



# The plight of the black Belle Knox: race and webcam modelling

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To cite this article: Robert L. Reece (2015) The plight of the black Belle Knox: race and webcam modelling, *Porn Studies*, 2:2-3, 269-271, DOI: [10.1080/23268743.2015.1054672](https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2015.1054672)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2015.1054672>



Published online: 07 Sep 2015.



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## FORUM

### The plight of the black Belle Knox: race and webcam modelling

When a Duke University freshman revealed in early 2014 that she worked as an adult film actress to help pay her tuition, a media firestorm ensued as people were forced to deal with the collision of white, upwardly mobile feminine respectability and stereotypes about porn actresses. But the Duke freshman porn star, Miriam Weeks aka Belle Knox,<sup>1</sup> leveraged her story to secure a part in an online reality show and a sex toy line, while major news outlets framed her as an advocate for both sex worker rights and the almost inevitable result of rising college tuition on students (Shire 2014). However, the unspoken racial undercurrents of her story have yet to be examined and beg a number of questions: how would a black Belle Knox experience the adult film industry? How would the media frame the experience of a black woman who has sex for money to pay for an elite college education?

The work of scholars such as Mirielle Miller-Young (2010) and Patricia Hill Collins (2000) suggest that Knox's story – being secretly carted to porn sets and becoming a media darling – seems unlikely for a black woman. Black women are consistently valued less than white women in the adult film industry, and a black woman's ability to convince a production company to cooperate with such a complicated travel and film schedule seems limited. Additionally, the media would probably draw on negative stereotypes of black women's sexuality to frame her experience less positively – despite the fact that black students' struggles to fund college can be much more acute than their white counterparts because of significantly less family wealth and income. But internet technologies offer a way for black women students to claim their share of the estimated \$1 billion adult film industry to supplement their income and pay tuition without relying on major adult production companies or risking the stigma of working in the mainstream adult industry.

Most mainstream pornography is shot in only a few locations, hence the need for Belle Knox to travel from Durham, North Carolina, to Los Angeles to participate. Knox's trips were funded by her agent (Fernelius 2014), but other women, particularly black women, struggling to afford college are unlikely to receive the good favour of a generous benefactor, severely limiting their opportunities to participate in the mainstream porn industry. The internet, however, offers a potential solution to this geographic dispersion, one that academics have largely neglected to examine. Studies of internet porn, and sex work and the internet more generally, almost universally fail to address how race shapes the ways that performers experience the industry. On the rare occasion that race is examined, the research does not fully explore the internet's effect on sex work. In a previous study, I sought to expand research on internet sex work through an analysis of in-depth interviews with black women, text and video content from websites, and discussions in online forums (Reece and Walker, n.d.). I examined the archetype of internet sex work: webcam modelling, an industry in

which performers live-stream sexual performances (generally solo performances) over the internet in exchange for payment.

Webcam modelling – or camming – epitomizes internet sex work because it cannot exist without the internet. Unlike pornography or prostitution, both of which are enhanced and expanded by the internet, webcam modelling typifies how technology has expanded the adult industry in ways that are more compatible with participation by traditional college students, especially black students. While Belle Knox (2014) claims that she is able to pay her tuition through the adult film industry because ‘Demand for porn actresses, especially extremely young ones like [herself], far exceeds supply’, Miller-Young demonstrates that the opposite is true for black women, who are ‘systematically positioned in spaces and roles of lesser importance to white women, who are valued as the most prized commodities in the sexual marketplace of hardcore’ (2010, 220). Camming subverts the limitations of the traditional adult industry by allowing black women to avoid seeking employment with major agencies, which, in addition to the aforementioned stigma, can be difficult to forge relationships with. Camming also allows individuals to work from the relative safety and comfort of their homes. Aspiring webcam models can register at any number of camming websites and begin working very quickly. A number of respondents in my study reported that, similar to Belle Knox, their camming careers began as a means to supplement their incomes while in college. But in contrast to Knox, many respondents explicitly disparaged work in the mainstream adult film industry, because they recognized the ways in which their opportunities were limited by the very things Knox and the media take for granted. Respondents expressed a desire to work autonomously from home and to avoid what they perceived as subpar treatment of black women in the adult film industry, including low and inconsistent pay and an implicit requirement to perform scenes that they viewed as more degrading, involving a wider variety of sex acts. While Knox (2014) reports being stigmatized during her job as a stripper because she also works in porn, her whiteness shields her from the negative effects of racial stigma, and thus neither she nor any of the writers commenting on her story ever discuss it.

In addition to offering webcam performers greater freedom, the internet also offers models the opportunity to be completely independent and test their entrepreneurial ability apart from the major cam sites, allowing them to maximize their income. Elizabeth Bernstein comments on this entrepreneurial freedom in her discussion of internet sex work by arguing that, ‘For women who are able to bring technological skill and experience to sex work, it is increasingly possible to work without third-party management ...’ (2007, 497). Although Bernstein is correct that online sex workers need technical skills – which often shuts the door on black women, who are less likely to have the necessary technical ability, particularly if they are just beginning college – a string of online businesses now exists to assist internet sex workers with these entrepreneurial ventures.

These sex work adjacent businesses assist webcam models by offering services, such as web design, that require technical ability models may lack. In this way, they lower the educational cost of working independently by relieving performers of the burden of acquiring a new series of technical skills. This allows black women students to jump into the trade and succeed with minimal technical difficulty. One of my respondents, who holds a bachelor’s degree in literature, cammed full-time for eight years after entering the industry as a college student. Her longevity is attributed, in part, to sex work

adjacent businesses that allowed her to establish an independent website and work as a full-time webcam model despite receiving little technical training as an undergraduate.

Belle Knox's story shows what happens when an elite university education, a career in sex work and whiteness intersect. For Knox, the returns have been astounding. She has benefited enormously from an industry that privileges white women at the expense of black women, while black women – who on average suffer more acutely from the rapid increase of college tuition – often cannot imitate Knox's path. Fortunately, the growth of webcam modelling offers black women seeking to enter the adult industry an avenue by which they can circumvent some of the barriers they might otherwise face in the traditional porn industry. Through webcam modelling and the use of sex work adjacent businesses, black women can avoid the pressures and intra-industry stigma of mainstream porn employment. They can also become entrepreneurs in their own right. And while most of them will never have a reality show, a sex toy line or be featured in *Time* magazine, camming offers them the opportunity to supplement their college educations and begin possibly fruitful careers in the adult industry or another of their choosing.

### Note

1. I use her porn alias 'Belle Knox' in this paper. I cite a number of pieces she published in media outlets. Sometimes her by-line reads 'Miriam Weeks'; other times it reads 'Belle Knox'. Where I cite her in text, I credit her as Belle Knox for the sake of consistency, but the reference section reflects how she chose to credit herself in each essay.

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