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Let's Talk About Porn : An Interview

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Sara McClean interviews independent gay porn performers: Colby Keller and Dale Cooper --both of whom call Baltimore home. We sit down to talk with them about pornography as a career, its gender and feminist implications, the strengths and limitations of porn as a profession, sex worker organizing and workplace protections, and the role of porn in sexual health.

Dale Cooper Colby Keller Interview -- June 23, 2013

Sara: This is June 23rd and we're hanging out with two independent porn performers, I don't know how else you would say that, [they are] Dale Cooper and Colby Keller. And we just have a

few questions, to get some information from you guys and talk about porn as a profession and what that means in terms of feminism and queerness and how those things relate. It's mostly a selfish project (for me) because I know you guys and I know you're both smart and articulate and you've got a lot of interesting things to say about this; so it gives me an "in" to talk about it some more. We'll just start with: how you both got into the profession, what drew you to it, and how'd you get to this career?

Dale: Hi guys, this is Dale. Well, I actually did my first one (porn video) when I was in college. It's kind of a long story, but I was going to do this biking trip and you had to fundraise for it. I had a donor back out at the last minute and I had to make up the money, so I did that that once in college and was like, "that was fun."

S: So how'd you get connected to it? How'd you even know you could do that?

D: I found that one on Craigslist, kind of sketchily (laughs). Yeah, it was super fun. Craigslist adult section. Providence, where I lived at the time, is kind of known as a little sex city. It attracts a lot of conventions and stuff like that.

S: Is it legal there? Is porn legal there?

D: No, actually. There are very few places where...

Colby: I think full frontal stripping is (legal) though, right?

D: In Rhode Island? I'm not sure about that.

S: That's something we can doublecheck.¹

D: Yeah, we'll have to look it up. But anyway, more recently, when I started doing it more professionally, I was introduced through my friend Colby Keller here (woooo!). I had wanted to do something more to supplement my income, and then it became my sole source of income. So, I've been relying on that pretty heavily since then. It's good to have a connection, I guess. So yeah, that's me.

S: Ok, and Colby?

C: Well, I've been in the business for a *very* long time...

S: You're a veteran.

C: Yes. Which in porn terms translates to about ten years. I started, let's see, I think I had just graduated college with a degree that I use to this day but is not very useful in making money, and that's an anthropology degree (laughs).

S: It's related to your current profession though.

C: Yes, (laughs) it's completely related. And that's part of the reason I think I'm actually compelled by porn, intellectually at least. I graduated with this degree and I could not find work to save my life. [We] had one of... how many recessions have we had now? I don't think we've been out of a recession since then, so I couldn't find a job. And one night, I was just, compelled to send in an application to my favorite porn site. Totally just on a whim, thinking that they would reject me, and

that would prove something to myself, I don't know what (laughs). It was one of those weird moments. And the opposite thing happened, and they called me back. And I had to ask myself a lot of serious questions, like would I do it? Should I do it since I sent in the application? All these things. And I did it and slowly have come to appreciate the income and it keeps me in the business.

D: It wasn't that slow. I appreciated that income real quick (snaps). (Laughs) Yeah we're actually both anthropology majors.

S: No kidding.

D: Yeah when we were first talking it's one of the first things that came up.

S: I mean, it does make sense actually, in an interesting way.

D: Yeah, maybe we should do a survey of sex workers and see what they studied. All humanities obviously cause we couldn't find jobs (laughs)

C: Or working class guys.

S: Right. Well the thing that I found that was interesting, and this is kind of going off script for a minute but, I kind of crowdsourced some questions for the interview, I put on facebook, "I'm going to interview some porn performers, what questions do you have, what topics?" I actually got some responses from people off-list, private messages, telling me that they had participated in porn previously as an unpaid thing, like amateur porn. And there was a lot of discussion about why people choose porn as a career. And do people choose it because they're broke and they don't have other outlets? Or what part of it is, well I don't want to state too heavily the economic exploitation part, but what part is economic exploitation, what part is just having a job? Those don't necessarily imply the same thing, and...

C: Well the thing is, why do you become a doctor? You need income.

S: Exactly.

C: I think that's the kind of question that reveals more about the prejudice that people have about the type of work that it is. Well and also, you're not allowed to escape from work, ever. I mean, not in the system we have. So why isn't it considered a legitimate job?

D: Yes, but in the vocational sense, in the way that like being a doctor is a vocation and it's something that you come to and feel that you have a calling to work with other people, like I guess porn could be construed as a vocation.

S: Yes, that was my question.

D: But I know for me personally, yeah, I just see it as a way to earn income. in college I was pretty active and we had a sex club within the university. Which isn't as scandalous as it sounds. It means we got together and invited porn performers to talk or [when] the sex workers art show which was traveling, which was really cool, [it] would come by and we'd watch famous porn and talk about it afterward. So I always had the impression that porn was essentially a form of manual labor, and being in it, I've been doing it more or less "professionally" for the past two years and that's only reinforced that: it's just a job that requires your body to be in a certain condition.

C: Well it's interesting, because I definitely consider it a job and do it for income, but I feel like sometimes that almost feels a little bit like an excuse that I'm making. It's not fair to the other kind of creative, intellectual, anti-intellectual motivations that I have for doing it. And sexual motivations. I almost feel like I use the job part as an excuse, like, "Oh no, I'm not really some sexual nymphomaniac, I just need the money!" But that's not true. There's part of it that I find sexually appealing.

S: And satisfying...

C: And satisfying on a lot of different levels. And so in that sense, it is more of a vocation. I come to find it is a lot more like a vocation than a job. Cause trust me, there are a lot of ways to make more money in the world than porn, including other types of sex work, which most performers do, and which I don't. So for me, it does feel like it's about a little bit more than just the money.

S: So what do you think those distinctions are between porn and other types of sex work?

D: Well I guess just based off in terms of what the actual, physical, job requires, porn as a genre has very specific types of scripts that go along with it. It has things like cameras, it has things like microphone, the actors, the producers. There is a script that you follow, not necessarily like a paper script, but there is a ritual that everyone involved goes through in creating porn...

C: It's like a lot of other forms of film, there are tropes that get replayed over and over, and it just goes from like, well in gay porn, sucking, eating ass, fucking, three positions, come. And who in real life has sex like that? (laughs)

D: That being said, the other larger category of sex work is prostitution, which I also personally do not do, I've dabbled in it, it wasn't my thing. I mean, it's kind of hard to describe. In that the relation between the person (at least for me personally), between the person who is paying money to someone who is prostituting themselves, there's a very different power dynamic and there's a very different sort of feeling of control that you have in that environment or at least that I've felt personally. Versus being on a a porn set where I am conscious of this as a performance, I have agreed to do this willingly...

C: ...and both you and your scene partner are getting paid money by a third party. It's a very different...

S: ...the person who's paying you the money isn't the one who's receiving sexual favor...

D: Exactly. And there's forms, and there's certain codes of conduct, I mean, we're not unionized, I wish to hell we were...

S: Well that was my question (laughs)...

D: I will talk your ear off about sex worker unions. Yeah, at least for me personally, that's the biggest change, is that sense of power and control. They're both pretty performative I would say. I don't know if you had anything to add, Colby.

C: Well, I feel, I have very strong opinions about this and I feel like I almost have to keep them to myself a lot of the time because I've never done that type of sex work. I don't consider my type of sex work remarkably different from that. Well I mean, it is. They're (porn and prostitution) very

distinct things. They're differentiated. I don't want it to sound like I think my type of sex work is better. It's different. We need to have sex worker solidarity, all sex workers of all stripes.

But, well one thing I don't like about it, I think when you're prostituting, escorting I guess, we'll use that word, your sexuality is kind of owned by this possessor. And it is for me[as well] in porn for the two days every two months that I do it. But if you're an escort, you're probably working every week, every weekend, and that is your sex life. It's your job. And it's really kind of like, and I get this even with porn, it's like an emptying feeling, when that thing that is so fundamental to your humanity, you have to give it to someone else. You're doing it willingly, but it's, through force almost because you need the money. And for me, psychologically and emotionally, I don't think I could cope with that, on a consistent basis anyways.

S: So what you're saying in some ways, is that you think it's almost more a function of time and repetition as opposed to the type of work that you're doing, right?

C: Well, I've done camming work before...

S: What does that mean?

C: Oh, where you have a live camera on the computer, people can see you, you can't see them. They pay you for it.

D: And that's actually something that for me personally is so akin to escorting that I can't really do it. I've tried and I've tried and I've tried, because it's a good solid source of income.

C: It's incredibly difficult. I can't even imagine being there with people that I wouldn't be sexually attracted to and to have to perform sexually, like I could just not go to that level. I think you almost do have to be a hypersexual person to pull it off cause it's just really demanding...and you have to be really good at compartmentalizing your sexuality and your emotional life, and I just don't have the skills (laughs). I am not a big enough person for that I think.

S: That makes sense. Do you find that, I mean, is it difficult to compartmentalize your own emotional sexual life from what you do as a profession? Or does it seem like that is sort of a natural distinction, when you know you are going in like, "This is work, and this isn't."?

C: For me, I think it was a process of being able to learn what was "work-sex" and what's sex outside of that. And what's sex in a loving context too, because that's a very different thing. And I think, just being a gay man, you do that a lot anyways. But it's hard for me to say, I mean, porn has really informed my sexuality and the way I have sex, even in my personal life. So I don't know how much I can really completely tease them apart.

S: Sure, and that is probably not completely possible period.

D: Yes, and that's probably true for most of the larger porn-watching population just in general. Of course as a performer that has its own set of nuances to it. At least for me, the biggest separation I have, and Colby kind of touched on this, is that I do have this sort of defensiveness about my job. You know, and I think for a lot of people, and I think particularly for escorting, and porn work, I guess I should say, does have this sort of desperation about it. There's still this like weird, puritan morality tied to it, where you're like, "You must have nothing else you can do, if you are going to sell your body."

C: Although, I've gotten more shady disapproval from escorts for doing porn...

S: Really?

D: Well this is just a phenomenon that I think we should get on the record: that for the vast majority, well, not vast majority, I don't know numbers, but a *lot* of porn performers use their porn work basically as paid advertising for their escorting.

C: I would say definitely the majority.

D: Yeah, definitely the majority. A lot of them do it. A lot of them, because, you know, once they're a big name doing so many XXX films...

C: And that's where most of their income comes from. So a lot of people think that we get paid a lot of money, but not from porn.

S: Right. Do people assume then that you also do escorting? Do you get a lot of assumptions?

C: A lot of people do, yeah.

D: And it can also be...I feel like part of the problem I've had too, I think Colby and I, well and there are many other porn performers that are like this, but you know, we do a good job of sharing maybe parts of our personalities that are not that performance aspect of porn. Whether with the fan base, or our friends, or acquaintances that we meet as Dale Cooper or as Colby Keller or what have you. I feel like that distinction is still kind of there...I guess because the porn work is just my occupation, it's very easy for me to separate it. But I noticed that even with close friends, or with people who know me as Dale Cooper, we've bonded over other things. But they still will just come back to that, in a way. Me personally, I'm like "you haven't gotten over that yet?"

S: Over the fact that you do porn?

D: Over the fact that I do porn. And not necessarily in like a really blatant way, but it's almost like it's constantly this nagging thought in the back of this other person's head. In a really bizarre way. I've had a few people who I would call, maybe like close acquaintances as Dale, just like feel the need almost, or at least I feel like, to constantly reference the fact that I do sex work. As if I've forgotten. You know, "I'm well aware of it."

C: Were these friends of yours before you started doing it?

D: No no.

C: So you know these people as Dale?

D: I know these people as Dale, but they're also people who I know as Dale who also know that Dale likes, you know, to do the crossword, and Dale likes to read these kinds of books, or this kind of music, and we can talk about these things.

S: So that's really interesting because it's like it makes sense that on some level it could be like a, "I can't get past it." In some ways it's reductive, like, "This is what you are, and I'm going to continue referencing porn because that's where you are to me, like that's how I relate to you."

C: But they're oftentimes fans who are being sold a product which is completely sexual, and it's very difficult for them to, or they don't want to, see you as something other than that product they have been sold. They want you to fulfill their fantasy. And so, I've encountered those types of fans, and appreciate the support, you know, and you just have to recognize that they're just going to want to talk about sex, and I kinda have to sell that for them right now because that's what this is about.

S: So it's almost like you're going off of their fantasy script, and they keep sort of reeling you back in?

C: It's hard, because if you're not "on," you know, if you don't want to perform as Colby Keller, it's very difficult to get out of those situations. And you don't want to turn the person off and have them not be your fan...

D: I've turned off so many people, I know I have (laughs). From Dale Cooper, just 'cause they've been like, "Oh, you're Dale Cooper!" in public and I've just been not into it. I can be, I'm very...

S: You're kind of a private guy.

D: I'm very introverted, which maybe seems silly. That's something we can talk about, is balancing that and the exhibitionism of porn. But it's been very, very hard for me. At least from my interactions where I've seen Colby do this, I'm not nearly as skilled as he is in those situations.

C: And it's so funny because I actually think, you know, on a personal level he's much more outgoing than I am. But I think it's kind of, I've been in the business a lot longer, and I've learned to develop. Actually the older I get, the more "Colby" I become, and the less I am, you know...

S: How interesting. You feel like it's sort of drawn you out in some ways?

C: Yeah, it gives me sort of permission and freedom that I don't have otherwise. A lot of constraint too, but it's fun to play with that. It's like a good art practice. You need rules in order to constrain what you're doing, you know, you can't just, total freedom is a bad thing for creativity.

S: Right, it's too chaotic.

C: But you know there are probably more people that will call me Colby now, than will call me by my given name. And it's funny, because when people use that other name, I don't respond to it (laughs). I've learned to adopt the personality, but...

S: Which it's a personality you've created anyway...

C: Right, and it borrows a lot from, who I actually am, I mean, it is who I actually am.

D: Yeah I was going to say, I think we might have a little bit of distinction. 'Cause for me, at least I try to tell myself that, and there may be varying degrees for which this is true and for which it's not, but I at least like to tell myself that Dale Cooper is just the name; like it is just a pseudonym that is slapped onto productions in which my body is featured basically. And with what online interactions, like with my website, or when I'm interacting with fans on twitter or something, I try to just basically be myself. You know, I react like I would, I post articles that I think are interesting. For me, I don't really, I don't have a personality that is associated with Dale, because Dale is nothing more than this name that certain people who have seen him, attach some amount of importance to I guess. So maybe that's why I'm so bad when people call out "Dale" in public, because "Dale" doesn't exist.

C: I'm gonna call you out on that, because you do have a blog where you write and you *do* have a personality that people identify as being intellectual...

D: No, people do identify that personality as Dale, but to me, I don't purposefully construct Dale as a personality, I'm just me.

C: Right, I don't either with Colby, and I think that's actually what I learned was the most successful tactic to take, is that Colby is me. But Colby is also not me, and that's like really liberating and fun to be able to be two people, and now like a third (laughs). And to me it's like a fun, productive process to do that. (To Dale) And I think you do that too, I think you're just at that stage where you're a little reticent to embrace it. Not that you have to. But you are doing it, whether you...

D: That's what I was saying is that there, well there's always, obviously there's things I can get away with as Dale Cooper that I would be unable to do. And part of that is being able to reach an audience, to put things out that like, no one gives a shit about, because no one follows a porn performer on twitter to read an article I thought was great. They wanna see selfies. And I've never taken a selfie and I will not (laughs). Well I've never taken a selfie that was for those purposes. And I've seen my fanbase dwindle, I guess as a result.

S: So wait, you mean you've never taken a selfie that's porn related and put it up.

D: Correct.

S: So Dale Cooper has a strict selfie policy.

D: I have a strict no-selfie policy.

C: I think what's helped me is that I've learned to kind of, or maybe I haven't learned, but I am also an artist. And in my art practice there's a lot of embracing failure in the high and low and with Colby I'm able to do that. And I get a certain thrill out of posting some you know intellectual blog post right next to a picture of my penis (laughs). Or a clocktower that looks like a penis.

S: Do you feel like you're kind of sneaking it in? The other aspects of what you want to talk about? Or where does that thrill come from?

C: No, cause sometimes I think I just really want to show you the stain on the floor that looks like a cock. Cause isn't that funny...

S: Right, no I mean do you feel you are sneaking in the intellectual blog posts, is that where the thrill is coming from?

C: But it's not about sneaking that in, and it's not about sneaking in the thing that looks like a penis, it's the tension between the two of them. And that I shouldn't be afraid of it. Because I know people aren't gonna, like I wrote some movie review the other night because I had a lot to say about this movie, and granted, as a regular person, no one would read it. But because I'm like this porn persona, people will read it. Not everyone's going to read it and most of the fans who wanna watch me naked/have sex aren't gonna read it, but the fact that some of them do and that there's something kind of compelling about that idea or tension for them, excites me. So I like the idea of embracing both aspects. Like, I'm gonna do a selfie, or maybe it's a phot shoot that I would never in my life do as an artist, like I think it's kinda bad, but I'm gonna do it anyways because there's something....you know, by bringing yourself to that position, even if it's something you might consider lower, you actually learn more, I think.

S: So you both do different forms of art as well...

D: (rolls eyes)

S: Oh I've seen your art Dale, yes you do.

D: (laughs) I'm not an artist, but that's very kind.

S: Well, so do you see this as part of that, do you see them as separate? The way that you do other forms of art? Do you see that it overlaps or interplays at all?

D: This goes back to what we were discussing earlier about, I like to say that Dale Cooper is just this name that's going on to things, but honestly a lot of what I do as Dale Cooper is very much me taking advantage of the fact that I have an outlet like Dale Cooper through which to do random shit like the website and things like that. So I would say to that extent, yes, it gives me a space which, I mean we live in the age of Tumblr and Facebook where everyone is sharing everything anyway, it gives me a space to share that I feel more comfortable doing so. Because before, when I made some stupid graph it was just there on my computer and it would never show up for anyone. So that has been kinda fun. But again it's not like I'm participating in a community, where you have people who would actually talk back to you about it. (Not) in the same way that if you're like a food blogger and you post a recipe and your food blogger friends talk back. Because they just want some penis. But it's fun.

C: I think for me, you know, I went to grad school in an art program and my art practice was in no way related to the porn that I've made. And I really did separate the two completely, and that was partly because I was making art under my given name. And it's been a real battle for me to try to figure out what my art practice should be and how much of that part of myself needs to be included in it. And I think I come more and more to the conclusion that is actually something that makes my art more interesting. And art is a very small, small world (laughs) and I realized with my blog it's a very difficult language for people to be able to be engaged with. That's why I put it up there, because they need to be, people should be challenged a little bit. It's arcane, right? It's difficult for

people. So figuring out how to incorporate that with a job that is very easy, which is like, sex, desire, you get it. I mean, whether you're turned on or not you get what it's supposed to be doing pretty easily. So how do those two things map on each other successfully. That's the process I think I'm still working through.

S: I wanted to go back to the questions of unions, cause you had brought it up, Dale. Can you guys talk a little bit about organization of sex workers, benefits, insurance, etc.

D: (laughs) Sure! There are none. (laughs) Next question. No actually, this is something I personally, and I think obviously lots of other people feel pretty passionately for this. A lot of other, well I get kind of tired of using this phrase, but many other "western developed" nations do have sex worker unions, particularly those European ones (you know how those Europeans are). But yeah, we have no workplace protections. we don't have health insurance through any of our work, even if you're in a (contract)... Colby, I believe you're still freelancing, right? We're both freelancers.

S: So some people take on a contract with a particular company?

D: Yes, that's what I was going to say, even then that is almost nothing more than you're obligated to perform a certain amount of scenes and get paid a certain amount.

C: I've heard of other types of contracts, but typically, it's an exclusive contract so you can only work with one company and they pay you a certain number...

D: It's nothing like workplace protection.

C: It really actually protects the company more because it protects your image. They don't want you to be overexposed.

D: There's that, and we're responsible for our own health insurance, so I'm very excited for Maryland to set up their insurance exchange in September.

So [there's] no health insurance, no organizing, unfortunately, of any kind. I think there's been a few attempts, but they've been mostly faltering in the United States from what I understand. Which is a shame, because we still see things like people trying to legislate how sex work is done. Like what we had in Los Angeles County, they tried to mandate that everyone use condoms and it just curtailed the ability of a lot of straight performers, mostly, to find work, as opposed to actually helping them find ways to protect their health, like good access to health insurance, cheap and affordable health insurance, clinics, even if it's just for STD care, would be incredible. So yeah, that would be really nice.

S: So, there just really aren't protections for sex workers in any way?

D: No, and even then, like, Colby and I might do a scene and it might be the most popular, amazing, like the Titanic of porn, and we get paid our set rate and we have no entitlement to royalties, to anything like that. We get paid a set rate, we sign away all of our rights on these images and whatever from that scene. For them to use in perpetuity, for whatever they would like. And, that's it. We get a paycheck and for all legal purposes we're divorced from the remainder of that scene's existence.

C: I have a great story about how difficult it can be not having that kind of organized pressure

against these....well first of all, we should establish that the porn industry at large has really been going through some hard economic times, in that there's a lot of free porn online, you can torrent porn, so they're losing a lot of money. There's also a lot more out there. In the gay porn world ten years ago, there were like two companies, now there's like fifty. You have a lot of bareback porn you have to compete with and in the gay world, which, you know, it's difficult because people want to watch that and not stuff with condoms.

S: Right, and so just to clarify, both of you work with...you're both in mainstream gay porn.

D: Right, but even then the term "mainstream" you have large...well for me personally I will only work with studios and participate in scenes that practice safer sex and that usually means in the gay porn world safer sex means condoms for penetrative sex.

C: So the porn world is hurting and everybody, you know, people are paying less in actual money than they did ten years ago. This happened to me very recently, one company in particular that I had a very long working relationship with, probably five, seven years ago. They paid me a certain rate, which was low at the time that they were paying it, I've been paid double from other companies, to put into perspective how much they were paying -- but they were also the top mainstream DVD-releasing company. They paid me a set rate. Came back at me recently and wanted me to do a scene with them paying me a couple of hundred dollars less than what this established rate was that I had with them before, of course I don't have a long term contract with them. They were also bought out by a major distribution company which is primarily straight-owned. Straight companies pay their models a lot less. I think part of the, you know, what do you call that when companies merge? A merger, oh acquisitions. You know, the workers actually suffer a little bit. This is also saving them money because the company wasn't doing too well. I came back at them and I'm like, "No, actually, this is my set rate, you paid it to me in the past, this is what I charge other companies, you can pay me this."

They really, desperately wanted me for this scene, and the director went way out of his way (or at least claimed) to try to get me more work, and they basically came at me with an exclusive contract without exclusivity. But they wouldn't pay me any more money per scene. And to kind of sweeten the deal, they came at me and they're like, "Oh we have this affiliates program." Which every porn company has, I mean you could start a blog and if you link to a porn site you get half of the memberships or whatever that someone coming through that blog spends. I've done this before, never made a lot of money with it. So they come back at me saying, "Oh you'll make thousands of dollars!" And I'm like, "I'm already in your affiliates program." (laughs) "And like this isn't a special thing, you're just doing for me, like anyone could do this. And really all I'm asking is that you pay me more money OR pay me the amount of money you want to pay me but instead of three fuck positions, we're gonna do two. I'm compromising there. You're probably going to get the same amount of work out of me, cause I know how it's gonna be, like you're just gonna grind those two scenes out but I'm giving you this out, you save face, I save face, we have a deal."

Wouldn't do it.

S: And that's where the unions come in.

C: Right, exactly. And I was willing to bargain with them! I'm willing to go down to their rate, I understand the problems in the business. But you have to come back with me. But there's no pressure for them to do that.

D: And that's also part of the problem -- there are just, along with proliferation of actual porn products, there's a proliferation of porn actors. So you know, we're a dime a dozen.

C: And you're the example of unskilled labor.

D: Exactly, and so I feel like that is one of my biggest concerns, particularly there are some companies that I've worked with and I now know how problematic their hiring practices are. In which they're essentially taking very very young adults, yes adults, and saying, "You'll be a star, you're going to do this and this and that." And these kids know absolutely nothing about balancing a budget, they know absolutely nothing about paying for health insurance, and having savings and things like that. And they chew them up and spit them out after they've had their year or so in the industry. So you have stuff like that where they feel no need, even with someone who's a really respected veteran like Colby, they still treat you like shit. Because you're one of hundreds.

S: Because they can.

C: Well, I will give a little bit of credit to the people who run these companies, cause, in fact I'll give them a lot of credit because they've been very good to me over the years (laughs). I think some of them do take those considerations into mind. I have seen producers take care of models, like call their mothers, make sure they're going to school, I've seen that kind of activism and some are a lot better than others. But it's difficult when you have to make money. And I think it's the nature of capitalism that that kind of antagonism is in place. And as much as you might want to be moral as an owner of a company, you can't, because you are exploiting people using their labor to make a profit. It's kind of the definition of how profit is made. So that antagonism is going to be present, what's problematic is that they can exert a lot of pressure on us. I've noticed for one thing, I think that magically all the companies in the business will start paying less money at the same time (laughs). (Sarcastically) I think they might be talking to each other about what they pay their models!

D: They're all owned by the same adult entertainment conglomerate.

C: Right, and I don't even know what it would take to get a sex workers union in place....

D: Even then, part of the problem is that because it's not seen as a valid profession, it's seen as something people do in dire straits, or when you're young and stupid, or...kids will do it for a couple of years and then move on to something else or not.

C: I mean, the way I think about it is, I have no retirement plan. And a porn star retires when they're like thirty! (laughs) I did a scene with a guy who's a dancer, and they retire at thirty-five. But he has a retirement plan to take care of him for the rest of his life. Because he's devoted his life to dancing and a ballet company. But there's nothing like that in place for porn. And that's part of the reason you get a lot of push-back from gay men and it's kind of along the lines of, "Why would you do that? What are you gonna do when you retire? Where's your income going to come from?" Especially with gay men, you don't have kids, who's going to take care of you? How are you going to do that?

S: Well I wanted to go back also to the question of mandatory condom use and testing and your thoughts on, for example, what recently happened in California. I know, just from talking to you before, that you had some mixed feelings I think about the condom requirement in porn? And also, the second part of that question is since porn is not legal in Maryland, why did you guys decide to make Baltimore your home base? Does that make it difficult to work, or would you have to travel for work anyway?

D: Well, first off, in terms of the first question, I always side with personal choice. Whatever you do, whatever kind of film you want to make, whatever you want to do in that film, whatever you want to depict in that film, you should absolutely have creative license to do whatever the hell that you want as long as it's all consensual. Right? So that can include, in discussions of porn, using condoms/not using condoms, showing rape scenes or like a...

S: Simulated.

D: Yes, a rape simulation, thank you. Or what have you. Again, myself personally, I choose to only work in safer sex situations and things of that nature. But I absolutely defend the right for anyone to create any kind of film that they want, provided that it's all consensual actors on film. So that being said, I think that particularly the thing for California, what I was worried about was that it's such... I mean, the porn economy is massive. Just absolutely huge. To have a place like L.A. succumb to this weird... I've been trying to research the history of who's putting forward this specific condom legislation and what sort of vested interests that sort of rallied to this. It was still kinda bizarre. But to me, it really defeats the whole purpose of the thing, because all they're doing is making it harder for these people to make a living, driving out industry from the area and just pushing it elsewhere.

C: I mean, it's THE industry in the valley. All those other businesses depend on money that comes from porn.

D: Right, whether it's hotels, travel, restaurants, all of that. Then there's people who rent out studios, and cameras and lighting equipment and expertise with those things. So it seemed to me that it just completely smacked of the...that it was completely wrong-sided in my opinion. I mean, for me personally, getting to the specifics of Measure B, I was totally fine with them taxing porn more, I think that's great. I'm a progressive liberal, I'm all about taxes. But you know, put those taxes to something like a pool for porn workers to use to purchase health insurance together, as some sort of collective. So there's that.

And the second one (question) is that I moved to Baltimore for work, so.

S: Different work, non-porn work.

D: Yes, I moved here for different, non-porn related work and have since just settled here. 'Cause it's a great city, I love Baltimore.

S: It is a great city. So I just wanted to follow up with the...so do you have any...I guess my concern when I hear about things like mandatory condom use in porn is the way that we sexualize or desexualize safer sex and the public health implications of that. I have mixed feelings about mandatory condom use, definitely, and I understand what you're saying. But I was curious if you have any other...how do you think that impacts the way, for example, that porn will be produced? Do you think it is essentially just pushing it further underground, where people will still make bareback?

C: Oh, no it will just push it to a different city. I think a lot of businesses will probably move to Nevada. There are only a few states... I think this is true of Maryland, you can film porn here, you just can't recruit. That's the part of it that's illegal because it's considered prostitution. So I can't call you on the phone and say, "Do you wanna be part of a scene?" That's prostitution, except in a handful of states.

D: Nevada, California, Florida, New Hampshire...

C: Arizona, New York? No I think in New York it's illegal.

D: I'm pretty sure it's illegal in New York.

C: But you can film it anywhere. So I don't know, I think that's just going to push the business out of the valley. I think it's a really stupid move on the part of city government. Horrible, horrible move. Because I don't think that the companies are just going to start shooting with condoms. Because that will hurt their business if they do. I think it's hurt more "mainstream" (in the way that we're using that) gay porn. I think it will change in gay porn, actually, I think that less companies will start to use condoms. There used to be a consensus starting in the 80s and the 90s with a handful of gay porn companies, which was that everyone would promote safe sex and use condoms. And if a model was in a scene where there wasn't a condom, they'd be blacklisted. Very aggressive promotion of safe sex. And as the (HIV) treatment landscape has changed, as the prevention landscape has changed, that's gonna really change. And you see a lot of really popular companies really embrace bareback sex, and I think are successful for it.

D: Which just as an aside real quickly, we should just mention if your viewers or readers are not familiar with it, in heterosexual porn, it is much much more common to have unprotected condomless sex. In homosexual porn it is very common to have protected, condom sex.

C: Used to. Until recently...

D: I would say still. And even recently. I mean, there is one major studio that I know of that has been very very prolifically putting out bareback sex.

C: I think it's changed in that it compounds all the problems that the industry has had in terms of...I mean, they say that, of course I really don't know cause I don't look at the books (laughs). And they're only telling me that so they can pay me less.

D: But that being said, to go back to your point real quick, Sara, about the message of...you know in that context I would say I do agree personally with the idea that, well wouldn't it be great if we could, to prevent disease (which is the angle of the California law, right, preventing disease)... and I understand that, I totally get that. Noble cause. But they were relying on that idea of it being a noble cause to sort of block out any discussion otherwise. Which is problematic. I feel like at least for me personally, the problem isn't that we have porn that does not show the practice of safer sex and it is getting out there. The problem is that we make porn this privileged site of, when it comes to sexual education, and not like Hollywood or the advertising industry, or all these other places where sex is incredibly prolific and important and part of the flows of capital, just as much as in porn. But porn is the one that we regulate. Porn is the one area of this business that we are scandalized by, that we secretly titter about in the dark at our computers, that we try to make these Measure B regulations on and things of that nature. We do not allow, largely as a society, to accept that sex is such a huge force in all of our lives, that there are other venues through which we can discuss these really important things. And yes, it is unfortunate now that porn has such a disproportionate effect on the sex lives of its viewers, because we don't allow any other...like porn, sex is still taboo, even in the 21st century, that we don't allow other venues for us to expand on that narrative whatsoever.

C: The condom thing about gay porn is fascinating to me because it is an instance where, and you know these companies did this voluntarily, they're selling a product that's about desire, right? And fantasy. And yet, there's an aspect of that that isn't either of those things. It's propaganda to have this type of sex, this safe sex that will save your life. And it's inserted into every scene to really, because they know that the product that they're making will impact the way people will have sex in their personal lives. And yet, other aspects of the way that they create that product don't take that into consideration. Like they might have these hypertrophied giant steroided bodies that are not healthy for anybody in that situation! And not realistic. Quite personally, those aren't people that are very fun to have sex with, 'cause their bodies don't move very well by and large. Personal point. But so somehow the business gives permission to do that, but then it's also selling us this moral message too. I think that's an inconsistency in the product that they're making.

D: That's an excellent point. So same as the Measure B thing, like they tried to have some moral message, like "See, look, we're moral actors in this. We mandated condoms or we have condoms on the set, therefore we no longer have to have this larger discussion about steroid *abuse* in the industry." Rampant steroid abuse.

S: So we're absolving ourselves from talking about health entirely by...

C: It's handing it off to the government. To say you have to use condoms, because then you can be excused from the kind of repercussions of what it means to show it or not in your product.

S: Very good points. So another question I had, you hear a lot about, or at least I hear a lot as a woman, about feminist porn and the way that that differs from other types of porn. And I was wondering if you want to talk a little bit about what you would see as feminist, what is feminist about porn and what's not -- and what makes porn feminist.

D: Well I feel that for me, one of the things that's so interesting about the whole feminist porn was is that it really happened before gay pornographic content reached the sort of zenith that it has now. So it was very interesting reading a lot of these, like in the 80s, when everything was sort of straight-to-video kind of pornography, about you know, the primacy of the phallus and all about the inserting, all about penetration, and it was really about the money shot, about domination of the male. And I feel like a lot of these sui generis, psychoanalytic, feminist perspectives from people who are anti-porn, the anti-porn feminists, were just kind of like, have you ever seen a gay porn? (laughs) I think it completely throws out the...what I'm trying to get at is that for a lot of anti-porn feminists, they constantly construed of the pornographic as being about gender, and not about sex. And I feel like gay porn necessarily completely problematizes that. Because while gender is still expressed in the terms of being a top, being a bottom, being first, and trust me, there's feminization of skinny "twink" guys, being topped by a "daddy" of course there's gender implications that you can't really escape. But I was always sort of like confused by that. And I think it's interesting that we haven't seen much in the academic landscape now about that same feminist critique of porn. That being said, I think you had sent me, Sara, that porn site, that porn journal that is coming out, and I don't know if you heard about the recent controversy, where apparently it was...a bunch of people are signing a petition to say that this is a "pro-porn studies" book so you need to have some "anti-porn" viewpoints. I don't know. I guess the board for the journal had "pro-porn" stances. So they wanted some people who were "anti-porn" on it.

Sara: So make an anti-porn journal.

D: Exactly. Or they wanted to change its name or something. But to get to the point, I think what a lot of anti-porn feminists really were justifiably upset about (in) the vast majority of mass produced porn in the 60s, 70s and 80s, has come to change as the medium has democratized. I mean, we have amateurs creating their own porn, we have venues through which people can curate their own porn. I don't personally have a Tumblr, but I think that's one of the best things about it, that people can curate and collect, "this is what I think is hot, you might also think that this collection of images I have is hot, and we can talk about those images and share them." As opposed to having to go to your regular porn site and have one offer whatever they decide to give you. I think that has been really really great. I think there's still a lot of work to be done, and I'll probably get some hate emails after that (laughs) but that's the best way I can express it.

C: And the other question is, what is it that we want porn to accomplish. Right? Everyone, whoever watches it, what do you want it to do? And part of what I think you really want it to do is show you a real experience. Of someone really enjoying themselves. Really having pleasure. In the middle of it. And when we talk about where porn has tropes, and where it fails, and where the guy delivering the pizza, why that's funny to us is because it shows it as being something false. When what we really want from it is real. And I have encountered a lot of women, a lot of gay women actually, who watch gay porn, gay male porn. Which doesn't seem to make sense. Until you ask them why, and the response I typically get is that, one, I think there's a little bit of pleasure in watching men get fucked, and thinking about the male body as a receptive body. But also being able to physically see that you are aroused, which the penis can do. That their complaint was that

they'd watched straight porn and they'd watched lesbian porn and you could never tell if the woman was faking it, or you often knew that she was. So that, to me, is the kind of misogynist porn that I really hate. And I've watched it on sets with straight actors, and it's really disturbed me. It's usually that the woman is just obviously not engaged, or excited by what is going on. Or maybe they're being really aggressive and she doesn't want to be there. And for some men, that's what they get off on, that there is that power differential and the man is in control, and that to me is what is disturbing and bad about that type of porn. That it doesn't really demonstrate authentic enjoyment on the part of a woman, because that's what power is. Is being able to...you know, there's something really powerful about an orgasm, you can't control it, it overtakes you. Losing control through the aid of another human being is a remarkable act. I think we're all compelled by it and that's why porn is so popular, for that reason. If it's not real it really kind of disturbs us in a really kind of deep place.

D: I was actually going to say that I think some people actually do want artifice. For some people they do desire t

hat aspect, like in the case of the person who wants to completely subjugate a female partner, or he's imagining himself in the place of the penetrating male in a heterosexual porno scene. But one of the things that I find is interesting about gay porn is that it allows, you have the opportunity...

C: Well that's sort of the fundamental quality in a lot of gay porn.

D: Right, because things can always switch. Like even though in a scene, I might only top and Colby might only bottom, there is the knowledge that we are both gay men, that we both have orifices that could be penetrated and that gives us sort of equal footing as actors through which someone watching that particular scene can project onto. That's also I think something that problematizes the feminist critique of porn is that in gay porn, I think that equal footing also extends to the voyeur as well, whereas I feel like in a lot of heterosexual porn, from my understanding and my own participation in watching it and in talking to people who view it and enjoy viewing it, is that you're imagining that you're the penetrating person, which is why there are so many shots where you erase the male's face and it's from the viewpoint of their head or from over their shoulder, and it's all about the visibility of the female body. You are pretending to be that penetrator. Whereas I think that in gay porn, and not to say that gay porn doesn't have its own slew of problematic tropes, particularly bodily visibility and bodily attractiveness, something that can be said for those tropes that is positive is that it does, because it does tend to be better lit and stepped back and you're allowed to play with all three of those, as person 1 or as person 2 regardless of what the activities are (or as voyeur). That being said, like Colby mentioned earlier, when every single scene is person 1 and person 2 doing the same rote three positions and then a money shot and then you're out of there, that does get problematic. That's not to say that as a whole porn is "progressing" and we are getting "better" at having more representative porn. But [it is] to say that there are some positive things about how far porn has come, even the mass produced stuff nowadays.

S: Alright, well I'm gonna try to wrap it up, but I'm gonna be cheesy at the end and ask you what is the best and worst thing about being a porn performer?

C: Best and worst? Possibly the same thing. And that's the main reason I do it which is money. I can't set my own schedule so sometimes you really have to work to find work. Which can be very frustrating. But it's also nice when it comes and I can do other things, like I said, I'm an artist with

an art practice so a lot of free time to do that. Or not free time, but time to do that. And that's really important to me. And porn allows me to do that. So it's difficult, bad in that sense, but also good.

D: I'll have to concur. I think for me, particularly as someone who had a full-time, professional "real" job, at the same time that I was a practicing porn performer, really there's nothing worse than sitting at a desk .

C: Yeah, I've had really physically demanding blue collar jobs that don't pay you shit! And I worked for a company, I worked for Nieman Marcus for two years and they worked me 70 hour weeks, they didn't even consider me a full-time employee because they didn't want to pay me health insurance! And they paid me half of what they paid everyone else and I did more work than everyone else. Horrible company. So porn is a lot better than that situation.

D: Yeah, so I do really like the amount of time that I have to myself. And it's also given me an ability to travel that I wouldn't have. I never really traveled much growing up, or much at all until fairly recently outside of the porn world. You had asked earlier, there is not porn at least not that I know of, not that I participate in in Baltimore, so I do travel a lot for it. So that has been really nice to see new cities and new places.

S: Alright! Well thanks to both of you and give us your websites:

Colby: www.colbykeller.com [2] or www.bigshoediaries.blogspot.com [3]

Dale: www.daledoesporn.com [4] Dale Cooper Colby Keller Interview June 23, 2003

1 The author attempted to find the answer to this question without success. A general google search shows that there appear to be fully nude strip clubs in Rhode Island, but author was unable to find an actual legal status for that. As an interesting sidenote, prostitution was in fact legal in Rhode Island until 2009 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prostitution_in_Rhode_Island [5])

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