labeled as submissive and feminine. She discussed with me one experience that she found

particularly meaningful, when she was able to facilitate sex between bicurious men who

previously did not pursue that experience because of hegemonic masculinity-induced shame. As

a sex worker, she successfully created a space where men felt comfortable experimenting in such

vulnerable ways:

> "I've been told my aftercare is amazing. I don't know exactly why, I'm not sure exactly
> why people may feel that way. But it could just be the services I provide, and then the
> level of care that they get. But I absolutely love pegging[6]. And I had an experience where
> I had two of my subs together. And one of them wanted to start to try some other things
> *[pauses for dramatic effect]* and one of them *also* wanted to try some other things. So, I
> was able to help them have that little adventure together. And that, that made me hungry
> again, for having those experiences, those new experiences, some new people, or just in
> general. And that's why I tried to do a bit more for myself, so I could try to provide more
> and different things for them as well."

Importantly, Reina prides herself on aftercare, which in BDSM refers to actions taken after a

"scene" or a session to mitigate any potential harm or discomfort caused by extreme physical and

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[6]"Pegging" describes the act of a female domme or "top" donning a dildo or artificial penis and
penetrating a male "bottom" or sexually submissive partner.

emotional vulnerability. Additionally, she was invested in doing "a bit more for herself," by learning new techniques and experimenting with toys so that she could continue to provide exploratory experiences for her clients. Her emphasis on care and emotion management reflects a certain orientation towards sex work shared by the women in this chapter. Importantly, Reina marries the Mammy's willingness to care and the Matriarch's propensity to emasculate to challenge hegemonic masculinity's rejection of the feminine.

While Reina and Kima spoke about encouraging exploration among their clients, others were interested in providing educational experiences for people more generally. They were community oriented in their sex work and sought out opportunities to contribute to the growth and erotic self-knowing of others. For example, I first met Gianna at Exxxotica where she was leading a seminar on music and sensuality. This was one of dozens of seminars that would happen over the weekend at the annual sex industry/lifestyle convention. Because Black women sex workers are often relegated to the fringes of the sex work industry (Miller-Young 2014, Jones 2020), I was not surprised to see that only two Black women were scheduled to give a workshop at this event, including the music and sensuality workshop by Gianna.

As I walked into the conference room off to the side of the large convention hall, I saw Gianna on stage giving a demonstration of fellatio on a large pink dildo, moving her mouth back and forth to the beat of a slow R&B song. There was a small crowd of about 20 people watching her intently–this was just her opening. After the music stopped, she introduced herself and her workshop theme. For the next 20 minutes, she lectured a crowd of mostly heterosexual couples on integrating music mindfully into sexual practices, considering how the pace and tone of music can be used intentionally and how different pitches of sound affect various chakras in the body leading to deeper sensations. We chatted briefly after the talk, but she was quickly surrounded by

people asking questions and I decided to move on to another event that I wanted to observe that afternoon.

I was surprised to see Gianna on Zoom a week later when she signed up for an interview under a different pseudonym. We did not recognize each other immediately but when we did, we continued our conversation about sex and mindfulness. She told me about how her background as a psychology major influenced the sex work she does–which was mainly Only Fans and content creation. For her, education and connection were foundational to the pleasure she found in sex work.

Managing Ambivalence: Challenges and critiques

Despite the benefits they reported from the SBW attributes, however, some remained critical of what they felt was fetishization of Black women in sex work. Some struggled to articulate ambivalent feelings towards being sought after based on their Black woman identity. For example, Mariah described to me a time when a man approached her at an Exxxotica conference who brought up racial preference immediately after they exchanged contact information:

> So, when I was walking away, he was like, 'Are you a fan of white men?' And that
> question grinds my gears, the reason why is because if you're looking for an experience,
> why does it matter? Well then, he inbox me and was like 'well, how much do you weigh?
> I bet you will crush my face and that's exactly what I'm looking for.' Granted I do not
> kink shame because [face-sitting] is a kink. However, the way you approach things about
> your kink should be in a respectful manner, especially when you're speaking to a
> mistress. I just felt kind of disrespected. But yeah, it's a big thing with black woman and
> especially being a black domme, I definitely feel like I'm fetishized a lot in the nonblack
> community"

Mariah did follow up with that connection and performed multiple BDSM scenes with that client. While she voiced disapproval of fetishization and objectification based on her body size, she struggled to reconcile that with her commitment to being kink friendly, which was an important value to her and her sex worker peers. She felt disrespected but still followed up on the connection, possibly because she understood dealing with fetishization as a normal part of the job. Several women expressed this sort of ambivalent acceptance of explicit fetishization, including Amelia who said the following about dealing with fetishization as a phone sex operator:

> I mean, when I worked in phone sex, that was where I really saw the weirdness come through. And unfortunately, when I did that, it was a lot of people who were interested in either race play or people who were interested in like cuckoldry with the element of race play, like, 'Oh, you're my wife, but you need a giant black dick' type of thing. And that was a really common [request] with phone sex, like cuckold requests involving specifically a black guy as the other guy. Extremely common.
>
> *Nia:* So, what do you mean? So, they would request for you to find a black guy to…?
>
> *Amelia:* Yes, so this was phone sex. So, they're not actually going to meet me. They wanted to pretend like I was their wife or whatever. But I needed like, black men because their [the client's] dick was too small and only a black guy could fill me. It's part of the fetishization of black men that, you know, white people tend to do. It's just, you know, having to deal with it as part of the work.

Although Amelia explicitly mentioned the fetishization of Black men, her comment reflects concern over the fetishization of Black people generally that includes the assumed sexual excess of Black women's bodies that could only be satisfied by sexually-excessive Black men. Her comment illustrates an important understanding of fetishization as a challenge that can be dealt with as just "part of the work." As demonstrated by research on Black women's sex lives,

fetishization plays a role in Black women's sexual expectations. In sex work, they consider it to be a normal part of their work experiences.

Some found racial fetish disturbing even when it appeared to be complimentary. While discussing Black women reversing racial power hierarchies in race play, Camila said:

Like it's one thing to encourage someone's Blackness but it's another thing to like, try to flip the role. I don't know how to describe it. It's so extreme. I'm accepting of things until it gets so extreme… like when they'll try to push this black supremacy type thing, and I mean, don't get me wrong, I love me some black people. I'm trying not to make it seem like I don't want people black people to be on top but it's just the way that they do it feels wrong to me. Like, okay, you can appreciate my blackness without making it so fetishized and intense. I don't know… I can be 'Queen,' 'Ebony Goddess' or yada yada [whatever] I don't mind that. It's just the way that you approach it. I don't know.

Yet Camila also epitomized a third reaction to fetishizing by my respondents: taking pleasure in it. Although some women talked about embodying strength as pleasurable, they talked about it as an admirable quality of Black womanhood, not as part of a fetish. Camila described to me that while being very critical of fetishization, she realized that there were some aspects of enacting race that she enjoyed:

"So, I was 19, so it was 2020. I was a stripper with my friend in Nashville. And I don't know, I guess because I'm already 5'10– I'm already pretty tall. So, I guess it was something about the way I carried myself, and I already have really tall shoes on. Other people kind of just viewed me as a more dominant person. Plus, I'm a black woman. So, it's kind of like the stereotype put on us in the first place. So [a customer] was just like, 'hey, could you like, step on me?' And I was like, 'ummm right now?' He said, 'yes, I will literally pay you to step on me.' I was like, 'okay…sure.' And I did and I was like, 'okay…I kind of like this. This isn't bad. I don't hate it.' I've always been against the

whole strong black women thing. I just want to be a woman like, can you just leave me? But at that moment, it was kind of cool. And I was like, 'this could probably be something!' So, I just leaned into it for my stripper persona. And it ended up just becoming something that I was like, super into"

Camila was unsure about "leaning" into what she considered to be problematic expectations for Black women. She was aware that the pressures to be "strong" often had a negative impact on mental health and outright rejected that for herself. Yet, after embodying these stereotypes erotically, she noticed her own pleasure in being admired for her physical appearance in racialized ways. Her statements demonstrate the ambivalent feelings towards racial fetishization in sex work.

Some scholars argue sexualities research does not always capture these mixed and contradictory attitudes towards racial fetishization (Nash, Lee 2010, Stallings 2015). The sex workers here demonstrate the potential for pleasure in what Miller-Young calls "self-Jezebelization" or the self-fetishization projects of Black women (Miller-Young 2014). Departing from traditional Black feminist thought that describes fetishization as always dehumanizing, these sex workers demonstrate the potential in finding pleasure in one's own version of strong Black womanhood, particularly when they can profit and get creative with its deployment.

Discussion and Conclusion: Controlling(?) images and erotic critique

This chapter explored identity meaning-making practices of Black women in sex work, elucidating how class and educational advantage prompts the marketization of expectations related to the Strong Black Woman, Mammy and Matriarch controlling images. Sex workers reinscribe meanings of Black womanhood by 1) finding pride in their embodiment of SBW 2)

using tropes to critique patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity and capitalism, and by 3) cultivating pleasure that is both physical and political in their roles as marginalized women and workers.

The women in this chapter take pride in the images of Black womanhood they integrate into their work. They find delight in their ability to embody elements of Black womanhood that they express strong admiration for, including inner strength, resilience, and as Lisa put it, "the natural power" of Black women. For these women, persona-making is a process of self-love, and admiration for Black women's resilience that they've witnessed in their own lives. Pleasure is not just coming from profiting from stereotypes, but from self-discovery and the utilization of the erotic to pay homage to the Black woman experience.

Advantaged Black women sex workers also reinscribe controlling images by using them to critique patriarchy, hegemonic masculinity, and capitalism. Consider for example, Kima and Lisa who both embody caretaking stereotypes to educate their clients to be more compassionate and respectful towards women. Although we do not know if these lessons are internalized outside of the interaction, we do know that these women take their roles as caregivers seriously and experience positive benefits to their self-concepts because of this. Future research should be aimed at understanding client reactions to sex worker lessons on the topics of race and feminism to examine the impact it might have on clients outside of the exchange.

The women in this chapter also renegotiate meanings of Black womanhood by challenging hegemonic masculinity. They do so by encouraging them to take submissive roles and guiding them through exploratory activities that disrupt expectations of hegemonic masculinity. Scholars have argued that BDSM has potential to disrupt gender expectations (Lindeman 2011; Cruz 2016). Advantaged sex workers cited the potential of controlling images to disrupt gender expectations.

Sex workers reinscribe meanings of controlling images by using them to disrupt capitalistic expectations related to work and pleasure. They refuse to ignore pleasure in the pursuit of money and find creative ways to marry their sexual and creative interests with the necessity to support themselves financially. Through education, they sometimes work to encourage others to do the same. Sex work appeared to give Black women the opportunity to find pleasure amid misogynoir that is pervasive in society. For example, Reina explained to me that in her vanilla life, she works in human resources at a tech company. Her role is very "people oriented," she is constantly facilitating conversations that involve emotion management. In this way, her vanilla life is consistent with sex work. The major difference is that in sex work, she is admired, praised *and* compensated for the emotional labor that she provides. This example builds on newer sex work literature that speaks to the potential benefits of doing sex work compared to other work, especially for marginalized groups (Miller-Young 2014, Jones 2022).

Finally, Black women reinscribe controlling images by finding pleasure in their deployment that is both physical and political. In seeking experiences that allow for sensual exploration and building their own sexual repertoires, they are committed to finding pleasure in their work. By recalling images of Black women they admire, pleasure is specifically sought out through their deployment of various meanings of Black womanhood. Nash uses the term "political pleasures" to describe positive feelings derived from practicing subversion, transgression, and challenging racial myths (Nash 2014). By infusing these controlling images with sexual agency and subversion, the Black women sex workers in this chapter develop erotic critiques to broader systems of power.

A big question remains–what is it specifically about sex work that allows for exploration into identity for this group? What keeps these women from exploring sexuality outside of the

transaction? I argue that the answer to this question lies in the meanings constructed around

Black womanhood. This group is more susceptible to socialization that praises working hard and

self-reliance *and* sexual conservatism. I argue here that participation in sex work gives a

justification for exploration into racial and sexual identity while keeping in line with cultural

expectations to be hardworking, financially independent, and willing to help those in need.

Sex work offers pleasure in embodying meanings of Black womanhood that offer

emotional benefits. Endorsement traits related to the Strong Black Woman concept indicates

positive associations with pride in Black woman identity that is often ignored by the larger

literature on mental health and SBW. Though the consequences of buying into SBW should not

be obscured, it is important to acknowledge the potential for pride and inner strength, which are

experienced as a positive emotional boost for Black women.

The women in this chapter not only reinscribe controlling images of Black women, but

they also call for a reexamining of the concept itself. Patricia Hill Collins defines controlling

images as "...images [that] are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of

social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins 2024,

69). So, what happens when Black women also use these images to challenge those exact

systems of oppression through erotic critique? Perhaps through sex worker's reinscription of

these images-- invigorating them with creativity, pleasure, and sexual agency-- calls for a deeper

interrogation into the "controlling" nature of stereotypical images of Black women. The women

in this chapter have relative advantages–education and financial security–that allow them to have

more control over the racial meaning-making that happened through their work. As we will see

in the next chapter, less advantaged women faced considerable challenges in doing so, deploying

different meanings of Black womanhood as they negotiated expectations of aggression and anger

with their own longing for authenticity in their work.

Chapter 3

"It's almost like Black anger is a kink":
Anger, authenticity, and the management of racialized personas in sex work

Sariah started doing sex work in 2020 after being laid off during the Covid-19

shutdowns. After searching for profitable side hustles on YouTube, she came across sex work–

specifically, the variant known as financial domination[7]. As a mother of four children with

limited resources, she was struggling financially. Her previous job in retail paying $7.25 an hour

was not nearly enough to make ends meet. When she was let go, she was determined to find

viable gig work that would not leave her relying on one source of income. Fascinated by the

possibility of making money by just demanding it from men online, she began by looking at the

social media accounts of popular professional dominatrixes for inspiration. Under the persona of

Miss Vicious, Sariah created a Twitter account to begin attracting clients. While she spent hours

on message boards and YouTube in preparation, she wasn't prepared for the emotional

unraveling that would happen through the construction of her persona, "Mistress Vicious," in the

intensely racialized world of sex work.

Sariah's experiences with sex work were strongly influenced by class disadvantage.

Scholars have argued that class status is a significant factor when considering the impacts of

doing sex work. People who begin doing sex work out of dire need can have significantly

different experiences compared to those with more financial stability. For example, studies show

that people who engage in survival sex work are more likely to engage in risky behaviors, use

addictive drugs, and have unprotected sex (Church et al 2001, Harcourt & Donovan 2005),

leading to lower self-esteem and job satisfaction (Weitzer 2009). Conversely, sex workers with

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[7] In BDSM, financial domination describes a kink in which one is aroused by the idea of being financially controlled or exploited.

comfortable incomes have higher job satisfaction and self-esteem related to their work (Bernstein 2007). While most of the people I interviewed started doing sex work because they were interested in making more money, some were more severely disadvantaged than others. The sex workers in this chapter have experienced extreme poverty and have started doing sex work out of material necessity. While some are currently more stable than they were in the past, they are still in financially precarious situations and often struggle to make ends meet. Some people I spoke to in my broader sample had multiple ways of earning money, had college degrees, and/or an established and lucrative brand in sex work, but the 20 people in this subgroup rely on sex work as their main source of income.

This chapter will delve into the complicated arena of identity management related to the creation of racialized personas in sex work. Sexuality scholars have explored how sex workers manage their various identities through the creation of personas and "hybrid identities" to maximize their profits (Sanders 2008; Frank 2006; Brewis and Linstead 2000). They argue that identity in this context are "fractured constructions" that are enacted in a dynamic process where identities are not static but performed strategically for various purposes (Hubbard 2002: 366). Therefore, the line between "real" and "fake" identities are often blurred. This chapter addresses the complexities of identity construction in newer forms of sex work that takes place online. Playing with identity can provide opportunities for creative expression as workers can create personas and accentuate different parts of themselves strategically at different times.

However, previous research argues that the ability to be authentic and derive pleasure from these hybrid identities largely depends on the worker's own embodiment and how close it is to normative ideals of desire and attractiveness. In her study on camming, Jones (2022) finds that models' performances are shaped by a "structure of desire," in which white, thin, able-

bodied models can be more authentic in their presentations while non-normative bodies and identities must exert more labor to perform in ways that do not correspond to their authentic emotions and ways of expressing themselves. Given these findings, it is still unclear how these performers react to their own construction of racialized hybrid identities, when those identities feel pleasurable and empowering, and when they do not. Also, these arguments do not explain how race interacts with class status to create particularly racialized meanings of hybrid identities. How do economically disadvantaged sex workers create and manage identity in relation to authenticity, pleasure, and self-commodification? How do they handle the costs of embodying racialized meanings, especially when they are asked to be someone they do not want to be, when the role that they are paid to play feels inauthentic or problematic?

Persona construction as a pathway to authenticity

Looking back, Sariah described her first few sex work experiences as "magical." She quickly found that sub[8]-leaning clients responded to her quick-witted demeanor, apathetic attitude, and perceived hardness. After 2 months, she made $600-800 a week on average, and had one rare and extremely profitable "drain"[9] that resulted in a $4,000 payout. After making just over $200 a week at her last retail job, the new money seemed unreal. She was struggling to make ends meet working 40 hours a week at her retail job just a few weeks prior, and now with financial domination, she was working fewer hours, making more money, and determining her

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[8] "Sub" is a shorthand used to describe a person in a BDSM dynamic that takes on a submissive position.
[9] "Draining" refers to a practice in financial domination where the domme slowly "drains" the wallet of a sub during a session, for example, a domme might slowly arouse the sub, demanding more and more money until they reach orgasm. These extremely profitable drains are rare, smaller ones of a couple hundred dollars are more common, but it also depends on the domme's ability to slowly seduce and get as much money out of the session before it ends. The sub that sent Sariah thousands of dollars blocked her immediately after and nothing similar has happened since.

own schedule. In addition to the financial benefits, she also initially experienced emotional satisfaction by embodying Miss Vicious:

> "It was magical. Just magical. I never thought I would be making so much money doing something like this–just from throwing around insults! It's just fun sometimes. I would say… [Miss Vicious] allowed me to be open. She allowed me to be an angry Black woman, she let me (pauses, sighs deeply) be mad and not be labeled as that, but labeled as hot, and not only that, but to get money for it"

Sariah described those early months as magical not only because her income increased significantly, but also because she enjoyed embodying Miss Vicious. For Sariah, the alter ego she created allowed her to engage with anger in an acceptable way, deriving pleasure and satisfaction from work in addition to much needed income. Her previous jobs working in retail and fast food did not offer the same benefits. With sex work her anger was not only acceptable–it was appreciated and profitable.

For sex workers that do BDSM related work, the power exchange in client interactions can be a source of validation and pleasure. This applies especially when they are playing roles that involve Black women as powerful, commanding, and in control. Such depictions of Black women are a particular category in sex work and pornography. For example, "Ebony goddess" is a common search term in porn and sex work for consumers who are interested in Black women as a fetish. Drawing on racial stereotypes related to strength and hypersexuality, these depictions often feature Black women as dominant, sexually demanding, and emotionally validated in anger.

Furthermore, for Sariah, the ability to embody an "angry Black woman" on her own terms initially felt validating and pleasurable. Although she was generally critical of Black

woman fetishization in sex work, her commentary sheds light on the potential for pleasure in embracing racial exaggerations that would normally be avoided out of fear of being stereotyped. In these instances, compensation transforms the boundaries placed on emotion by racialization. In this way, feeling rules that guide emotional performance in sex work are quite different from the ones in non-sex work related occupations.

Considering racialized emotion management in the workplace, for example, Harvey-Wingfield (2010) shows that Black workers often deal with the effects of microaggressions and tokenism, making it more difficult to conform to pleasantness and congeniality. Occupational stereotypes of Black workers heighten the stakes of appearing to be frustrated and angry (Feagin 2006).

This creates a work environment that Black workers experience as hostile and offensive, yet one where they must simultaneously pretend that they do not. To avoid being stereotyped, Black workers suppress emotional reactions, particularly anger. Bringing their true emotions in line with these workplace feeling rules requires more emotional labor, which has negative effects on workers, including emotional dissonance and alienation (Hochschild 1979). The high stakes and stressful constraints of feeling rules for Black workers generally clarify the benefits of sex work for workers; when disadvantaged sex workers can express authentic emotion freely in their work – even when that emotion is anger – they can experience validation and pleasure, even in survival sex work.

Erica, a 20-year-old pro-domme and content creator, described her work as emotionally cathartic. After working several jobs out of high school, including in food service and strip clubs, she learned about sex work as a viable way to make money, when she saw fetish models on Twitter. She started out making money as a sugar baby and escort, marketing herself as a sweet,

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hyper-feminine, and submissive girlfriend for hire. When she realized that she could also make money as a domme, she decided to switch her image to a more aggressive one:

> I immediately saw that I could make money and keep my clothes on. So, I was like, Oh, shit, I don't want to be submissive on camera when I could literally sit here and say, 'fuck you,' and just say and do whatever I want. And then if anybody ever saw this, they'll be like, 'Damn, that's how you make your money?' Yes.

Erica found that embodying a different, more aggressive persona gave her opportunities to express how she really felt. She explained to me that being a sugar baby was too constraining, and she felt limited by the feeling rules that did not leave room for her authentic emotional expression. Through self-orchestrated commodification, she creates lucrative opportunities for her to experience pleasure in work.

It is important to note that specific conditions of newer forms of sex work grant the freedom to choose a niche. Both Erica and Sariah primarily make money through camming, technology-mediated sexual interactions that give them some control over their working conditions. When they do meet clients in person, they are not under the control of a pimp or some other exploitative management practice. Instead, the working conditions of newer forms of sex work allow for some control on the part of sex workers. These benefits also diminish the appeal of the blue-collar work that is most accessible to disadvantaged women. Ava, 31-year-old exotic dancer and survival sex worker, compared her experiences working as a sex worker to other blue-collar jobs she has had:

> Like, when I think of rock bottom, I think of being a waitress. That's like a nightmare job. I cannot think of anything worse than being a server. Because the thing is, when you're a server, and customers are saying weird things to you, or

sexually harassing you, or saying racist things, you can't leave, you can't abandon the table, you have to just continue to shuck and jive and tap dance for them in hopes that they're going to tip you–which they might not–and then you might owe money on that table.

It's just a nightmare situation. Whereas with sex work…yeah, you put up with a lot of bullshit, but at least you're getting paid. And like, you know, you don't have to talk to every person that starts giving weird vibes…and if someone says something weird, you can cuss them out or leave with no explanation.

For Ava, being a self-employed sex worker allowed for authentic expressions of anger. Despite having to do emotional labor in interactions with clients, they were free to express anger and frustration at customers without the fear of losing their jobs. Ava went on to explain that her introverted demeanor was already considered "rude or threatening" at the restaurants she's worked in. At her last job she got comments from employers that she was intimidating, difficult to work with, or not a team player. Ava related this back to being an introverted Black woman– she felt that the feedback was racialized. She said:

I don't thrive in that environment. I think it has a racial element to it, too, like when you're like an introverted black person, people take that as being very threatening and like, I've always gotten feedback at jobs that I'm like, being intimidating or difficult or like, you know, not a team player. It's definitely like *[pause]* I'm literally just sitting here having my own thoughts. Like, I cannot be engaged constantly. Like, I just…I'm not doing anything wrong! I'm just existing in this setting. So yes, I don't really thrive in those kinds of situations.

Ava explained how the racialized feeling rules of her service industry jobs left her feeling alienated and frustrated. This point is important because Black women are largely

overrepresented in service work. If these are the jobs that are also requiring the most emotional labor, then Black women are particularly affected. As a sex worker, Ava has more freedom to act in ways that align with her personality while benefiting financially from the racial meanings attached to it.

Some sexualities scholars have previously argued that commodification in sex work allows for authentic emotional expression. The monetary exchange disrupts social norms around sex and romance, making it easier for buyers to be honest about their attractions and desires (Bernstein 2007, Sanders 2008). Building on these arguments, these sex workers demonstrate the potential for authentic expression on the part of the sex worker as well. While Amber and Sariah demonstrate this through the commodification of anger, Ava shows how the working conditions of sex work allows her to express emotions freely as well. Alongside flexible working conditions, payment disrupts social norms around pleasantness in work and feminine deference in sexuality, allowing workers to react authentically to misogynoir when it shapes the interactions with customers.

Unlike Sariah, her persona Miss Vicious is unafraid of being too angry or too aggressive. Prior to her move into sex work, Sariah was spending 40 hours a week at a retail job with feeling rules that necessitated racialized emotion management. Like Ava, her manager gave her negative feedback about her attitude on multiple occasions. Sariah often resisted, challenging what she felt to be double standards for employee behavior. Her resistance eventually contributed to her employer's decision to let her go. After working service-oriented jobs for so long, Sariah felt that the ability to express her emotions authentically, to express anger unabashedly to an admirer as Miss Vicious, was empowering. These findings suggest that when personas are experienced as a

genuine part of one's identity, they have the potential to provide sex workers an avenue for authentic self-expression.

Black women, assault, and the authentication of anger

While sex work invoked the possibility for authentic emotional expression related to work, it also enabled the expression of authentic emotions related to sexuality as well. Black women are devalued in sex and dating; they are more likely to be single (Clarke 2011; Moorman 2022) and less likely to marry (Teachman et al 2000; Salisu 2021), and among the least desirable on popular dating platforms (Kleinman 2014; Alhabash et al 2014; Kao et al 2019; Tsunokai et al 2014). Thus, many of the people I interviewed shared anger that grew out of prior experiences with nonmarket sex. Sariah described Miss Savage as essential to processing the anger she felt towards her first romantic relationship; her story helped me to realize that for this disadvantaged group in particular, the creation of hybrid identities allowed them to access parts of their emotions, including unresolved trauma, that were less accessible in their day to day lives.

At 17 years old, Sariah was pursued by a 34-year-old man and eventually fell in love with him. She grew up in an unstable household, so when a popular drug dealer who was known for having plenty of money pursued her, she felt lucky and mature for her age. She eventually had her first child, a daughter, with him when she was 18 years old. They were in an on and off again relationship for 5 years before she discovered that he was sexually abusing the child they had together. She was uncomfortable disclosing to me the details of what he did and how she found out but said that the ordeal was extreme and traumatic for both her and her child. The realization that she had also been a victim of sexual grooming, being emotionally and sexually manipulated for years before discovering what was happening with her own daughter, was unbearable.

Fourteen years later, she is actively taking legal action against him, and she described that process as being integral to the creation of Miss Savage.

> Okay. Well, in my very first relationship I was not able to be the dominant person. I felt like my life was just diminished. Like I said, I was 17 with a 34-year-old. You know how guys get in your head. It was a very controlling relationship, it was super, super controlling and super bad for me and it drug on for five years. But this man that I was in a relationship with, I thought it was cool because I was just graduating high school. He was out on the corner selling dope, I was just like, "oh my god, he got so much money!" All of us thought that... And he ended up being a sick bastard. I ended up having a baby with him. He ended up going to prison.

Sariah was one of several disadvantaged people I interviewed who spoke about their hybrid identity as having something to do with escaping or coping with sexual violence, conditions to which poor Black women are more susceptible. Young Black women are disproportionately affected by intimate partner violence (Petrosky et al 2014, Lacey et al 2017), are the most likely group to die at the hands of a romantic partner (Petrosky 2017) and are disproportionately victims of rape and sexual abuse (West & Johnson, 2013). According to the Center for Disease Control, Black women experience sexual assault twice as much as white women (2019). These risks are escalated when young Black women are economically and socially disadvantaged (West 2004, West and Johnson 2013). These facts help explain why sexual trauma and violence were common themes in interviews with the most economically disadvantaged people that I interviewed.

When I spoke to 20-year-old Erica last year, for example, she had just celebrated two years of financial freedom from an abusive male partner. When they were still together, she had

decided to give erotic content creation a try and set up her own Twitter page under Mistress Amber. In her first month, she made almost $1000. She had never experienced making that much money for such little effort, especially compared to the physically and emotionally draining work at fast food restaurants and clubs. After a blowout with her partner that resulted in physical violence, she decided she was making too much money on her own to withstand any more abuse. The move was a struggle financially, and she eventually had to travel across the state to live with her mom before securing her own place for good, but the initial boost to her income allowed her to escape an increasingly dangerous home situation.

Importantly, it wasn't just the income that allowed Erica to leave that situation. There was also something about embodying Mistress Amber that inspired her to move. Unlike the strip club or menial fast-food work, she reports that sex work boosted her self-esteem in ways that drove her to leave her abusive partner:

> "I never noticed how strong I was until I started doing this. Like, I came out of a dark spot…you know, but when women know their worth, they're unstoppable, for real."

Erica described the physical and verbal abuse that was present in her last relationship. The creation of Miss Amber did more for her than just increase her income. Through Miss Amber, and the embodiment of a stronger, more aggressive version of herself, she found strength that spilled over into other aspects of her life, including in intimate relationships that were violent and unhealthy.

While Erica relates positively to her work as a sex worker most of the time, however, the same was not true for many of the less advantaged people I spoke to. For this group, the emotional intensity and salience felt around their sex work identity was the result of extreme

financial need; this group spent the most time and energy creating a marketable identity. For this reason, they were also the most susceptible to the demands of their most common customer: white men.

Ruptures in authenticity and emotional boundary management

White men are the largest consumer base in pornography and sex work (Anthony, 2012; Gorman et al., 2010; Hald & Stulhofer, 2016). The women I spoke to knew this as well, and some purposefully managed their persona to attract white men. This often meant leaning into racial stereotypes, and embodying what some call the "Ebony goddess" niche. The Ebony goddess niche involves embodying stereotypes of Black women including aggression, strength, sexual dominance, and hypersexuality. Embodying Blackness and inverting racial hierarchies might feel pleasurable sometimes, but acting in ways that align with stereotypes brought up complex emotions related to race and identity.

While Sariah described her first experiences being Miss Vicious as "magical," for example, she quickly felt problematic consequences of encouraging her own fetishization as a Black woman in sex work. The expectation to always perform aggression eroded her initial excitement towards the work.

> I had a lot of anger built up at that time. So back then when I first started, I was real hot shit on the Findom scene. And I just remember thinking like, "This shit is not freaking real. This is not real. I'm not getting paid to do this!" But yeah, I think [Miss Vicious] has been within me for a long time…
>
> [But] now I'm kind of more acquainted with her as a demon that I'm fighting.

While Sariah described Miss Vicious as coming out of traumatic experiences she had in abusive relationships, after a time, embodying violence for the people who frequented her inbox began to feel draining. At first, being angry and demanding felt fun, as she was able to express all the anger she wanted. But she began to feel guilt associated with saying humiliating and demeaning things to the people in her inbox. She experienced an emotional rupture where she was doing and saying things that did not align with the kind and soft temperament that she said was more natural to her. She felt a certain shame that she said was due to conforming to someone else's expectations and embodying a mean personality that did not match her own. Her calling Miss Vicious a "demon" invokes an important quality of many a sex worker's persona: a hybrid identity that is exaggerated and racialized but also personal and deeply attached to one's self-image.

Sariah started thinking about these feelings especially after one client asked her to do "race play" in a virtual session. Race-play is a practice in BDSM that refers to Dominant/sub dynamics where the power play rests on racial hierarchies. It is considered fringe and highly controversial in BDSM communities. Practices like slavery reenactment, for example, would be considered race-play. Pornography that fetishizes Black men and mimics white supremacist fears of Black masculinity in content labeled "BBC[10]," "cuckolding," or with similar tags can also fall under the category of race play. Alternatively, some race play involves a reversal of Black-white racial hierarchies.

As I scrolled through public pages of BDSM-oriented Black sex workers, it was common to see "no race play" written in people's bios. Some of the dommes I talked to were vehemently against any kind of race-play, but some considered it permissible if the roles were reversed and

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[10] BBC stands for "big black cock"

they were the ones in the dominant position. Some even found the role reversal not just

permissible, but also pleasurable, but this was not true for Sariah.

When Sariah received a request from a sub to be treated like her slave for a virtual

session, she had mixed feelings about it. She expressed strong disapproval at white men who

used the word "slave" to describe treatment that they are paying for and consenting to, but as she

was unwilling to turn down a profitable session, she obliged. They had started going back and

forth, she was degrading him and instructing him to do various things when he started referring

to her using racial slurs. At that moment, Sariah noticed her discomfort in being objectified by

her client in such an obvious way. Unlike her previous experiences that felt fun and subversive,

she did not feel in control, and began to feel guilty embodying Mistress Vicious:

> "So, my first time really wanting to quit sex work, I got on a call, and I think that
> was my first time being called a nigger–ever. Never in my whole 31 years of
> living have I got called a racial slur and it really was like an epiphany…it affected
> me so bad. And I was already getting burned out because you know, you make
> money and it seems like easy money, but you really have to put a lot into it. You
> have to put a lot into it to get yourself out there and then it starts to feel like
> "okay…well what is the next boundary I'll break just to get some money?"
> Things like that make you just be like 'okay, this is not fun anymore. This is
> affecting my mental health now.' My former self was such a positive, happy,
> powerful speaking person. And now the words that come out of my mouth…I
> wouldn't want to manifest that.

> *Nia:* Like what, if you don't mind me asking?

> *Sariah:* The craziest thing–it's my specialty. It's humiliation and degradation.
> They want to be degraded. They want you to spit in their face. They want you to

tell them that they're a faggot, they want you to call them slurs and you know

you're getting paid to do it. You're getting paid to do it…but it doesn't feel okay"

What started out as an exciting and lucrative side hustle turned into a challenging inner conflict where Sariah found herself negotiating personal boundaries for pay. Although the pay was good, and as a mother of 4, desperately needed, it was not enough to justify the negative emotions that were shored up due to the commodification of herself and her racial identity. In the three years that she's been active, Sariah has taken several hiatuses from sex work due to her mental health. She deleted everything associated with Miss Vicious online three times, is currently on her 4th Twitter page and is considering taking a break again.

Mental Health and embodying race

Considering the social sanctions against sex work and stigma attached to performing sexuality especially for Black women, mental health can be a serious issue for sex workers. However, the less advantaged sex workers I spoke with gestured toward another aspect of the work that affected their mental health: the embodiment of racial exaggerations through sex work personas. This finding is consistent with previous research that suggests identity commodification is damaging to sex worker's mental health. Such identity management perhaps has a more significant impact on economically disadvantaged Black women due to their lower mental health status. Several studies have indicated that Black women are more often exposed to minority stress that contributes to lower mental and physical health status (Strenthal et al 2012; Williams 1999). People in this sample talked openly about their mental health and how sex work frequently challenges it.

For example, Stella is a 22-year-old nonbinary person who does sex work as their main source of income. A tall, thin person with soft facial features, a blonde buzz cut and piercing eyes, Stella was able to leverage their butch gender presentation to build a following on Reddit posting nudes and occasionally dominatrix-type content. During our interview, they showed me their most popular post: it was them in tight boxers and a sports bra, looking down menacingly towards the camera. From the post, they certainly looked like someone who enjoyed being a sadist. The people who engage with their content agreed; Stella often got requests for humiliation and phone sex that involved some degree of degradation for the client.

Despite their presentation of self, I learned that Stella made the most money from activities that they actually didn't derive pleasure from doing. Stella didn't enjoy humiliating or looking at men's penises. They had complex feelings about using their Black, queer identity to feed into the fantasies of their mainly white male consumer base. Although the Ebony Goddess niche relied upon notions of "Black female supremacy" and reparations, people doing the work were often aware of the fragility of such concepts when they involved a racialized fetishization that they themselves encouraged or enabled. Throughout our conversation, Stella expressed discomfort in leveraging what they understood to be problematic stereotypes against Black women:

> "It's not necessarily that easy, you know, because I'm still out here like advertising…you have to come up with these things to say, it's almost like black anger is a kink, so to speak. So yeah, there're aspects of it that feel empowering. But it's also like, I don't know…where does the power really lie?"

Stella asks a question that is central to new conversations in what scholars refer to as Black erotics (Miller-Young 2010, Nash 2014, Cruz 2016). These scholars engage with the messiness

of selling racialized sexual fantasies, arguing that when fetishization happens on their own terms, embodying stereotypes can lead to pleasurable experiences for sex workers. However, some feminists, particularly those who are anti-porn and Black feminists, argue that sex work contributes to the denigration of women, and to profit from racial capitalism is to consent to it (Collins 2004). Stella's comment highlights the discomfort that comes from embodying racial stereotypes, confronting the reality that Black women's anger is fetishized by a mainly white audience. But Stella doesn't foreclose the possibility of pleasure, saying that the freedom to be angry and experience praise based on it sometimes feels empowering. Stella's contradictory feelings match the contradictory nature of Black women's sexualization, which includes both their hypersexualization and perceived diminished value in the sexual marketplace, resulting in an ambivalent subjectivity that straddles both.

Like Sariah, Stella has taken several breaks from sex work, which was possible because they did not pay rent as a house sitter and relied on odd jobs and a long-term partner to pay for food and other necessities. Stella demonstrates sex work can form a critique to capitalism, highlighting how the demand for work under capitalism is unreasonable to marginalized, differently-abled bodies. Taking a hiatus from sex work was one of several strategies employed by sex workers to help mitigate the potential emotional harms of identity commodification. Beyond taking a break, sex workers employed a variety of strategies to protect themselves from misogynoir that had a harmful impact on their emotional wellbeing.

Beyond "taking a break": strategies of resistance, acceptance, and refusal.

Taking mental health breaks is a strategy frequently employed by sex workers, but other strategies included acceptance of racist conditions and refusal to oblige to some requests from

clients. People who were the most disadvantaged expressed more acceptance towards issues related to race and emotion, pointing to how difficult work can be in general for economically and socially disadvantaged Black women.

Acceptance. Olivia, who worked as a camgirl, was 21-years-old at the time of our interview. While she sometimes does other work to make ends meet, she makes most of her money from camming and erotic content creation on Only Fans. As a small, mixed-race woman, she described her niche as "light skinned, skinny, small—all the words that men would use" to refer to her. Appealing to the perceived demand for women-degrading pornographic content, she often makes clips of herself masturbating, calling herself derogatory names and responding to those in the chat who do the same.

While this may be a pleasurable kink for some content creators, Olivia admitted that the videos hurt her self-esteem and made her feel degraded. Her entry into sex work was prompted by conversation with a now ex-boyfriend. She was used to feeling slut-shamed in the relationship: he would make derogatory comments, criticize her for past sexual relationships, tell her she looked like a slut in certain outfits and closely monitor her social media for content he deemed unacceptable. One day, they got into an argument over a picture she posted on her social media. He told her, in short, that if she was going to be a slut then she might as well get paid for it:

> "I remember it starting with a conversation I had with a very toxic ex. My boyfriend at the time was saying degrading things. And he was like, "Oh, well, if you're gonna do this, you might as well sell your nudes…he was basically, like, calling me a whore or whatever, saying, 'if you're gonna do that, you might as well.'"

While we talked about her frequent negative feelings related to sex work, I asked her why she wouldn't consider another persona or niche that might feel more empowering. She responded by saying that as a Black woman, especially with a mixed racial heritage, she was used to feeling overly sexualized anyway:

> "I guess I could have chosen one that was better for my mental health. Like there are women who are femme dommes, right? I can imagine they don't have the same mental health struggles that I would or feel the same kind of pressure that I would because of the way that they're marketing themselves. But I would say it was a niche that I chose because that's what I had already heard. And then say, that's how they thought of me. So I was like, okay, this is an easy niche for me to get into this is how men will perceive me. So that's how I can then market myself. But yeah, it's repeating a cycle that continues to harm me if I just build into what men have said, like they think of me"

Olivia's point demonstrates how young Black women are often perceived to be promiscuous and overly sexual. Feminist scholars have long argued that Black women's sexualization is linked to their exploitation under racial capitalism (Davis 1987). By accepting this reality, she is emotionally protecting herself from the disappointment that may accompany expectations to be treated better. This strategy helps mitigate some of the negative feelings she has towards doing sex work but does not eliminate them clearly; she thinks of herself as consenting to this negative treatment.

She continued:

> "As I was thinking about this interview, I just really feel like as a black woman, I think that people see sex work as an anomaly, like something that's kind on the fringes of society. But it's really just an extension of what so many women are

already doing and already experiencing…Yeah, I feel like it is challenging and to
some extent exploitive, but I just think the average woman and especially the
average Black woman is already going through an aspect of that every single day,
they're just not being paid for them. So that's what I think. And that's one reason
that I am okay with doing it."

For Olivia, erasing the expectation for better treatment does not help her feel *good* about the content she creates, but it might help assuage the shame she feels engaging with sex in ways that feel harmful to her. She also has a point: As previously stated, Black women are generally devalued in sex and dating due to misogynoir. Thus, profiting from the bad treatment she perceives to be present *everywhere* for Black women feels to Olivia like she is taking some power back. In this way, she is resisting against Black women's negative treatment by demanding compensation for her sexualization.

Olivia reconciles herself to what she is doing by viewing the continuity across domains of Black women's experiences–in dating, work, and sex–and noticing the potential for exploitation across experiences. Stella has a similar orientation towards profiting off of personas that engage damaging stereotypes about Black women: "I think there's something to owning the power of that–if I'm going to be sexualized anyways, or if I know that I'm somebody that's going to draw attention, anyways, I might as well get paid for it…"

"So, I think I just noticed a lot of black people—and especially black women, find
that like, you really do get more appreciation and more money in this industry
than you would, you know, using your body to do something else. It's, like, weird
though, because like, you know, you get appreciation, but it's still, you know, it's
fetish."

The sex workers I spoke to considered previous jobs where they were subjected to misogynoir and racialized feeling rules while also being underpaid. Stella's commentary summarizes an essential critique made by many of the sex workers I spoke to. They highlight the mistreatment and economic exploitation of marginalized people in capitalism. They insist on finding work where they are able to experience admiration and pleasure and decent pay, thus forming a critique of the capitalistic separation between work and pleasure.

People who were the most disadvantaged in my sample reported that they experience sex work as a site of predictable racial stereotyping and emotional harm. These narratives demonstrate an orientation towards sex work that offers insight into sexualized racism. For the women described in this chapter, devaluation in sex and romance was unavoidable–they are aware of stereotypes and expectations that affect their desirability. Many of them have felt misogynoir and class disadvantage that disempowered them in nonmarket sexual relationships. Many of them also have felt misogynoir and class disadvantage at work, in the form of unlivable wages, double standards, and tone policing, particularly in service industries where Black women are overrepresented (Roux 2021). Thus, sex work often provided space for their authentic emotional expression in areas of life where they were otherwise ignored, overpoliced, and invalidated.

Many of the most disadvantaged sex workers I spoke with shared the sentiment that sex work was not particularly harmful to them in terms of work and intimate connection. Like many jobs they have experienced, Black women in sex work confront stereotypes and are obligated to manage their emotions in challenging ways. Like many intimate relationships they have experienced, Black women in sex work confront sexual racism that wears on their mental health. These similarities are felt and yet sex work is preferred because it offers avenues for refusal.

Refusal. Finally, instances of refusal were less common among women with dire financial need, but for some, turning down services and clients was something that distinguished sex work from their previous occupations. After Sariah was called a racial slur, she refused to do race-play and permanently blocked that person. Doing so may have ended that client relationship, but she was able to end it on her own terms and still has work--an option that was nonexistent at her previous job. Like Ava mentioned while comparing sex work to her former jobs, self-employed sex work allows for more autonomy that enables people to cope with misogynoir that she believes to be present everywhere.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the disadvantaged sex workers sounded different from the playful delight of their advantaged counterparts. While some felt empowered by receiving compensation for work that seemed easy compared to other forms of working-class labor, many talked about acute discomfort, shame and even trauma they endured from having to shore up the worst parts of how others perceived them in order to make a living. They adopted various coping strategies to manage these challenges, but the struggle to maintain their mental health was daunting in the face of relentless pressure from clients, such as those for whom "Black anger was a kink."

This chapter dealt specifically with disadvantaged sex workers whose work involves the creation of a persona. There are parts of the trade that are pleasurable–being seductive for pay, autonomy in terms of time and energy, and importantly, feeling rules that allow for emotional reconciliation with anger and frustration from the sexual racism and violence that poor, socially disadvantaged Black women are more likely to experience.

My research demonstrates the complexity of hybrid identities through the stories of several disadvantaged sex workers-all of whom have dealt with the messiness of establishing a sexual "self" that operates in the realm of fantasy, juggling the demands of a mostly white male consumer base with their own desires to be authentic, while also getting paid. The findings in this chapter support previous research claims that sex workers manipulate their identities in the work they do. Building on this research, I found that Black women sex workers remake racial identity by embodying racial exaggerations, specifically controlling images related to anger and aggression.

Importantly, the sex workers I spoke to claimed to seek pleasure and authenticity in their work, implicating previous sex work scholarship that fails to see these as pull factors for materially disadvantaged groups. Nonetheless, while at times these personas were emotionally linked with positive self-expression, allowing people to tap into parts of themselves heretofore inaccessible, they were also major sources of conflict related to race, sexuality, and emotional wellbeing. Most of my interviewees attested to these complex experiences with constructing and enacting personas, but the less advantaged group found them more common and particularly intense. Because they are full-time workers dependent on sex work as their main source of income, the hybrid identities attached to their work carry significant meaning.

The feelings of disempowerment and devaluation in sex is essential to understanding why sex work is particularly meaningful to this group. Many aspects that scholars assumed were uniquely damaging in sex work–sexual exploitation, racism, violence, attacks on self-worth–are typical in the lives of some women regardless of whether they are a sex worker. Disadvantaged sex workers experience the world of erotic labor similar to how they experience other jobs they have had but prefer sex work for the moments of authenticity it offers, given their particular

working conditions in a post-pimp era. Newer forms of sex work allow for self-employment, autonomy and flexible working conditions, enabling working-class women to profit off of the commodification of stereotypes while experiencing a rare autonomy. It is important to note that sex workers who operate under the exploitative management of a pimp, or who are trafficked into sex work would not have the same experience as the poor and working-class women discussed in this chapter.

The personas feel empowering, however, until they become another arena where stereotypes about Blackness cause emotional harm. While some scholars argue that BDSM can be therapeutic, the disadvantaged sex workers I interviewed suggest a different view. Because of their self-commodification and the inescapability of racism that it engenders in these spaces, these women are not necessarily finding resolution to mental health issues in sex work. However, they do encounter opportunities to confront their past and their emotions through the personas they create.

Perhaps most importantly, being authentic in their work was vitally important to these women, despite their desperate financial straits. There seems to be a paradox operating in the realm of identity–these hybrid identities are at once an escape from a reality in which they are materially disempowered and unappreciated, but they can also offer space for engagement with emotion–specifically anger–in an affirming and profitable way, until it becomes an anger bidden by others, an anger for sale.

Chapter 4

"Between a Rock and a Hard Place:" Dating, money, and racialized sexual expectations for Black women

When I met 23-year-old-Grace, she was recently out of school and not living the post-graduate life she had hoped for. After not seeing many job postings that matched her qualifications as an English and Psychology double major and unsuccessfully applying for part-time opportunities, she reluctantly moved back home with her family. Graduating during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic proved to be a very difficult time for finding secure employment. She was also deeply missing the connections that she had made with friends and romantic interests in college. With mandated social distancing and living with parents, her ability to connect with new people was severely limited. To solve both issues, Grace turned to online applications–online dating apps and gig platform apps–to try and meet people and to make money.

At the time of our interview, Grace was applying for jobs while driving for various ride sharing services. She shared that friend-seeking apps, specifically Bumble BFF,[11] were helping her connect with more Black women in her hometown, specifically with more Black women who identified as queer as she did. When it came to dating however, Grace did not have the same success. Although she wanted to date and had goals involving a long-term romantic partnership, Grace was experiencing a precarity in her intimate life that matched the precarity of her work life. She described dating as "a lot of work" from which she needed regular breaks to "maintain her sanity." Later in the interview, she described to me the realities of dating as a Black woman,

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[11] Bumble BFF is a feature on the popular dating app Bumble in which users can create a profile to make platonic connections. It functions similarly to the main platform: profiles include pictures, a brief biography, and question-based prompts for conversation.

which include navigating the paradox of being simultaneously valued and devalued, having to reconcile fetishization and the constant feeling of being less wanted. Grace's perceptions and experiences–along with the other women in this chapter-demonstrate the collision of intimacy and market forces that impacts racial identity meaning-making, even for women who are not sex workers.

Like Grace, the women in this chapter are independently employed gig workers. By comparing sex workers and gig workers, we can clarify the difference between the racialized meaning-making in intimacy that happens for Black women generally, and that which is the result of market sex. The gig economy has been expanding since the 2009 financial crisis and consists of labor market activities such as working multiple jobs, typically as an independent contractor, to make ends meet. More recently, the gig economy has exploded with the increased popularity of gig work platforms like those that organize ridesharing and task-oriented applications that expanded during the Covid-19 pandemic. In fact, the gig economy is expanding three times faster than the total mainstream US workforce and over 50% of the US workforce is likely to participate in the gig economy by 2027. Estimates of women's participation in the gig economy in the United States range anywhere from 33% to 55% (Hunt & Samman 2019).

Scholars argue that gig work is a part of a broader trend of late capitalism that includes employing the most vulnerable (Zwick 2018) and contributing to the informalization of the formal economy (De Stefano 2016). The precarity of the workforce has increased significantly since the 1980s (Healy et al 2017). Scholars have also identified shifts in how people relate to their work and relationships due to the individualistic values of late capitalism. Bernstein (2007) argues that late capitalism demands individualism as people strive to find personal satisfaction in work and relationships while experiencing precarity in both. In addition to the shifts in work

relations, Illouz (2011) draws our attention to the individualization of romance; a shift that occurred in late capitalism due to the disappearance of familial control over romance. She argues that the lack of social control increased the number of potential partners coupled with the lessened amount of publicly shared rituals around romance individualized people's expectations and criteria for romantic partners. Both Bernstein and Illouz argue that individualization in the market and in romance converged and mutually transformed each other, leading to the creation of dating "markets," and making the market a viable place for securing romantic connections.

This chapter includes women who participate in the gig economy in various ways. Of the 25 gig workers I spoke to, 16 did beauty-related work (i.e. nail techs, braiders, cosmetologists), and 9 worked as life coaches and/or content creators. In terms of class background, this group varied along the lines of education and socioeconomic status. In total, 10 had just a high school diploma, 4 had completed some college and 11 were college graduates. The diversity here matches the diversity of the sex workers, whose backgrounds range from working class to medium-high class social status. The socioeconomic statuses of their families of origin also varied, as some were able to lean on comfortably middle-class parents through work precarity while others had no safety net and additional financial responsibility to struggling family members. All the women had more than one job, some did gig platform work on ridesharing or task-related applications to make ends meet.

To control for the types of romantic relationships pursued, the women I spoke to in this comparative sample were single and actively dating. The ways in which they spoke about their dating lives mirrored the ways that Black women sex workers spoke about the challenges they face in their work, particularly related to sexualized racism and stereotypes. Like the sex workers I spoke to, they similarly experienced sexualized racism in digital spaces that influenced their

views of sex, dating, and the meanings ascribed to being a Black woman in society. Misogynoir can be used to describe the racial violence throughout history, particularly through visual and digital culture, against Black women. Digital activist Trudy further theorized this concept to include the impact of normative expressions of heterosexual desire, normative expressions of gender, the hypersexualization of Black women, and controlling images of Black women as unreasonable or unintelligent (Bailey & Trudy 2018). The concept of misogynoir is useful for thinking through the experiences of Black women in modern dating, particularly as conversations arise on social media platforms that influence people's expectations of romantic relationships.

Both gig workers and sex workers are at the nexus of a convergence of economic and intimate changes in late capitalism. Levitt argues that "Sex work operates according to the logics of the gig economy, demanding multiple sources of income, independent contractor status, low wages, flexibility, and a premium on creativity" (Levitt 2021, 590). Thus, gig workers are comparable to the sex workers in this project because of their shared self-employed status and the precarious nature of the work they do. Most importantly, the comparison between gig workers and sex workers is essential for understanding the impact of monetary transaction on racial identity meaning-making in the mutually transformed worlds of sex and work. Through this comparison, we understand that sex work, often characterized as a last resort for desperate women, enables practitioners to gain purchase on the challenges of misogynoir that affect Black women generally.

Black women, men, and "gender wars"

In sex work, the transaction of money dictates the emotional aspects of the interaction. However, without explicit monetary exchange, interactions are governed by expectations of romance–which can lead to immense emotional pain when those expectations are not met. The term "gender wars" emerged over the last few years on social media colloquially to describe ongoing debates between Black men and women on the topic of sex and romance. Black men and women use their social media platforms often to perpetuate criticism towards Black women. The substance of these "gender war" debates often include financial expectations in relationships and sexual double standards between men and women. The substance of these conversations reflects precarious change in the realms of sex, gender, and work.

Issues and expectations surrounding romantic relationships between Black men and women continue to spark contentious debate within Black communities. Black feminist scholars have pointed to the Moynihan report as a critical moment in history that helped define the relationship between Black women and men as problematic (Spillers 1987). In the report, Moynihan argues that Black people's lower economic and social position is due to the higher rates of women-headed households in Black communities. Ignoring the impact of structural barriers that kept Black men from finding work, Moynihan points to Black women's marginal economic success as a form of emasculation that hinders Black men's ability to be successful and industrious (Spillers 1987, Bailey 2021). Thus, the Moynihan report utilizes the Sapphire controlling image by vilifying Black women's financial independence and household leadership while also reinforcing patriarchal and heteronormative family dynamics. The history of structural barriers to economic equality generated meanings attached to Black intimate partnership.

Financial expectations continue to be an important factor in these online debates, and according to my informants, affect Black women in relationships. Amanda was one of the first

interviewees to bring up the term "gender wars." When I asked her to describe them, she said the following:

> "Um Okay, so a lot of the men are saying women are gold diggers and everybody wants to be a City Girl.' They think women are not bringing anything to the table. But when a man says that [splitting bills] 50/50 needs to be a requirement, women are just like, 'No, some people need to be providers and that's your traditional role.' It's something that counteracts the feminism thing. There's just a lot of back and forth."

Amanda is speaking of a shift in relationships that troubles traditional gender roles and by extension, financial expectations within romantic partnership. Her comment points to the treatment of Black women and men in online spaces, where men are challenging traditional gender roles–but only when it comes to finances. Sexual double standards are still supported in these debates; Amanda mentioned the City Girls[12]– a women rap duo who gained fame by producing catchy music with themes related to using sexual desirability to get money from men. The point that all Black women want to emulate this lifestyle vilifies both Black women's sexuality and the ability to profit from it, contributing to the policing of Black women's sexuality regardless of whether or not they are actually sex workers.

The specter of the "gold digger" was ever-present. Because of these online debates and related criticism, some of the women I spoke to actively strategized to resist such expectations. For example, Monica said she refused to let men pay for her to avoid being treated as a gold digger or a person participating in monetary exchange for sex:

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[12]The City Girls are a hip hop duo that garnered mainstream attention after the release of their album in 2018. Their debut singles that received platinum status include lines like "Oh, you like big butts? well I like big bucks" and "If you're a rich nigga, I'ma fuck ya 'til you ain't one." The duo has gotten mixed reception from hip hop fans, including men and others who criticize explicit reference to trading sex for money and feminists who point out that men in hip hop have been referencing the same for a long time, arguing that the only difference is the gender of who is narrating and claiming to be in control of the exchange.

"I prefer to pay for myself. Because like, when you really don't know somebody, you're just sort of swinging in the dark… And then on a first date, you might not really know if they're going to treat it like 'okay, well, I pay for you. So, you have to come over and sleep with me' or 'I invested in you on this one date. And that means that there has to be a return on my investment somewhere.' Some people do treat dating as very transactional. And you don't necessarily have to have that explicit conversation. But for me, it's just more safe to avoid that."

Monica criticized dating practices that felt too "transactional," a phrase that speaks to the collision of sex and the market. Her commentary also speaks to stereotypes about Black women and money, specifically the gold digger and the Jezebel stereotype that posits Black women as always sexually available.

Throughout my conversations with these women, financial independence emerged as a prominent theme, which seemed at least in part a strategy to resist these stereotypes. In the quote below, Violet describes her preference for financial independence in her relationships:

"I just don't want somebody who depends on me financially because I don't intend to depend on anybody financially. Even if I were dating a millionaire, I'd still have my job. So just somebody who has his own life, and I have mine, and then where we come together is what we want to build together and what you know, we want to share…so no, I don't really value money. I just value drive, like you might be a dreamer. You know? I want someone with things they want to accomplish in life. That's all I want. I don't really care about money."

Violet explained to me that ambition mattered more to her than money but maintained that she would not tolerate someone who depended on her financially. She did want her partner to be financially stable and independent. So, while she cared about money to some extent, her quote reflects her rejection of dating practices that feel too transactional.

The women I talked to directly position themselves in contrast with the women that are talked about in online "gender war" debates between Black men and women. As I mentioned, there is significant overlap in the experiences of sexualized racism between Black women sex workers and those who do not sell sexual services. This overlap is made apparent in conversations about money and relationships. Black women's identities are formed under the same racist and patriarchal logics that vilify sex workers and Black women regardless of whether they work in the sex industry.

Misogynoir and Compulsory Desirability
The experiences of misogynoir in digital spaces reflects a broader trend related to desirability and sexualized racism. Research has established that Black women are devalued in sex and dating. For example, Black women are more likely to be single (Clarke 2011; Moorman 2022) and less likely to marry (Teachman et al 2000; Salisu 2021) and perceived to be among the least desirable on popular dating platforms (Kleinman 2014; Alhabash et al 2014; Kao et al 2019; Tsunokai et al 2014). Additionally, single Black women face social stigma and are uniquely stereotyped in policy and culture as desperate and problematic (Collins 2009, Moorman 2020). The negative feelings associated with compulsory desirability, particularly to Black men, are compounded by both the reality of devaluation and the cultural stigma against single Black women. For example, I asked Paris, a 27-year-old straight woman, what she thought was the biggest challenge facing Black women in sex and dating, she responded with the following:

"I definitely think stereotypes are a huge, huge issue… So, I do think that like, a lot of the time, black women are sort of battling with people who have this preconceived idea of what we are in terms of our personality, like loud or violent or ghetto. With like, a negative connotation. And then also, there's beauty standards, they're comparing us to different beauty standards that are usually Eurocentric, and they don't really have a lot of

wiggle room for, like, you know, having a broader nose or having fuller lips, or wanting fuller lips–but only on white women….So I think, black women have to…I mean, I know all women have frustrations with dating. But I think with black women, it's a lot heavier on our shoulders, and there's a lot more compromises that I think we feel like we have to do in order to find love. Otherwise, we also have the cultural aspect of like, oh, well, you don't have a man. And so being alone is also very scary. Like you're in between a rock and a hard place in that regard."

Paris's quote highlights the role of controlling images and unfavorable beauty standards in the dating lives of Black women. Importantly, she points to the cultural value of romantic partnership that emphasizes Black women's necessary desirability. To be undesirable, i.e., without "a man," is associated with having less value. This attitude towards being single is more damaging given the fact that Black women are more likely to be single compared to women of other races (Clarke 2011; Moorman 2022). The cultural importance of heterosexual partnership can be traced back to respectability politics that prioritized the institution of marriage and the "strong Black family," in order to resist negative assumptions in cultural products and policy reports (i.e. the Moynihan report) that depicted Black family dynamics as inferior (Higginbotham 1993).

Women I spoke to also mentioned the cultural importance of being desired by Black men, particularly as the stigma of singleness increases with age. For example, Nicki mentions that in her work as a life coach, she sees her clients (mainly Black women) struggle to be comfortable being single. As she talked about her ability to overcome her fear of being a single woman in her 30s, she also gestured towards how misogynoir instills "patterns" of low self-esteem that in her view, lead women to settle for relationships that do not meet their needs:

So, I don't have any regrets about being single right now. Because I know that every person that I had attracted prior to now would have been a disaster if I had pretended [that] I really wanted to marry them. And I'm glad that you know, no one got that far with me. So yeah, at 35, I am really figuring out what I want and understanding why I always chose what I didn't truly want. And it was just low self-esteem, low imagination, low faith, et cetera. And that was based on patterns that were instilled in me. But I've broken those patterns. I'm helping women break those patterns. And it's allowing us to really be free in our journey of trust. Trusting God, trusting ourselves, growing ourselves, trusting the universe, trusting law of attraction, trusting that everything does work out and that there is a reason for what when it doesn't and that there's beauty in your singleness, and like gratitude, and all those things.

The fear of being unmarried and the feeling of being unwanted were prominent themes among this group of women. Nicki's conversation about faith demonstrates a need for comfort and consolation to lessen the emotional pain that comes from feeling undesired and underappreciated. The importance of faith and prayer in the lives of Black women has been widely documented as a coping strategy against gendered racism as the religious practices are associated with better health outcomes and life satisfaction (Thomas et al 2008; Spates et al 2020; Walton et al 2023). Leaning on faith is a response that demonstrates the deep impact of misogynoir. According to my respondents, this hostility was felt with more intensity when misogynoir was coming from Black men.

When talking about Black women's relationships with Black men, mentions of gender wars were coupled with offline interactions with Black men that left them feeling undesired. For example, Paris. who lives in a northeastern metropolitan area, describes her local dating scene as challenging for Black women:

"I mostly find that most black men where I live date white women. So, in that way, yes, race comes up, because I just sometimes…I don't understand. Like, if you're dating all these white women, why are you interested in me? I'm not white. In that sense, yes, race does come up… Like most of the black men here are with white women."

For Paris, "race does come up" when she witnesses Black men around her dating non-Black women, signaling her own undesirability. Her perception of Black men's preferences is in part substantiated by research on interracial dating. According to research, Black men are more than twice as likely as Black women to date or marry outside of their race (Passel et al 2010; Pew Research Center 2015).

These feelings of being unwanted weighed on the women in my sample; some explicitly spoke about the difficulty they had with not internalizing racialized tiers of desirability. For example, 29-year-old Violet talked about multiple difficult experiences with dating that led her to question whether she had any desirable qualities. When I asked if she had any positive dating experiences in the last few years, she responded with the following:

"Um [*sighs*] no. I have to put the blame on myself, and I can't put the blame on the people that I date either… I'm the common denominator. So, I'm, you know, just working on self-love and hopefully putting out more energy to get what I want. Because I just haven't. I haven't had any positive dating experiences ever. I think that's just a me thing."

This quote followed a conversation about being a dark-skinned Black woman with afro-textured hair. She felt that the standard for beauty was impossible for her to meet as a mono-racial Black woman who also does not wear makeup or dress in particularly stylish ways. She mentioned that she did not match the proper "aesthetic" to be desirable as a Black woman. Notably, this statement of never having a positive experience contradicts her earlier reflection on a "sweet" but

unsustainable college relationship and another short dating experience that she described as positive. According to Violet, it was her adult dating experiences that have been overwhelmingly negative.

Violet's statement demonstrates the impact of misogynoir when it is internalized by its targets. Her interpretation of feeling unwanted as a "me thing" speaks to the weight of desirability on Black women in sex and dating. Importantly, her "self-love" is employed as a strategy – however ineffectual, as her self-doubt and anguish are palpable – against the emotional effects of misogynoir. Similarly, Kayla described feeling unwanted throughout her college experience in a city that is predominately Black and Hispanic. While reflecting on her dating experiences, she expressed feeling like men were not interested in her because of her racial identity. She eventually recognized the toll it was having on the feelings she had towards her own identities:

> "I had a friend group that was overwhelmingly Hispanic. So, I was the only black person in my friend group. So, like, you know, when we would go out, all the guys would go for my friends…they wouldn't go for me, because I didn't get the same attention. And I felt like, during that period, I was a lot more desperate for attention from guys because I wanted to be seen. And I felt like, I can't…I can't keep doing this. If something isn't healthy, like, you know, I can't keep doing this.

Kayla responded to misogynoir by removing herself from the dating scene, specifically managing her expectations for affection from Black men. Some of the women spoke explicitly about how misogynoir affects their feelings towards Black men. Natalie, a 30-year-old Pilates instructor and part-time writer shared similar experiences in dating that eventually led to her being less open to considering Black men as a reasonable option for dating:

"I mean, honestly, most of the other black women I know, are single, too, like, a lot of the ones that are married are, you know, in their 50s and 40s, to like, other black men, which I guess disqualifies them from this conversation, or like these types of conversations, but um I feel like women of that age always, you know, push me towards black men are like, they in their head, this man would make the perfect partner. And it's like, well, it's great that you think that but if I'm not his perfect partner, then that's like not."

She continued:

"This is probably going to open up a can of worms. But like, I think as I've gotten older, I tend to prefer non-black men more... I just generally feel like [Black men] are not really looking for me or I'm not their preference, so I tend to not pursue them as much or like, be interested as much."

For Natalie, the risk of being rejected by Black men who do not desire Black women can be avoided by interracial dating. She employs a different approach to managing misogynoir from Black men who she feels are its most emotionally challenging endorsers. For my participants, Black men expressing disparaging comments towards Black women was particularly hurtful because of higher expectations to be treated well by members of their own marginalized racial group. The conceptualization of the misogynoir was inspired by representations of Black women and men relating to each other primarily through heterosexual desire and Black women's assumed failure to be desirable (Bailey & Trudy 2018). Natalie is an outlier in this sample because she explicitly named interracial dating as a strategy to avoid the feelings of being unwanted that emerge with pursuing Black men.

Interracial dating: Feeling unwanted v. Fetishization.

Interracial dating came up frequently as women spoke about reactions to misogynoir and experiences of dating. Interracial dating in the U.S. is quite common: a survey study involving

843 people found that 88.7% had been in or are open to being in an interracial relationship (Chappetta & Barth 2022). Most of my respondents reported having mixed experiences dating non-Black men, and found it brought up the same frustrations they expressed about feeling unwanted by Black men.

Concerns about being fetishized came up frequently as women spoke about the difficulties they had in deciphering whether or not affection from men of other races was something they wanted. Fetishization can be described as the act of making someone into a sexual object based on an aspect of their identities. Black feminist scholars have named fetishization as a function of sexualized racism that contributes to the lower social position of Black women. For example, Hill Collins (2004) develops the notion of "sexualized spectacle" to describe how racial sexual preferences often function to make racism appear "natural, normal, and inevitable" (173).

The Black women I spoke to were to some extent aware of the history of Black bodies being eroticized by white people. Some of the women I spoke to had experienced being told (by mostly white men) that they were interested in connecting with them because of their identity as a Black woman. For example, Monica, who is Jamaican-American, recounted times when she was sought after by a white man who immediately asked about the possibility of sex while asking her to provide him a certain racialized "experience:"

> They would say some things that sort of made me feel uncomfortable, like, the first questions would be my body count[13] or what I'm into sexually. Like, just like, right off the bat on a first date. Or if they would randomly mention that I would be like, the first black girl that they've ever dated. And that they would like me to give them this experience, you know, cooking food for them. And, you know, jerk chicken specifically.

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[13] "Body count" is this context refers to the number of people or "bodies' a person has had sex with

It just felt very much like [if] you really want to visit Jamaica, you know, just book a trip. So, yeah, things like that."

For the women in this chapter, the concern over fetishization called for increased suspicion towards white men. Importantly, overt sexual advances were perceived as acts of fetishization. Whether or not these experiences match agreed-upon definitions of fetishization were not as important as their effect on Black women's perceptions of dating. Just the possibility of being an object of sexual desire in ways they felt diminished their humanity was enough for them to avoid interracial encounters. For example, Nicki mentioned withholding physical intimacy due to concerns related to fetishization and stereotypes about Black women and hypersexuality. She described one experience where she was at a white man's house, and she felt pressured for sex:

"I feel like white guys aren't that attracted to me. And sometimes I wonder if the ones that are just have a fetish. And so, it felt a little bit with this recent guy. Like he wanted to be able to go back and tell his dudes that he, you know, got with a black girl, it felt a little bit like that. But what I ultimately told him was that I would need to cultivate intimacy and other areas before I was interested in being intimate in that way. And we haven't talked since. So, I guess he's like, "Okay, well, if we ain't intimate in other areas by now, then this is the extent of what I'm willing to invest. And I'm perfectly fine with that. Because there is no level of intimacy…like I don't even feel safe being in your house. So that's a clear indicator to me that even suggesting that there might be a possibility that I'm attracted to you in the future would be me lying to you, which I'm not willing to do to myself anymore."

Nicki's quote shows how concerns over fetishization and hypersexuality can shape Black women's experiences with interracial dating. What she experienced may not fit common understandings of fetishization; her date's forward questions about sex may not have been based on objectification of her racial identity. Yet, the threat of fetishization was enough to turn Nicki

off from this connection entirely. As a life coach, she also cautions her clients against having sex with men unless they express interest in other forms of connection, particularly with white men who she believes are more likely to fetishize Black women.

In contrast to the sex workers, gig workers I spoke to reported being adamantly against fetishization and were offended by racialized sexual expectations. Grace had a similar orientation towards interracial dating, stating that as a queer Black woman, she feels "sexualized" based on race and sexuality. When I asked her for examples of when she felt sexualized, she said the following:

> Um, I feel like it's all the time. Like, honestly, I feel like it's 24/7…like, if a guy hits on me, the first comment is about my body. It's never like, 'Oh, you have a beautiful smile,' or 'your personality seems great.' It's like 'oh, you got a fat asses. So very, like seldom have I had a guy give just a genuine compliment, like a non-sexualizing compliment. It's always been very sexualizing. So yeah, I would say all the time, and then I stay away from interracial dating just from negative experiences with race, I guess. Honestly, even though I'm actually mixed myself, I'm a quarter white, but I just stay away from it. Because I've had a lot of bad experiences where they would say, I would say microaggressions but in terms of sexualizing like just making comments like 'only black girls are shaped that way' or things like that, so yeah.

Scholars of race and representation have dissected mainstream portrayals of Black women's bodies to demonstrate how the "fat ass" is a metonymy for Black women's problematic sexuality, vulgarity, and sexual excess (Hobson 2018, Pickens 2015, Benson 2023). For Grace, compliments given based on her body felt fetishistic, especially when coming from non-Black admirers. Here, sexualization is perceived as fetishization which denies a woman her personhood, making her an object of sexual desire for someone else.

Online activism, self-love strategies of resistance

The women I spoke with overwhelmingly experienced the dating world as challenging and particularly hostile to Black women. Yet despite having experiences that led them to question their desirability and ability to find partners, most were optimistic about their dating futures.

They employed various strategies to maintain positive feelings within the world of sex and dating: namely online activism and self-love. In some cases, knowledge of misogynoir also facilitated self-confidence that was diminished in experiences of sex and dating. The popularization of the term on social media gave many women the language to name what they sometimes experience as a personal issue. For example, Kayla referenced misogynoir when describing her shift from personalizing her dating experience to contextualizing it in the broader context of sexualized racism against Black women:

> "I think at that time. I once again accepted that maybe guys were into me, but they're not going to be as vocal and out as the guy who went to my friends. And that doesn't say anything about my worth, or my beauty. That's just how misogynoir and white supremacy works. And like, you know how race works in dating…"

Kayla's use of misogynoir reflects the impact of digital activism for Black women in the realm of sex and dating. The concept was popularized by Black women activists who created content and online communities to educate and support other Black women in digital spaces. Kayla demonstrates that knowledge of misogynoir can be essential for Black women trying to cope with its damaging effects.

Other women explicitly talked about fostering self-love as a strategy of resistance against misogynoir. For example, as Natalie reflected on the challenges she faced in dating, she said the following:

> "I sort of feel like this is just a time for me to focus on myself and really find happiness and centeredness in myself before bringing someone in. So, I think that that's my main focus at this point."

Natalie's comment demonstrates Black women's challenges in modern dating; hostility she feels can only be remedied by self-love and cultivating an appreciation for oneself in the face and misogynoir. Some women spoke more candidly about self-love as a strategy against negative depictions of Black women through online "gender war" conversations and other digital media. For example, Violet stated the following:

> "I'm trying to just love myself without all the external factors because if I don't figure out a way to do it, then I'm just gonna be miserable because I just have all of these, you know, stimuli around me telling me 'you ain't shit.' And that's just a horrible way to live. And so, I just, I'm trying my best to just fight through it"

For women in this chapter, self-love is an important strategy to resist negative portrayals of Black women that can easily be internalized and misinterpreted as a personal problem. Self-love has been theorized by Black feminist scholars as a political practice of self-valuation that is uniquely important for Black women (Shange 1977, Lorde 1984, Walker 1984, Pough 2003, Jordan 2003, Collins 2004, Nash 2011). For example, Nash (2011) argues that self-love is a Black feminist tradition and practice of freedom. Analyzing the works of scholar-activists Alice Walker, June Jordan, and Audre Lorde, she describes Black feminist love politics as "... a doing, a call for a labor of the self, an appeal for transcending the self, a strategy for remaking the

public sphere, a plea to unleash the radical imagination, and a critique of the state's blindness to the violence it inflicts and enables" (19). The women in this chapter demonstrate both the raison d'etre of Black feminist love politics and its utility in the day-to-day lives of Black women. Cultivating a sense of inner worth is essential for battling misogynoir, threats of fetishization, and perpetual feelings of being less desired.

Conclusion

This chapter discussed the experiences of sex and dating for Black women working in the gig economy. The inclusion of this comparative sample allows us to think about the impact of monetary transaction on racial identity meaning-making. Black women who are not sex workers similarly have intimate encounters in which their racial identity is amplified and impactful.

Black women's experiences with social media "gender wars" influence their perception of their own desirability, particularly to Black men. They are intimately aware of the cultural stigma of singleness, particularly as they age. So, the cultural significance of Black partnership amplifies the impact of misogynoir which depicts Black women as having romantically undesirable qualities. While the women reported having different experiences with interracial dating, concerns over fetishization and racialized sexual expectations were often barriers to connection. This finding supports previous research and provides further explanation as to why Black women are among the least likely to date interracially. Research suggests that Black women are less desirable to Black and non-Black men, but they also avoid interracial dating (with white men in particular) to protect themselves from fetishization and racialized sexual expectations. Black women also employed the strategy of self-love to mitigate the harmful effects of misogynoir in dating.

Perhaps most importantly, Black women who were not engaged in sex work articulated the convergence of sex and the market in ways that aligned them with sex workers. First, they are also treated as always sexually available, particularly for pay. This sentiment arose during interviews where Black women refused to have their meals paid for to avoid being stereotyped as a sex worker. This finding is important because Black women are treated as sexually available for pay even when they do not participate in sex work. While it may be a common complaint among all women dating–the presumption that being treated for a date means that they are sexually available–racialized stereotypes about Black women involving hypersexuality, unreasonable financial expectations, and being gold diggers racialize the meanings attached to money being transacted in these dating interactions. For example, white women are not competing with the culturally salient vision of the hypersexual Jezebel, the pejorative welfare queen label in which Black women seek class mobility by scamming the government through sexual reproductive labor (having babies), or on the other hand, the Sapphire controlling image that vilifies financial independence in Black women. For Black women, the role of money in intimate relationships is particularly important because it carries the potential to reproduce them as stereotypical sexual objects.

Black women gig workers and sex workers all navigate the paradox of being hypersexualized while somehow simultaneously being less desirable intimate partners. As Miller-Young argues, Black women's sexuality is "publicly scorned and privately enjoyed… alluring, transformative, and perverse" (Miller-Young 2014, 14). Thus, Black women sex workers and non-sex workers are similarly interpellated by racialized sexual expectations that contribute to their subjugation. In the next chapter, I will compare the gig workers and sex

workers and explain why money is sometimes more than financial security – sometimes it is

armor.

Chapter 5:

A Job That Never Stops:
Race, Sex and What It Means to Be a Black Woman in Racial Capitalism

When I met Mecca, she was 28-years-old and had just moved to northern California to work as a special education teacher. While she loved her work, teaching did not pay enough to support the comfortable lifestyle that she wanted for herself. After talking with a friend who made a decent living from sex work, she decided to give sugaring a try. She began reading Reddit message boards, and eventually made successful online profiles that attracted wealthy men who would be willing to support her financially. At the time of our interview, she was seeing three regulars whose allowances together were enough to cover most of her monthly expenses. She found that being a sugar baby was more enjoyable than she anticipated. Mecca confessed that she enjoyed the company of the older men she was seeing and opted to spend less time with those who she found less attractive. She described having an active dating life that included nice dinners, gifts, and sometimes travel. While she experienced the occasional bad date, her positive experiences far outweighed the negative according to her. When I asked if she was seeing anyone outside of her sugar relationships, she replied with the following:

> "No, no. From like 23 to 25 I was in a relationship that was okay. And then towards the end, it just got so trash and I was like, 'I don't think I will ever date for free ever again.'
>
> I was just reflecting on it…this is gonna sound so jaded. But I'm just not interested in dating anyone for free at this point in my life…I just would like to have a simple kind of, like, agreement where, you know, it's not too deeply involved, and we both can go and do our own separate stuff."

Mecca did not expand on the challenges that caused her previous relationship to end, but to her, sex work offered an opportunity to get her needs met for affection and sexual intimacy while protecting her emotions from the complexities of modern dating. She would prefer the "simple," emotional and physical expectations of her sugar dating relationships to the "deeply" emotionally involved relationships that did not promise anything in return. Her response signifies an acceptance of a less-than-ideal dating reality characterized by disappointment and unmet desires in intimacy. What are we to make of this "jaded" confession? What does it mean that Mecca, a Black woman, would prefer to commodify her relationships, rather than keep trying to find connections off market?

I argue that such attitudes towards dating reflect what cultural sociologists refer to as a flattening of social relationships dictated by late capitalism (Hochschild 1983; Giddens 1992; Illouz 1997). Importantly, the convergence of market forces with intimacy affects relationships whether or not they are commodified explicitly as is the case with sex work. In the sections that follow, I compare the experiences of Black women who sell intimacy with those who do not to understand the impact of explicit commodification on racial identity meaning making. Through a comparison between Black women who sell sexual services and those who do not, I argue that the flattening of these relationships has consequences for racial capitalism, fetishization, and racial identity meaning-making through the erotic.

Sex work, intimacy, and alienation

The sex workers I spoke to described playing with their erotic selves–experimenting with personas, crafting personalities based on marketability as well as their own preferences. For some, their sex work led to deep explorations of their own kinks and erotic desires that they did not engage in their non-sex work relationships. However, sex work also led to alienation due to

the market that demands exaggerated versions of Black womanhood. As we saw with the less advantaged workers in particular, fulfilling client requests that required them to perform inauthentically – and to enact vitriolic or denigrated characters – sometimes caused emotional distress. While this finding was more prevalent among the more economically precarious sex workers, sex workers from various social backgrounds expressed instances where sex work made them feel alienated from their real personalities. Similarly, they expressed feeling disconnected from their sexuality at times because of their focus on its monetization. For example, Jenna reflected on the challenges she's faced using her "sexual energy" for pleasure and connection outside of work:

> It's just like, sex work does still take up a lot of your sexuality. So, like, I feel like when I'm doing it, I am using up my sexual energy for work. So, I have to determine whether I'm ready to use all that on this and then make money or if I want to kind of reserve my energy and use that for myself basically.

Jenna explained how sex work could at times feel draining because it demands a significant amount of her "sexual energy." As an escort and an Only Fans model, she spends most of her time making sexual content and providing romantic company to her clients. Through these interactions, she feels her energy is depleted, and there is not enough left to pursue other connections.

Considering cultural sociology's concern about the commodification of relationships, Jenna demonstrates how market-mediated relationships can keep individuals from pursuing non-commercial relationships. While she describes this work as sometimes enjoyable, having to maintain what Bernstein (2007) calls bounded authenticity can be challenging. Jenna described experiences when she felt exhausted dealing with the expectations of her clients. Additionally,

her sentiments about having to choose between herself and her work reflect the alienating nature of emotion commodification under capitalism.

Similarly, Ava described the taxing nature of sex work that could sometimes make it difficult to form unpaid connections. It is important to note that social sanctions and stigma attached to sex work can be major barriers to sex workers maintaining romantic relationships (Wersch & Gorton 2014; Perez-Salas et al 2020). However, Ava describes a different dilemma based on how much of her erotic energy she must give:

> I mean… when you spend all of your shift like having to make small talk with a bunch of different men, then when you are off, you're not like, 'Oh, let me go to a bar and do that again,' like, for free? Why? So yeah, I mean, I guess it's a little exhausting trying to do that…But I don't know, an element of [sex work] does kind of feel like speaking to people romantically. Like when you already kind of have to do that at work, it feels a little exhausting."

Like Jenna, Ava described dating as emotionally risky and tiresome. They expressed frustration towards dating that reflects the general conditions of the dating market as well as the deep impact of misogynoir in dating. She also mentions that to her, sex work includes "speaking to people romantically" in ways that make it difficult to exert that energy the purpose of other forms of connection.

Stella (they/them) explained this point most clearly when they reflected on the distance felt between their own desires and what they performed for others through their work.

> I don't know, there's pressure and I think other things [like] the burnout from social media, and it just started to feel inauthentic…like [sexuality] really is my passion. But I think when you start to monetize your passion, sometimes it just really changes your

relationship with it. So, I think I just kind of needed to take a step back because it just didn't feel authentic to me anymore.

Stella also elaborated on the alienation they sometimes felt through performing heterosexuality as a queer person. For someone who feels passionately about their own sexual identity and pleasure, sex work can be particularly challenging. As demonstrated by the quotes above, it is difficult to be authentic in one's sexuality while simultaneously monetizing these forms of expression.

"Why would I date for free?" Sex workers and inequality in dating

Some of the women expressed their preference for paid sexual labor in response to anti-sex work criticism. For example, Ava admonished women who participated in the stigmatization of sex work. As a stripper and full-service sex worker, she pointed to the similarities between sex work and hookup culture and related gender disparities in pleasure:

> "So yeah, you know, people are like, 'morality is why I wouldn't go into sex work.' And I'm like, 'no, it's not because you fuck people from Tinder for free and you're not even [orgasming]' If I'm not having satisfying sex, I can at least be getting money for it. Like, the times that I've tried to have one-night stands, [I'd be thought like] 'That was terrible. *And* I didn't get paid. *And* I didn't [orgasm], why did I participate in that?' And that feels so much worse than the sex work. You know, at least I'm leaving with something that I wanted. That is a win-win. The other hooking up is not a win-win."

Ava references double standards, arguing that the dating world is already so unfavorable to people like her that sex work felt less emotionally risky. She also mentions what some scholars have termed the "orgasm gap" (Wade et al 2005) or the "pleasure gap" that refers to the difference in frequency of orgasm for heterosexual men and women. According to one large and

oft cited study, 95% of heterosexual men say they usually or always orgasm when sexually intimate while only 65% of heterosexual women say the same (Frederick et al 2018). Other studies also identified other gaps between women engaged in sex with other women versus men and women engaged in casual versus relationship sex (Mahar et al 2020). Ava's comment demonstrates that sex work can also act as a criticism to normative dating relationships that are unequal or less concerned with the bodily pleasure of women.

When we compare these two groups of Black women, their differences and similarities reveal much about race and sex in America. The sex workers I spoke to viewed sexual connection in a way that was emotionally protective. Like the non-sex workers, they were critical of modern dating and aware of inequality, including misogynoir against Black women. Also like the non-sex workers, they felt disillusioned with modern dating and related that to the devaluation of Black women in society more generally. These groups diverge, however, in their perspective towards failures in dating. When the non-sex workers experienced disappointment, they expressed feelings of frustration and inadequacy. In contrast, when the sex workers' needs for affection were not being met, they pointed to the fact that "regular dating" also failed to meet their needs, but at least with work they got paid.

For example, Amelia is a camgirl and an escort who makes most of her money from going on dates and having sex with clients. When I asked her to describe her dating life, she said the following:

> "The one issue that I found with dating apps is that it starts to feel like work. And so, we can just because it's actually very similar in regard to like, people who are trying to fuck you are all up in your inbox. And so, it's that overlap. It's still hard for me to deal with mentally. Like, I don't want to do this right now. I don't want to work for free."

It is important to note that when women are comparing their dating lives to sex work, they are not describing sex work as an erotic utopia in which they are treated well. Rather, they are suggesting that unpaid dating is so draining, unsatisfying, and emotionally tumultuous that sex work, a similarly racialized area of social life, offers some consolation in the form of monetary reward. Thus, sex work also transforms intimacy into work as women seek compensation for disappointing experiences.

The gig workers

In contrast, the gig workers I spoke to have no such protection from the emotionally dangerous terrain of the dating world. As I describe in the previous chapter, when their needs are unmet, they internalize it and blame their own shortcomings, or they back out of dating all together. Interestingly, when I asked them about their previous relationships, they often described situations where they felt they were giving more than they were receiving. This was especially true when they mentioned the emotional labor they would perform in previous relationships. Recalling images of the Strong Black woman, they performed self-sacrificial caretaking that was expected of them in relationships. For example, Paris was critical of such expectations for Black women who she believes are expected to give selflessly in relationships. She described being a Black woman as "a job that never stops:"

> "No matter if you want to participate or not, you're always happy to help someone or save someone. So that's what I feel like it means to be a Black woman. A job that never stops."

For Paris, the expectations for Black women in relationships created a reality where Black women become drained and emotionally exhausted through connection. Both the perspectives of sex workers and non-sex workers demonstrate how much emotional energy goes into making

romantic connections for this group. Through their experiences, we learn that sex work serves as a critique of Black women's experiences in sex and dating by demanding restitution for the labor that they inevitably are expected to perform.

For the gig workers, their attitudes towards their sexuality were linked to dating market forces and the expectations of their preferred partners, who generally were Black men. Their expectations for partners were higher and when they were unmet, it felt particularly disappointing. None of the single gig workers that I spoke to mentioned sexual pleasure or even the pursuit of pleasure. They did, however, mention celibacy as a tactic to protect themselves against emotional harm. Their avoidance of sex might mean that they have less engagement with their erotic selves and less opportunity for the kind of productive self-reflection that is mentioned in the accounts of the sex workers. Gig workers might also engage in what Allen refers to as "erotic self-making" (Allen 2011), but these pursuits may not be as top-of-mind as it was with the sex workers. Scholarship on BDSM and Blackness demonstrate that erotic self-making happens in unpaid sexual play as well (Cruz 2016). Future research should consider a comparison between people who engage in BDSM with and without pay to understand how monetary exchange impacts identity-meaning making in kink and erotic play.

Gig workers and financial expectations
Like the sex workers, gig workers also make economic decisions about who to engage with intimately and employ market-style language to describe their ideal sexual situations. Consider, for example, this quote from Monica, a gig worker, where she describes the importance of equal transaction in relationships:

I do think that, like, it's important to be realistic, like we do live in a capitalist society, it's important for people to have goals or have ambitions, because nobody really wants to get

into a relationship where, you know, you give a lot more than you get. People [mention] that statistic of like, however, many marriages fail, a lot of them fail because of finances, and arguments about that kind of thing.

By mentioning that "we do live in a capitalist society," Monica is admitting to participating in what Marx would refer to as money fetishism, where money reduces personal relationships to capitalistic instrumental ties. For Monica, it would be unreasonable to neglect to consider what one has to offer her financially in a romantic relationship. For some, this understanding of money and relationships is a protective move against their own exploitation. Nicki, a gig worker, described how her experiences with financially insecure men led her to make economic decisions about who to date:

> Nia: What kind of men would you say you attracted before?
>
> Nicki: Brookies.[14] And that is so honest…I was attracting men who also were not living sustainable lifestyles, and we were just trying to like, struggling or they were just pretending like they had money and then somehow, [I] look up and somehow all of my money's being depleted.

Monica is describing a situation in which her own financial resources were depleted over the course of a romantic relationship. Importantly, she is describing relationship-seeking as a calculated move to prevent a "broke" lifestyle. Interestingly, this view of money and relationships does not differ drastically from the views held by the sex workers.

Sex work and attitudes towards money

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[14] The term "brookie" is colloquially used to describe men who are financially insecure or "broke."

For the sex workers, disconnecting monetization from their own self-worth was essential to their mental health. During mental health breaks they found other ways of making money, and reminded themselves that money was the main objective, hence offering some cushioning for emotionally challenging experiences.

For the women who sold sexual services, it was important to understand how money can flatten relationships and disrupt one's sense of self for their own wellbeing. Acknowledging this function of money helped them protect themselves from feeling negatively about self-commodification. Assuming a position of confidence was something they prioritized and worked towards. Yet, cultivating a self-worth that hinged on one's ability to profit from sex led to decreased feelings of self-worth for some, particularly given the stigma attached to sex work. For example, Jenna said the following about selling herself "as a product":

> So, if you're gonna start like an Etsy shop, or something, selling a product that you make, that's already a little stressful, because you're running your own small business, you forget how to market it, figuring out how to, like get people to buy your product, right? When the product becomes your body. And to an extent, like an aspect of your personality and aspect of yourself that people might want to see. It's even more, even more pressure, even more stressful. … So yeah, I would say it becomes a lot of pressure. And you really start to lose maybe some of the more human aspects of sex and even about your own body.

Jenna very clearly articulated the impact of sex work on one's attitude towards their body and sexuality. For her, monetizing sex can jeopardize the "more human aspects" of sexuality, including the ways she expressed her own outside of work. Thus, engagement in sex work necessitated an accepting attitude towards the potential of money to flatten relationships and identities.

Other sex workers agreed that the focus on money could be damaging. Ava mentioned "class drag" or the act of exaggerating one's financial status online to attract more high-end customers. Ava was very critical of this practice out of concern for young people who might think sex work is all fun and easy work. She argued that doing class drag encourages others to attach their self-worth to how much money they were making through sex work and contributes to stigma and shame felt from not being able to make enough profit:

> I think the problem is, it's very easy to say like, 'fuck your weird evangelical morality,' you know, when I'm making 100k a year. But when you're struggling on rent, or having an eviction notice and you're doing sex work, then it seems less justifiable. And like, there's more shame involved, because [it feels like] you're doing something bad, and you're not even like making money from it. And so then people feel a lot more shame around it. So I think a lot of girls fall into that.

> And also, I think they found it as a capitalism thing of like, attaching how much money they're making to their worth. So, like, you know, they feel like they have a bad night, and I was having a good night's like, Is she prettier than me? And or, like, am I doing something wrong? It's like, well, it's none of those things, really. And, yeah, so I think that that incentivizes some girls to feel like they need to act like they're doing a lot better than they are to, like, justify why they are doing that. Which can be misleading to others.

Ava is describing the challenges related to sex work stigma. For her, it becomes essential for sex workers to cultivate an understanding of money and commodification to avoid the pitfalls of class drag. She identifies the difficulty in maintaining a healthy sense of self while also pandering to the preferences of the men who pay her for sex.

Importantly, both the gig workers and sex workers expressed an understanding of money in which intimate relationships become instrumental, calculated ties. The difference lies in their management of feelings related to this perceived reality. When the calculations of effort and

benefits do not add up for gig workers, they are disappointed, exhausted, even bereft. When they do not add up for the sex workers, they up their charges. These views of money demonstrate the nature of modern intimate connection, in which personal gain becomes the primary motivator for intimate connection.

Capitalism and racial identity meaning-making

In the previous section, I have described how both sex workers and gig workers employ the capitalist logics to seek out and assess their intimate relationships. Thus, sex work mediates some of the emotional harm in modern dating by reducing expectations of romance, which then match the instrumentalization of intimacy under capitalism. While sex work has the potential for alienation, the logic of late capitalism is employed by Black women in ways that offer some emotional protection from misogynoir and the devaluation of sex and intimacy. While the theories developed by cultural sociologists have been essential for understanding how capitalism transforms social relationships, they do not attempt to explain how race is made in these intimate connections. Thus, this project also employs the concept of racial capitalism to understand how capitalism also transforms meanings of racial and racial identity.

By comparing how Black women construct meaning around racial identity, I argue that sex workers develop meanings of race that match racial capitalism's interpellation of Black woman identity.

Capitalism and meanings of race: Controlling images and caretaking

What does it mean to be a Black woman? This question emerged in every interview I had for this project. The women and femme nonbinary people I spoke to thought of themselves as strong and resilient across categories. Interestingly, their attitudes towards elements of Black

woman identity diverged depending on the contexts in which they had sexual relationships. This difference was the most pronounced when we discussed their experiences with caregiving. The sex workers I spoke to expressed having pride in their perceived heightened ability to care for others – especially the more advantaged group of sex workers, who saw themselves as educators and facilitators of new experiences for their clients. For example, Brianna described Black women as particularly gifted caregivers because of their positionality:

> I just think overall, we have so much love to share just because we've been through so much. And I think that's really what it means to be a black woman, just carrying the love.

Brianna characterized Black woman-positionality as one that grants special skills for "carrying the love" or providing care and emotional support for others. As I discussed in a previous chapter, these ascribed characteristics are reminiscent of the Mammy controlling image but transformed through erotic meaning-making in sex work. Importantly, Brianna views Black women's perceived capacity for emotional labor as a positive trait that is benevolently shared by choice. In this way, the racial logics of sex work match those of racial capitalism, which includes assigning extraordinary caregiving capacities to Black women to justify their exploitation.

The gig workers, however, expressed a different attitude towards the caregiving their lives demanded of them. They described feeling pressured to provide significant emotional labor in ways that were not celebrated or admired. Instead, they felt exhausted by these expectations that felt unavoidable in both work and romance. For example, Nicki described being the default person to resolve conflict at her previous nonprofit jobs, which eventually led to her quitting to find more flexible work. She explained to me that she felt exploited for her love of community and was regularly tasked with doing more work for no additional pay. She described these expectations for self-sacrificial caretaking as extremely draining:

It gets to a point where you can't see the results or growth in yourself, because you've poured out so much to everyone else, but yourself. So, I really just kind of got to a point where I realized that I didn't have the capacity to pour into myself, I was pouring so much into the city and to everyone else.

Nicki's refusal to allow work to detract from her personal growth was a form of resistance against racial capitalism. The point here, however, is that Nicki does not view excessive caretaking with pride or pleasure. Instead, she viewed it as an imposition that eroded her energy that she would rather use to focus on her own goals and desires.

The people who did not do sex work viewed excessive caretaking as an expectation that permeated all aspects of their lives including work, family, and intimate relationships. For example, 22-year-old Tatiana stated that she was used to feeling like a savior for men who needed significant emotional support:

I attract a lot of broken souls, because they look at me like, I don't know, like "wow with her I could be so much better. She's gonna love me" …And I am trying to be very self-aware to avoid that because it's too much.

Tatiana's comment shows the pervasiveness of caretaking expectations attached to being a Black woman, and the strain it imposes upon them. Her comment sheds light on how Black women are often treated as arbiters of emotion and unconditional, self-sacrificial love. Collins argues that this vision of Black womanhood was developed to challenge racist ideas of Black people being bad parents and community members (1990). However, claiming that Black women are endowed with self-sacrificial devotion functions to police them into being submissive domestic workers, putting their own needs aside to care for Black men. Thus, this seemingly positive trait also works to maintain patriarchal power dynamics in family and intimate relationships. Tatiana's stated avoidance of one-sided emotional relationships demonstrates a personalization of the

issues affecting Black women in intimate connection. Instead of naming or referring to misogynoir as a cultural reality, she turns to personal attributes, saying that self-awareness would be useful to disrupt what she experiences as a harmful pattern in her personal dating life.

These divergent perspectives on caretaking demonstrate how sex work and racial capitalism converge in their construction of racial identity. The sex workers embody elements of the Mammy/Matriarch controlling images, which contribute to the maintenance of racial hierarchy. And yet, these findings also demonstrate how Black women are affected by racial expectations even when they are not getting paid to perform them. Unlike the gig workers, sex workers experience clearly socially marked benefits related to caretaking. This does not mean the gig workers I spoke to received no emotional benefits to caring for loved ones, but it does reflect a larger story of felt devaluation in intimacy for Black women. If the terrain of sex and dating is fraught with controlling images that require more out of them than they receive, doing paid, compensated intimacy becomes a more reasonable option despite the social sanctions against it. Additionally, as the conditions of sex work allow for more independence and control over sexual and racial presentation, commodifying the emotional labor that is often performed and appropriated for free becomes emotionally protective and rational.

Capitalism and meanings of race: fetishization

Sex work also matches the logic of racial capitalism through fetishization. Fetishization can be understood as a form of objectification based on racial and gender stereotypes. According to traditional feminist thought, fetishization is an essential part of gender oppression that involves reducing individuals to certain attributes or body parts for the purposes of establishing cultural and structural white supremacy. Black feminism's historical theorization of Black sexuality has named fetishization as a tool for white capital and pleasure (Lorde 1978 Spillers

1987) and anti-Black social control (Davis 1983; Roberts 1997). From this perspective, fetishization undermines agency, perpetuates harmful stereotypes, and contributes to white suprematist power hierarchies in society.

The gig workers I spoke to articulated being offended and discouraged by the possibility of fetishization; the feeling that their racial identity was being appropriated led to hurt feelings and disappointment. As was discussed in the previous chapter, even the possibility of being sexualized based on being Black women often turned them off entirely. When they confronted stereotypes about Black women, they did so in relationships where they did not receive any benefits based on their racial identity. Instead, fetishization contributed to feelings of stress about dating. It is experienced as a paradox–through objectification they felt simultaneously hypersexualized and unwanted as intimate partners.

These sentiments toward fetishization were echoed throughout my interviews with the gig workers, and they are analyzed in the previous chapter. Consider Monica's comment, for example, when she reflected on her concerns about fetishization in interracial dating.

> And if you do, like date interracially, then somebody might like you, but you have to navigate, like "okay, is this like a fetish? Is this like, you know, do you actually like black women? Am I a placeholder for something that you actually really want?" Those kinds of things can sort of pop up a bit.

None of the gig workers reported feeling positively about being pursued based on stereotypical features and expectations of Black women. Instead, fetishization is just another obstacle in dating that makes it particularly taxing and emotionally risky. Monica's comment indicates an anxiety caused by the paradox of Black women's sexuality–it is simultaneously alluring and exaggerated through dehumanizing objectification. Her fear of being wanted under the circumstances of

fetishization makes interracial dating dangerous emotional terrain. The experiences of the gig workers fall in line with traditional feminist understandings of fetishization that claim it is always experienced as negative and dehumanizing.

In contrast, the sex workers I spoke with had responses to fetishization that indicated a drastic difference in the way they understood exaggerated racialized depictions and expectations in sex. Black feminist scholars have dealt with the messy and often contradictory experiences of fetishization for Black women, particularly for those who perform sexuality for their work (Lee 2010, Brooks 2010). In her discussion of Black pop culture icons, Hill-Collins describes the "contradictions of sexualized spectacle" that considers the potential for self-determination in fetishization. She argues that entertainers provide consent to their fetishization that makes racism appear to be "natural, normal, and inevitable" (Hill-Collins 2004 p. 29, 34). For Collins, such consent is one aspect of the "new racism" that relies on mass media to reproduce ideologies that justify racism. Collins acknowledges the contradictions of Black women's sexual positionality– she considers, for example, how the early 2000s girls group Destiny's Child were icons for sexual freedom while they also embodied the objectification of Black women's bodies through their music. However, new Black feminist thought considers the potential for pleasure in sexual fetishism (Stallings 2007, Nash 2016, Cruz 2016). For example, Miller-Young considers moments of agency in which the pornographic gaze is appropriated or considered pleasurable by Black women (Miller Young 2014). These scholars connect pleasure with sexual liberation for Black women, thus challenging assumptions that fetishization is always a negative experience that contributes to the reproduction of racism.

Generally, the sex workers I spoke to expressed positive feelings about being called beautiful, strong, and powerful based on their racial identity. Unlike the gig workers who

admonished any kind of fetishization, the sex workers expressed limited approval depending on the nature of the client interaction. Overall, being praised for stereotypical Black women features, including the objectification of their bodies was experienced as positive. For them, such solicitations offered respite from misogynoir and negative portrayals of Black women that they witness online and in their personal lives. For example, Kima spoke about finding appreciation for her Blackness in sex work that she did not feel in other parts of her life:

> Like, no matter what, I don't feel ashamed doing this because a lot of the stuff that I was taught as a kid that I should be ashamed about whether it was being dark skinned, whether it was having 4C [afro-textured] hair, whether it was having a deep voice, whether it was being a bit more on the muscular side, or whatever. I always had like, either [pro-dommes] or clients, or just people in general within the kink community that will always tell me like 'you should be like, believing that you are actually a goddess you are actually so beautiful. And so that's why I can't demonize it. I can't be with the mindset that demonizes what this does, because it does a lot of stuff for people's perception of the self, honestly.

While we might expect Kima, a sex worker, to defend sex work as not shameful, the specifics of her explanation here demonstrate how sex work has the potential to provide a counternarrative to Black women's sexual positionality. Furthermore, Kima's response suggests that fetishization can feel pleasurable under certain conditions. Through her work, she identifies herself as a sexualized spectacle and consents to the fetishization of these racialized attributes. As Miller-Young suggests about the porn stars in her own work (2014), Kima is appropriating the pornographic gaze and reaping the emotional benefits of appreciation.

It is important to note that Kima belongs to a particularly advantaged group of Black women sex workers. As a college student with a stable economic background, her class position allows her to have more freedom in responding to requests from clients, which enables her to

have more positive experiences. And yet, the more disadvantaged sex workers also spoke of experiences where fetishization felt pleasurable. For example, Stella (they/them) reflected on the "power" they felt appropriating fetishistic expectations for their own benefit:

> I think even just owning the power of like…if I'm going to be sexualized anyway, if I know that I'm somebody that's going to draw attention anyway, I might as well you know, get paid for it…And I mean, just even being at the intersection, it's like, if nobody's hiring you [outside of the sex industry] – because I just know a lot of black, queer and trans people, like whether it be trans women, trans men, or just non binary people, are in this industry…So I think I just noticed a lot of black people like and especially black women, find that like, you really do experience more appreciation and more money in this industry than you would you know, using your body to do something else. It's weird though, because like, you know, you get appreciation, but it's also still, you know, it's fetish.

For Stella, sex work is an option to derive some benefit from the simultaneous sexualization and devaluation that racial and gender minority people confront in their day-to-day lives. Sex work offered Stella opportunities to profit from their marginalized position in society, and that benefit had sex work worthwhile to them. Importantly, they pointed out the limited options available for marginalized workers, especially for trans people whose unemployment rate is twice as high as the national average according to some measures.[15] In a labor force that lacks workplace protections for trans workers who often deal with harassment and discrimination, there are fewer options for finding work that provides both economic stability and respect for their personhood. Thus, Stella's ability to derive money *and* pleasure/appreciation for their body from work is particularly meaningful. Just like Kima who possesses physical characteristics in ways that are

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[15] 2020 data from the US CDC's Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System

devalued under white patriarchy, Stella reclaims power and pleasure through self-authored fetishization. The differences in the interpretations of fetishization are based on their class status–while Kima can limit her engagement with requests that feel demeaning, Stella feels empowered through appropriating what she feels is an avoidable part of their experience being financially unstable, trans, and Black.

While Black sex workers expressed more comfort with fetishization, they were more ambivalent when it came to the polarizing topic of race play. As a reminder, race play refers to the controversial BDSM practice in which sexual power play is based on racial hierarchies, sometimes involving scenes that depict slavery or the role reversal of white-Black slavery relations. As discussed in the previous chapter, most of the sex workers I spoke to were against race play that recited Black enslavement. Some mentioned experiences where clients would begin hurling racist names and insults where they would either refuse or continue based on their economic need. They generally expressed discomfort in explicit race play, but also pointed to some pleasure felt by being in the dominating position when slave roles were reversed. For example, Alexandria described ambivalent, yet pleasurable feelings attached to engaging in explicit race play with white men:

> I do feel a little uncomfortable. But at the same time, I feel like [pause] I feel empowered. Okay. It's like, I felt like I had that power, because they raped us. Back in the day when we were slaves and things like that. They had the power. But we're free now and I have the power. You're underneath my feet where you belong. You know? So, if they request for me to call them names, sometimes I will feel uncomfortable at first. But because they requested it, I will get into it and like I feel empowered. You know? I'm in charge. I'm in control. You're my slave. I own you. So, I will get into that mode.

The contradictions in Alexandria's comment mirror the contradictions of the Black sexual spectacle. While she does experience shame for embodying violence and aggression, she also experiences pleasure through white fantasies of Black sexual domination. By thinking about violence against Black women during slavery, she can derive pleasure from being in a position of control, even if that control is being purchased by white men. In this form of race play, consensual violence against white men may feel empowering.

A minority of sex workers I spoke to viewed race play as offering space for sexual connection that was not possible in the past. For these women, facilitating exploration contributed to a positive sense of self. While Alexandria's comment reflected a more critical understanding of race relations and Black empowerment, Brianna expressed a colorblind view of doing antiracism through sex work:

> As a black woman, I get [requests for race play] a lot. A lot of people will message me to do race play videos, and I am personally not comfortable with somebody talking about my skin color, [reducing] who I am as a person to my racial identity. And most of it comes from, you know, slavery back in the day. Most of it actually comes from, a lot of people don't know this, but black men who were not accepted by, you know, white women, [through race play] they get to live it out now in the future, but in a more acceptable way. And vice versa with white men who didn't have a safe space to be around like black women, so they get to live it out that way. So, I'm like, I'm very, I'm all big into equality, hey, I'm down with all the teams. So I don't try to, you know, limit my interactions, I just do try to limit what words are used with me, just for my boundary reasons. Now, if somebody did want to be humiliated for their white skin, I'm able to do that as a dominatrix. If that is a kink that you enjoy, I can make you feel bad about that. But personally, it's not something I want to do.

Brianna's ahistorical explanation of interracial relationships demonstrates a misread of history and of sexual relations between white and Black people. Yet she argues that fetishization can

give way to improved race relations and pleasure. While she claims that race play does not give her pleasure "personally," she derives emotional benefits from being in the position to provide a "safe space" for white people to engage with Black sexuality. Despite these different explanations of pleasurable race play, both Brianna and Alexandria demonstrate how performing sexuality for work can create avenues for pleasure in fetishization.

There are meaningful differences between the sex workers' and the gig workers' experiences with fetishization. First, the sex workers give permission to fetishization; they craft personas and personalities that exaggerate race for their own personal gain. They have, albeit limited, control over the meanings and personality they construct around fetishization through the creation of personas. In contrast, the gig workers experienced fetishization they did not give consent to. They feel disempowered by sexual stereotypes that function to diminish their value in the sex and dating market. While the sex workers can profit materially and emotionally from their fetishization, most Black women receive little to no benefit when they are subjected to racialized sexual exaggerations.

Conclusion

In this chapter I compared the experiences of sex workers and gig workers to understand the role of commodification in sex and dating and how money impact's racial identity meaning-making for Black women. While both groups face fetishization and harm in sex and dating, sex work appears to mediate some of these negative outcomes by 1) lowering their expectations for romance, 2) offering creativity and erotic identity meaning-making, and by 3) exposing Black women to praise based on being a Black woman through self-authored fetishization. The conditions of their intimacy and work cultivate divergent perspectives towards romance, the erotic, and fetishization.

Sex workers have opportunities to experience praise and admiration based on being Black women, which grants them a different perspective on stereotypes and fetishization compared to the gig workers I spoke to. According to these women, fetishization sometimes feels good because it is consensual and self-authored: sex workers have relatively more control over their fetishization and are able to derive benefits from it in a clearly socially marked way–through money.

Another important distinction between these groups is their attitudes towards money. The sex workers understand money in a way that aligns with Marx's claims–it turns intimate relationships into instrumental, calculated ties. Unlike the gig workers who do not see money as flattening their social relationships, the sex workers accept this as a given, and instead make the most of it by charging for their intimate labor.

What does it mean to consent to be a racialized, sexualized spectacle? It means contributing to these meanings of Blackness while also transforming them through agentic sexual expression. Part of the project of Black feminist thought is to consider how Black women name themselves amid misogynoir that controls representations of them. By considering the possibility for pleasurable fetishization, or what Miller-Young (2014) refers to as "self-Jezebelization," we see that controlling images can be counter-appropriated to enhance Black women's experiences of pleasure and intimacy, to challenge the racist assumptions underlying them, and to critique the gendered racial contours of work and capitalism.

These findings speak to the benefits of changing working conditions in sex work *and* the extent to which Black women are devalued in sex and dating generally. The idea that sex work, a highly racialized, sexist industry, provides Black women with some emotional benefits and opportunities for positive racial identity meaning-making shows how hostile non-market dating

can be: it is racist and sexist, but there are not always emotional or material benefits to counter

these problems. These findings respond to traditional feminist concerns over commodification,

suggesting that attention should be turned towards the misogynoir that affects Black women

regardless of whether they sell sexual services.

Conclusion

How is race shaped in the transformed world of sex and intimacy? Through sex workers'
accounts of their intimate and work lives, we can situate race-making in the erotic, and point to
its potential to reinscribe meanings of race that both challenge existing racial hierarchies and
naturalize racial difference. But can we bridge the gap between racial capitalism, pleasure, and
sex work? The advantaged sex workers demonstrated that pleasure is connected to one's ability
to express themselves authentically in their work. The relatively disadvantaged sex workers
revealed the role of class in how pleasure is acquired–through their limited ability to profit from
their marginalized positionality. Through a comparison with similarly positioned Black women
who do not sell sexual services, we can see that situating fetishization as a consequence of racial
capitalism reveals the importance of defining fetishization in a way that reflects the role of
consent and self-authorship. Through an analysis of how Black women sell pleasure, seek it in
their work, and demand recompense from situations that deny them pleasure, it becomes clear
the individualization of intimacy can produce new meanings of racial identity for Black women.

Racial capitalism, controlling images, and transformations in intimacy

Race scholars have explored how capitalism creates and transforms meanings of race
through the concept of racial capitalism. Emerging through anti-apartheid civil rights movements
of the 1970s and 1980s, racial capitalism is a term used to describe the interconnected nature of
racial exploitation and capitalism (Leong 2012, Keeanga-Yamahtta 2022, Levenson and Paret
2023). Building on the work of Franz Fanon, W.E.B. DuBois, and Angela Davis, Robinson
(1983) argues that the emergence of capitalism was a direct result of exploration and the
colonization of non-European people, specifically on the African continent. Thus, racial
capitalism theory situates race as central to the development of capitalism. Additionally, race

scholars maintain that race is continually commodified under capitalism, which thrives on the marketing of racialized stereotypes to sell products. Thus, feminist and CRT critiques of sex work are shaped by this understanding of commodification as something that always reproduces racial inequality.

My findings are in part consistent with these critiques–Black women sex workers do rely on controlling images that reproduce essentialist and problematic meanings of the Black woman as strong and angry, and as willing caretakers of white men. Endorsement of each quality listed reproduces the Black woman as a being that can endure more pain and hardship, who lacks emotional control, and is willingly self-sacrificial respectively. These controlling images reproduce the dehumanization of Black bodies in the following ways. First, the strength attributed to Black women justifies mistreatment, abuse, and exploitative labor practices, especially in service work and care industries in which Black women are overrepresented. Additionally, race scholars in the United States have identified how the logic of European Enlightenment dichotomized reason and emotion, attributing reason and logic to civilization, culture, and the white man while diminishing emotional expression and ascribing it to women, Black people, and indigenous populations everywhere (Wynters, Holland 2012). Thus, the idea that Black women are particularly angry, expressive, and lacking in emotional control contributes to the reproduction of racism in society.

There are important implications for Black women performing race in sex work. Their work often involves confronting controlling images that naturalize and dehistoricize racial differences. The women I interviewed consented to their own fetishization by using controlling images to craft their personas. Oftentimes, these images clashed with what felt like their authentic personality in ways that felt harmful.

For people who struggle with economic insecurity and challenging social backgrounds, sex work is experienced as a space where Black women's anger is amplified and sold as a commodity. Consider Stella, for example, who described in detail the ways their mental health was challenged by performing racial stereotypes for a majority white client base. By acting in ways that did not align with their authentic personalities and upheld racial stereotypes, sex work diminished Stella's mental health, which was already impacted by precarious economic circumstances.

Advantaged sex workers also mobilized racial stereotypes for their work. Their class status granted them more flexibility to do work that they found more pleasurable–they were able to avoid client requests that felt demeaning. While sex work scholars point to pleasure as a positive feature of new forms of sex work, particularly for Black women (Miller-Young 2014, Jones 2020), pleasure does not negate the potential to reproduce racial hierarchies through sex work. Many of the advantaged women I spoke to mentioned finding pleasure in very essentialized notions of Black womanhood. Consider, for example, Brianna who reportedly found immense pleasure in the idea of being an exceptional caretaker which enabled her to provide white men with a "safe space" to explore their fetishization of Black women. While embodying racial stereotypes produced positive emotions and contributed to her sense of self, it also contributed to the reproduction of harmful racial stereotypes.

This finding speaks to pleasure-centric feminisms that criticize what they refer to as an overemphasis on violence and repression that replicates narrow views of Black sexuality (Hammonds 1994, Morgan 2015). Centering the potential for pleasure does allow us to acknowledge moments of agentic sexual agency, providing a more nuanced understanding of

Black sexuality. However, it is important to note that pleasure can also be derived from racialization in ways that maintain racial hierarchies.

Through an examination of Black women's intimate lives, I found that controlling images were pervasive and had significant consequences on both their relationships and feelings towards themselves. Consistent with the literature on controlling images, I found that Black women experience emotional harm from caregiving expectations that left them feeling drained and/or inadequate. I also found that controlling images create barriers to connection, as fear of being objectified in these ways causes exhaustion and avoidance in terms of romantic connection.

Controlling images impact Black women in their working lives even when they are not selling sex. For example, Sariah, an economically disadvantaged sex worker and Nicki, a relatively privileged gig worker, both described battling racialized expectations in previous occupations. Working in retail, Sariah was subject to racialized feeling rules that made it difficult to communicate with her manager without being labeled as angry or difficult. Nicki, who previously worked at a nonprofit, described how caregiving expectations depleted her to the point where she had to quit a job she was passionate about. Similar to experiences with intimacy, these work experiences demonstrate how racial capitalism essentializes race through controlling images.

Here we can see that controlling images perpetuate harm against Black women in work and romance. Therefore, the maintenance of controlling images through racial capitalism rationalizes participation in sex work. While most Black women experience objectification without consent or any personal gain, sex work offers the potential to leverage these harsh realities for money. Even when controlling images cause harm to women within sex work, they

point to the unpaid, nonconsensual harm they experience elsewhere to justify continued participation.

In addition to financial need, the realities of racial capitalism and fetishization create the context that makes sex work a more reasonable option for Black women. It is important to note that sex work is valid work. Anti-sex work often employs such questioning when attempting to frame sex work as something that is immoral, dangerous, and always dehumanizing. However, this project demonstrates the importance of examining motivators for pursuing sex work. Specifically, the question of why Black women would pursue highly racist and sexist work grants us insight into how race is operating in this current terrain of individualized intimacy.

Transformations in intimacy

In addition to racial capitalism, transformations in intimacy help to explain Black women's voluntary participation in sex work. As we know from cultural sociologists' analysis of the individualization of relationships under late capitalism (Hochschild 1983; Giddens 1992; Illouz 1997), as market forces converge with intimacy, emotional life is increasingly governed by economic considerations. In agreement with these theorists, I found that Black women were negatively impacted by the market logic they used to assess their relationships. While a couple of the sex workers I spoke to were in long term committed relationships, many rejected the idea of pursuing non-sex work relationships because they perceive them to be emotionally risky. Similarly, the gig workers employed cost-benefit analysis to assess their relationships which formed a barrier to deep and genuine connection.

The logic of sex work matches that of late capitalism through bounded intimacy. Sex work becomes justifiable and tolerable for Black women given the transformed landscape of intimacy, racial capitalism, and the relationship harm generated by both. The logic of sex work

also matches ideas about Black women that are constructed by racial capitalism through the creation of personas that naturalize and exaggerate racial difference. However, I argue that Black women also pursue sex work because it mitigates some of the harm caused by misogynoir in dating. Newer forms of sex work do this by 1) mobilizing controlling images to challenge racism, 2) advocating for pleasurable work under capitalism, and 3) reducing expectations of romance given misogynoir and transformations in intimacy.

Personas, controlling images, and erotic critique

As I argued in chapter two, sex work enables this group to explore identity and desire while keeping in line with cultural expectations to be hardworking and financially self-reliant. Additionally, sex work opened avenues for bolstering their self-concepts through educating their clients and facilitating new experiences for them, reportedly aiding clients in their personal growth and development.

The personas they construct simultaneously endorse and reinscribe controlling images of Black women. In this case, the erotic is a space for racial identity meaning-making through the creation of these personas. The sex workers I spoke to often described their personas as something they experienced as being "deep down" inside them and always within them. Through their construction, sex workers negotiated meanings of race and sexuality. They critiqued sexual conservatism and restrictive body comportment that characterizes respectability politics' ideologies related to Black womanhood.

These personas are meaning-laden because they are negotiated in a pursuit of authenticity in an industry where race is amplified. Race scholars argue that social actors strive for authenticity or "realness" by defining the boundaries of Blackness. By choosing which tropes to amplify and embrace in their personas, they are participating in the making of Black racial

identity. The more advantaged women took pride in drawing from cultural repertoires of Black identity and personal history, maintaining personas that highlight their strength and caregiving capabilities. In agreement with scholars who work in Black erotics, I find that there is pleasure in performing race under certain circumstances (Cruz 2012, Nash 2014). Through their self-authored fetishization, sex work offers these women something more sustaining and satisfying that most industries (and relationships) fail to provide them: pleasure from expectations related to being a Black woman. While previous research argues that pleasure is derived from one's ability to profit off their race (Miller-Young 2014), I argue that pleasure also comes from garnering appreciation for their Blackness that they do not often encounter in their lives outside of sex work.

While this project demonstrates the potential for social reproduction through stereotypes, I also found that sex work contains possibilities for the reinscription of racial meanings in ways that challenge racial hierarchies. Most of the women I spoke to expressed a deterministic and natural view of Black women identity, but they also performed race in ways that directly challenged white supremacy and patriarchy. For example, college-educated women like Kima and Lisa used their hyper-racialized sex worker positionalities to challenge their white male clients to think about white privilege, male privilege, and women's subordinate position in society. While they work with personas that utilizes SBW stereotypes, they do so from a critical perspective that seeks to disrupt white supremacist logics. By alerting white male clients to the ways they may contribute to racial and gender inequality, they actively challenge racism and sexism. Far from the Mammy/Matriarch trope that naturalized and demonized ideas about Black women as caretakers, the personas that are gleaned from these images are experienced as pleasurable and meaningful for understanding what it means to be a Black woman in the U.S. As

demonstrated by many of the sex workers who were interviewed for this project, this erotic critique expands to other power regimes including heteronormativity and toxic masculinity.

As stated throughout this project, sex work scholars argue that pleasure can be acquired through profiting off controlling images (Miller-Young 2024, Nash 2014, Jones 2020). Building on this finding, I argue that the pleasure acquired through embodying controlling images disrupts the conceptualization of the term itself. According to Hill Collins, controlling images are "...images [that] are designed to make racism, sexism, poverty, and other forms of social injustice appear to be natural, normal, and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Collins 2024, 69). But what happens when Black women use these images to challenge those exact systems of oppression? While race might be naturalized in these situations, if sex workers are implicitly and explicitly challenging racial hierarchies, is racism also naturalized? Perhaps sex workers' reinscription of these images-- invigorating them with creativity, pleasure, and sexual agency-- calls for a deeper interrogation into the "controlling" nature of stereotypical images of Black women.

My argument here highlights a central tenet of critical race theory: that racism happens in the quotidian, in normal, everyday interactions between people (Delgado 2017). Considering how desire shapes meanings of race, Holland (2012) argues that race should not only be understood in terms of political, social, and economic structures but also as an erotic phenomenon. She argues that racism is deeply connected to pleasure, desire, and intimacy, which are often overlooked in traditional analyses of race. So, while I expand upon the ways sex work critiques broader power regimes of race, patriarchy and capitalism, the subversive potential of these erotic critiques during sex worker/client interactions should not be obscured.

Erotic critique and the pursuit of pleasure

Marxists argue that capitalism necessitates the sacrifice of pleasure. By committing to work they find pleasurable, the most advantaged women in this project break away from capitalistic distinctions between work and play. They spend significant time on the parts of their work they enjoy and prioritize requests and solicitations that bring them pleasure. However, sex work enables this exploration into pleasure and sexual identity because sex work matches the logic of late capitalism. Thus, their experiences reveal how pleasure is a regulatory regime of power under race and capitalism.

They articulated finding pleasure in their work through emotional catharsis, as the feeling rules of sex work allowed them to express anger in a space where it is appreciated and profitable. They also expressed vindication after experiencing exploitation and racialized feeling rules in previous jobs and in some cases, abuse in previous intimate relationships.

Pleasure is revealed as a motivation to get into sex work–a motivation that, for the more disadvantaged sex workers, is amplified by negative experiences of misogynoir in the arenas that converge in sex work: work and intimacy. In terms of work, sex work offers them flexibility and control over their working conditions. Unlike their previous jobs, mostly in service industries where poor Black women are overrepresented, sex work gave them license to express their feelings freely and get rewarded for them. They also made their own hours, and for many, working from home shielded them from misogynoir that is pervasive for working Black women.

Relationship expectations within bounded intimacy

Bernstein (2004) argues that the expansion of sexual commerce allows for bounded intimacy that meets the individualistic demands of modern society. The benefits of sex work are indicative of late capitalism's shift in intimacy in which relationships become calculated ties that

are assessed through a cost-benefit analysis of what the relationship has to offer the individual (Hochschild 1997; Giddens 1992; Illouz 1997). While cultural sociologists and sex work scholars have identified how all relationships are implicated under capitalism, I explored how Black women's intimate relationships are implicated under racial capitalism.

Both sex workers and gig workers participate in cost-benefit analysis about their dating relationships. This attitude is reflected in their conversations about financial expectations in relationships and their desire to be compensated for their intimate labor. However, what distinguishes the sex workers from the gig workers is their acknowledgement and acceptance of this reality. Sex workers embrace the flattening of relationships through modern capitalism and respond by putting a price on their intimate labor. Not all the sex workers I spoke to formed relationships with regulars, not all interactions with clients lead to relationship formation. However, those that did (particularly dommes and sugar babies) appreciated the clear terms for connection that sex work had to offer.

In contrast, the gig workers loathed the calculated nature of modern dating, even if their dating behaviors endorsed it. While discussing expectations in relationships, the women I spoke to admitted that they sought out romantic connections that offered them recompense for emotional and sexual *labor* they were expected to give. Their thoughts reflect feminist concerns that modern capitalism turns *all* forms of relating to labor that needs to be bought and sold.

Sex work offers a critique to capitalism by troubling the distinction between pleasure and work. But what alleviates the pains of modern romance is that sex work matches demands for individualization and calculated social ties under capitalism (Bernstein 2007). So, while expectations for romance leads to dissatisfaction for most, the nature of sex work allows Black

women to have what seem to be more reasonable and achievable expectations for intimacy under capitalism.

This may seem like a sad reality, particularly based on a Marxist perspective that acknowledges how everyone is turned into objects under capitalism. We must also consider Black women's objectification as it has been maintained historically throughout various shifts in intimacy. Intimacy is precisely the area of life where Black women have historically experienced the most harm. Considering Black women's history of domestic exploitation, disproportionate rates of intimate partner violence and death caused by romantic partners[16], and failing mental health of Black women due to expectations of self-sacrificial caretaking (Woods-Giscombé 2010, Erving et al 2024)–perhaps the monetization of relationships has something unique to offer Black women. As a group culture bounded by expectations of service, the commodification of relationships can offer ways to break free from controlling images that demand self-sacrificial service in intimacy. Perhaps through modern capitalism's demand for individualization, Black women can begin to free themselves from the sociohistorical bonds of controlling images that threaten their ability to self-identify and pursue their own needs in relationships.

Again, sex work is no utopia for Black women. Sex work is still an industry where race is commodified in ways that naturalize racism/sexism and promote white supremacy. However, through monetizing their intimate and sexual services, some Black women can experience recompense through late capitalism's demand for individualism that directly contrasts the forced self-sacrificial abnegation demanded by Black women's racialization.

Conclusion: Power and pleasure

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[16] https://www.publichealth.columbia.edu/news/black-women-u-s-murdered-six-times-more-often-white-women

The transformed industry of sex work offers women options to experience pleasure in sexual labor (Nash 2014, Miller-Young 2014, Jones 2020). Misogynoir shapes women's experiences in work and romance, as exposure to racialized sexual preferences, expectations, and double standards produce emotional loads that cause harm and suffering. The sex workers and gig workers acknowledged the mistreatment they have experienced as low wage workers in various industries. The more disadvantaged sex workers in particular spoke to the potential emotional and physical dangers faced by Black women who are more likely to experience abuse and exploitation in intimate relationships. A comparison between sex workers and gig workers revealed that the misogynoir faced by Black women in dating is so inevitable that sex work–an extremely racist and sexist industry–becomes a more reasonable option because they are at least paid for the intimate labor and objectification that they otherwise experience for free. Given these realities, what does it mean for Black women to be seeking pleasure in work and advocating for pleasure in romance? An analysis of Black women in sex work exposes pleasure as a regulatory regime that reproduces capitalism.

Scholars of sexuality have long argued that societies regulate sex to deny pleasure and human freedom (Foucault 1990, McClintock 1993). Why else would the government attempt to limit sex work despite the billions in revenue the industry generates? As Jones (2020) argues, it is because "societies are built around forcing people (often violently) to sacrifice pleasure" (238). This project understands pleasure has a regulatory function, and there is social pressure to acquire pleasure in normative ways. Like Gayle Rubin's charmed circle that distinguishes between normatively "good" and "bad" sex, I argue that there also exists charmed circle for pleasure, in which "good" pleasure includes pleasure that is earned through work, that is only obtained from working hard towards productive activities, usually paid labor. Thus, we are

encouraged to work hard, to earn money, to then spend that money on pleasure and leisure activities. The idea that pleasure and work are equal in importance disrupts consumerism's necessary claim that pleasure should be reserved for people who appropriate it in the normatively correct ways.

Consider the argument posed by Zelizer in *The Meaning of Money*, where she identifies the social sanctions placed on poor people who would spend public welfare pensions on pleasurable purchases like going to the movies or buying gifts for their children (1994). While her argument focuses on the moral character of money and efforts to control the "incompetent poor" through the supervision and restriction of money, I would like to highlight the regulatory function of pleasure promoted by capitalism. Under meritocratic capitalistic logic, pleasure is for the hardworking (read: rich). When undeserving (read: poor) people experience pleasure, it becomes problematic.

If capitalism demands the sacrifice of pleasure, then those who are the most marginalized are expected to sacrifice the most. Thus, Black women seeking pleasurable experiences points to new options for bodily autonomy in our current society that is characterized by individualism, in which new ideologies of romantic love endorse flexibility and personal development over sustainability and interdependence.

Methods Appendix:

Risky Disclosures

Research Methods in Sexualities

Sexuality scholars have pointed out that sex is a subjugated knowledge within the academy-particularly when the research is qualitative, exploratory, and not on the topic of public health (Cruz 2016, Meadows 2018, Wachter-Grene 2016). In attempting to study sex from a perspective that departs from positivistic conventions, researchers have exposed themselves to critiques that claim that their work is unserious, politically motivated, and subjective (Meadows 2018; Robinson 2022). Part of the innovation in Black feminist methodology is leaning into rather than away from the messiness of being a racialized sexual subject studying race and sex. Considering possibilities within Black feminist studies, Nash (2019) uses the term "risky disclosure" to describe how Black feminist theorists such as Christine Sharpe, Nicole Fleetwood, and others mobilize their writing to make others *feel*.

In an effort to engage the vulnerability and personal experiences that were essential to the formation of this project, here I articulate my own "risky disclosure" through a reflection of my own subjectivity that made this study possible. The methodological considerations that were made throughout this project demonstrate the potential for embodied research to understand identity and relationships. I developed the questions for this project through a reflexive interrogation of my own experiences being solicited as a sex worker.

The idea for this dissertation emerged through a random exchange with a stranger on a dating app. This conversation took place during my first year of graduate school. I was 22 years old and had just moved to a new place where I had no previous connections. Perhaps like most young single people in this predicament, I was active on various apps in pursuit of connection.

One day as I was casually scrolling on the dating app Tinder, I came across this peculiar profile whose picture was just a generic sunset. The only words in the bio were "paypig, findom sub." I remember being curious about those descriptors, so I swiped right to accept the connection. Thus began my first introduction to the world of financial domination.

I started the conversation simply by asking, "what is a paypig?" The stranger behind the profile responded, complimenting my profile pictures, explaining to me that his dream would be to "serve" a Black woman, pleading with me to make him my "white sissy bitch." He wanted to pay me for this service.

At the time when I met the paypig, my exposure to BDSM and sex work were quite limited. First, I questioned why someone would pay for what I considered to be harsh and disrespectful treatment. Quickly, through BDSM social media scrolling and academic reading on the topic, that question became less puzzling. The question I could not so easily resolve was, "why me?" To my eye, nothing in my profile suggested that I worked as a sex worker. As I reflected on that conversation, I thought about controlling images of Black women and felt offended. I felt my defensiveness grow as I acknowledged my own fetishization, and his assumption that I could enact the anger and aggression that he described in his long response to my question. I also couldn't deny my interest in the possibility of consensually acting on the anger that I typically felt bubble up whenever I dwell on the objectification and dehumanization made possible by white supremacy. The pleasure I felt towards that possibility produced feelings of guilt and curiosity. How could I begin to understand these ambivalent feelings?

Through this line of questioning and self-reflection, I began to think about the implications of new forms of sex work for Black women and how it contained possibilities for emotional pain and pleasure. When I described the conversation to my peers, some found it

repulsive, while others rooted for me to try it out. Could it feel good to "punish" this random white man as a metonymy for patriarchy and racism? What does it mean that doing so would require me to perform racialized expectations for this man? Who would really be in control? Whose pleasure would be centered? I thought about Black women who were less like me (less educated and not upwardly mobile), and I wondered how they might react to such a solicitation. Thus, this interrogation of my own emotions and positionality while being solicited for this type of work was the welter of material from which arose my research question.

Recruitment

The core of this project is based on 65 interviews with Black women ages 18-40, 40 with women who identify as sex workers and 25 in non-sex work gig economy type jobs (such as food delivery, carpool services, and TaskRabbit). To control for class, I conducted about half of the interviews from each group with participants who have at least a Bachelors' degree for a total of 4 groups: 20 sex workers who are college educated and 20 sex workers who are not, 15 gig workers who are college educated and 10 gig workers workers who are not. Most of my recruitment took place on social media sites, Twitter, Reddit, and FetLife which is a popular social media site for kinksters.[17]

I used a variety of search terms to look for accounts belonging to Black women sex workers. Some of the most successful search terms on Twitter included "ebony GFE," "ebony fetish," "Only fans model," and "erotic content creator." I would then send direct messages to profiles of women who seemed to be selling sexual services. Most of my messages were ignored, which is reasonable given how packed sex workers' inboxes can be with requests more lucrative

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[17] Kinky people who practice BDSM and fetish play.

than mine, which only offered a $25 gift card for their time and energy. A handful of people responded, perhaps annoyed that I was requesting an hour of their time, for which they would typically charge much more. I found myself having to clarify that I was not a client, but a student interested in Black women's experiences, and that the gift card was not payment, but a token of appreciation for their time and insights.

To reach Black women with gig economy type jobs who are actively dating, I also recruited through virtual support spaces. Virtual flyers for this project stated that participants must have an active profile on at least one online dating platform to indicate that they meet the participation criteria. I posted flyers in public online forums such as Facebook groups designated as "Black women only" spaces.

In recent years, media studies scholars have begun to unpack the social meanings behind closed, female-focused Facebook groups. In response to unwelcoming and hostile online environments, scholars have found that women seek to create "digital safe havens" in the form of closed groups (Yeshua-Katz & Segersta 2020). These are groups where women can connect, find information and share experiences in a more private space. Closed groups can also reinforce social identities. For example, in studies on Facebook groups for mothers, scholars have found that these groups can bolster maternal identity (Madge and O'Connor 2006), offer women relief from normative gender and mothering expectations (Johnson 2015), and serve as important sources of trustworthy information (Xie et al 2021). Black women-only spaces serve a similar function and have effects on racial identity (Bailey 2021). Sampling from these online communities allowed me to include Black women who are similar to the sex workers in the sample: they have gig economy jobs that are similarly freelance, precarious, and service-oriented and they use online spaces to find supportive communities. By controlling job-type, usage of

social media, and participation in intimate relationships, I was able to focus on the effects of sex work on racial identity.

Ethnography and being the outsider within

Sexuality scholars have argued that ethnography allows Black sexuality studies to theorize with Black sexual subjects (Allen 2011; Moore 2011; Miller Young 2014). In *Venceremos*, for example, Allen relies on critical interrogation of his own experiences of being a gay Black man in Cuba, using what he refers to as critical ethnography that "uses empirical methodologies to critique cultural formations and social practices that restrain freedom or prevent the full participation in social and political life of those who occupy marginalized identities" (Allen 2011, 636). By attending Exxxotica conventions, I was able to witness the racialized ways sex workers marketed themselves and interacted with potential clients in a space of restrained freedom.

Over the last few years, I've attended four Exxxotica conventions in DC and New Jersey where I recruited for interviews, collected observational data, and connected with like-minded performers, educators, and industry professionals all interested in the exploration of sexuality. According to their website, Exxxotica hosts the largest adult events in the US dedicated to erotica. While the average attendance for these events vary, Exxxotica DC generally sees several thousand attendees over the course of the weekend, and the event in New Jersey is even larger, as it draws performers and spectators from New York and the surrounding areas. The events feature porn stars, cam girls, live entertainment, and vendor booths that sell sex toys and related adult products. There are also various seminars on "lifestyle" topics, including beginner BDSM

discussions and demonstrations, kinky relationship advice, and discussions led by experts on how to "break into" the industry.

When I decided that I wanted to go to these conventions, I was not sure what to expect. I had never attended any kind of BDSM, or lifestyle event and I was very nervous. The first one I attended was in 2021; I had come straight to D.C. from my Friday afternoon discussion section, and I was dressed like a responsible teaching assistant. Once I got there, I saw a mix of casual and fetish wear. I immediately felt out of place and a bit overwhelmed by crowds and happenings to watch and take note of. I remember shyly leaving study flyers on the tables of Black women who were there as vendors. I felt stuffy in my business casual clothing– I awkwardly handed some women flyers, and they awkwardly accepted them. I circled around the huge convention center for hours, taking notes, attending seminars, and watching demonstrations before heading back to my hotel room. I decided that I needed to make more of an attempt to blend in.

The next day, I waited in the long line that formed outside of the venue, dressed in what I would consider to be a mix of casual and fetish wear. It was mid-morning and there were hundreds of people waiting to get in as the chilly December wind started to pick up. That was when I heard a man's voice repeatedly yelling, "Vendors move to the right!" He gestured towards a shorter line of vendors, mainly camgirls and performers, being ushered inside while the rest of the attendees continued to wait outside the convention center. I heard the man calling again, this time louder and impatiently, "Ma'am, vendors need to move to the right!" It took me a while to realize he was talking to me, as I was dressed in fishnets and a short black dress that only was a tad longer than my small, fitted trench coat. I was confused, but went along with it, mainly to get out of the cold.

From that moment on, my experience at Exxxotica was completely different from the day before. I felt more confident and at ease and others were more friendly with me too. For example, I went to one seminar led by a Black male porn star who introduced me to three of his Black women porn industry friends after I got to chatting with him about what I was studying. I noticed how quickly I was able to "break the ice" with vendors after we complimented each other's hair and outfits. Like other sexuality scholars and ethnographers (Chapkis 1997; Bernstein 2011; Jones 2022), I noticed how my own sexual presentation granted me access to spaces and people who I otherwise would not have been able to meet. By the end of the day, I was invited to two BDSM/industry parties, one of which I attended, and I was able to meet sex workers and other gatekeepers that helped me recruit for this project.

The interviews

Because I am interested in questions of meaning and identity, interviewing was the most appropriate method of data collection. Feminist researchers emphasize interviews over other qualitative methods because interviews give more control over voice on the part of the participants and allow for maximum discovery on the part of the researcher (Oakley 1981). In-depth interviewing allows for us to access beliefs and feelings towards identity which are often messy and contradictory (Pugh 2013). This is particularly important for understanding Black identities-which are often constructed and enacted in spaces where cultural values often contradict white homonormative values and assumptions. Specifically, in-depth interviewing allows us to access "meta-feelings," or feelings about one's feelings. Therefore, in-depth interviewing is the best method for understanding someone's feelings towards their sexual and racial identities. The interviews consisted of questions about paid and unpaid work, their

feelings toward their work, how racial identity is manifested in their relationships, considering where sexual identities and work identities converge and where they are separate. The final interview schedule was informed by pilot interviews with sex workers, including some of my own peers who have experience in the industry.

Data analysis

Because sex work is a fairly new literature in sociology, using a grounded theory approach (Allan 2003; Charmaz 2014) helped me to create new theory drawing from the lived experiences of Black women. I have used this approach in previous research on racial and sexual minority students' engagement with college hookup culture (Baker 2023). I transcribed each interview and went through two cycles of coding to analyze the data using Dedoose. In the first round I looked for emerging themes and concepts. Then, I used these emerging concepts and codes to conduct a second round of line-by-line coding for each of these initial codes. This cycle was incredibly useful in revealing common themes about participants' sexual relationships and how racial identity operates within them.

As a practice of researcher reflexivity, I took reflexive notes after each interview. In these short notes, I wrote down my first reactions towards the interview and described what felt interesting and important about them. I also wrote about my own emotional experience throughout the conversations. When I compare the notes from my first several interviews with the ones written towards the end of this project, it is clear that my own attitude towards Black women in sex work shifted quite drastically. At the beginning, I happened to interview more women who were doing well–having fun and insightful experiences with clients. I was excited by the potential of sex work to provide Black women with more options to experience pleasure

and appreciation for themselves in their work lives. I was particularly captivated by the dommes for their creativity and boldness, and the pleasure they seemingly demanded from their work. I have to admit that over time, my perspective became increasingly critical. I remember a year into data collection, I had a series of devastating interviews. These interviews were with women who I placed in both the advantaged and disadvantaged groups. I remember feeling ill-equipped to handle the stories of violence, sexual assault, and deeply internalized shame that colored these women's stories. I felt heartbroken for the women who justified any pain by saying they were accustomed to disappointment and mistreatment in romance anyways. My feelings intensified after interviewing the gig workers who corroborated what the sex workers said about Black women's mistreatment in sex and dating. Completing this project required sitting with a well of sadness that I, perhaps naively, did not anticipate.

I realize that my initial excitement was also based in my own deep yearning to see Black women in empowered positions experiencing pleasure and agency in their own bodies. In the spirit of Evelyn Hammonds and Joan Morgan, I desperately wanted to articulate a Black sexual subjectivity based in agency and pleasure–one that was not devastatingly impacted by racism. I did not find what I wanted to find. I did, however, find important truths about Black women's resistance to their subjugation through sexuality. It was necessary to acknowledge the devastating nature of racial capitalism and misogynoir to fully articulate and appreciate Black women's continued survival.

Ethical Considerations

There are certain ethical considerations that are important to address when asking people sensitive questions about sex and racial identity. To safeguard the comfort and dignity of my

research participants, I made sure that I indicated neutrality and openness in my self-presentation (Connell 2018). Because my sampling includes sex workers and people engaging in gray market sexual economies, it was essential to seriously consider the safety and privacy of participants. Even in the current US-context with increased acceptability, people publicly exposed as sex workers could face severe (and sometimes life-threatening) consequences (Sinha 2014). While considering the ethical and safety issues in doing sex work research, Sinha (2017) argues that the physical environment in which research interviews are conducted is an essential aspect in ensuring privacy and respect for the participants. To mitigate issues with insecure locations, I conducted interviews virtually, which gave participants more control over their surroundings. I asked them to choose a location for the Zoom call where they would feel comfortable talking about their sexual relationships. Although virtual interviews present a challenge for researchers (Oltmann 2016; Gruber et al 2021), new studies suggest that this mode of data collection can be just as insightful and may even come with some benefits (Cech et al 2020). Participants may feel more comfortable talking about sensitive topics in their homes where they have more control over their physical environment (Lo Iacono et al 2016).

Conclusion

Jennifer Nash argues that by situating ourselves in the text, often in risky and vulnerable ways, Black women theorists are able to interrogate aspects of Black women's subjectivity and ask what would otherwise be "unknowable" through erasure and disciplinary convention (Nash 2019, 103). Considering memoirs, she acknowledges the risks involved what she calls writing "beautifully," or in critically subjective ways:

"...its refusal to embrace fictions of neutrality and objectivity, comes at deep costs for black women in particular, whose emotions are constantly policed and regulated, and whose intellectual competencies are regularly questioned…Yet part of what makes the writing that I am invested in beautiful is its willful risk taking, its sense that there are risks worth taking, and that this risk taking is a constitutive political and aesthetic project of black feminist theory"

There were several aspects of this project that felt emotionally risky: from telling my dissertation committee about my interest in sex work and BDSM, to sharing study flyers on social media that were visible to my sexually conservative family members, to writing this section where I acknowledge how my own sexuality gave me access to my group of interest. Yet throughout, I felt empowered by queer sexualities researchers (Meadows 2018, Robertson 2020, Jones 2020), and my own participants who graciously took the emotional risk of sharing the details of their intimate lives with me. I felt honored to hold their stories and felt that the least I could do was be honest about my own.

In this overview of the methods used for this project, I hope to have demonstrated the utility of embodied research practices. From developing my question, to creating my interview schedule, it was essential to practice reflexivity, constantly monitoring my presentation to avoid creating unnecessary distance between myself and my participants. Because of the similarities between me and many of the women I interviewed, it was perhaps more challenging to continuously acknowledge our differences and to not make assumptions based on my own perceptions of our shared social location. However, through reflective practices, I was able to learn about the making of race in sex work while challenging myself to embrace the messiness of

simultaneous anger, alienation, and the attempts to find pleasure and agency within misogynoir

and capitalism.

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