Introduction

Rita’s workspace is ready. Music plays softly—a silky baritone voice emanating from a diminutive speaker connected to a smartphone will provide the show’s score. Her laptop and webcam are skillfully positioned on the mahogany wood end table that sits at the foot of her bed. Rita turns her computer on, hops onto her bed, and crawls across her white goose-down comforter. She rearranges three sex toys, her Hitachi Magic Wand, VixSkin dildo, and Lovense vibrator, which she had earlier placed on a blue towel. She adjusts the shoulder strap on her form-fitting pink camisole—the soft HD lighting in the room allows for a glimpse of the outlines of her beautiful brown nipples beneath the chiffon. Rita looks intensely at the computer screen, her fans lying in wait; she energetically starts, “Hey guys, are you ready for me?”

In October 2016, Rita needed extra money. She had spent much time thinking about various employment options, especially those in the burgeoning gig economy. Rita wanted quick money and pleasurable work that would also provide her with autonomy. She found this in the erotic webcam industry. She now makes $1,200 per month camming part-time and is one of the millions of people around the world who have turned to online sex work as a refuge from poorly remunerated service occupations in increasingly precarious global economies.

The erotic webcam industry, which emerged in 1996, is an exponentially growing sex industry where workers, called cam models, from all over the globe are finding decent wages, greater autonomy, community, and pleasure. Colloquially called “camming,” it is a genre of indirect sex work, in which cam models sell interactive computer-mediated sex online. The camming field, like other sex work industries, monetizes human desires for sex, intimacy, and pleasure.

I believe cam models provide an essential economic service. The camming field functions according to the logic of capitalism, but it stands apart because these workers are selling sex. For decades, sex worker ac-
tivists and scholars have worked hard to demonstrate that sex work is legitimate labor. These activists and scholars are correct—it is vital to sex workers’ lives that societies around the globe accept sex work as legitimate labor, decriminalize sex work where it is illegal, and provide sex workers with all the same protections all workers should have. However, a political strategy that advocates for sex worker’s rights using respectability politics has limitations.

Respectability politics involves subordinate groups demonstrating to dominant groups that they are worthy of rights. In this case, to gain access to basic rights, sex workers must prove to political gatekeepers that sex work is honest labor and like any other job in the service economy. Respectability politics glosses over the subversive outcomes of sex workers’ labor. Every day, sex workers challenge various overlapping systems of oppression, calling into question discourses around appropriate modes of sexuality and sexual gratification. In the erotic camming industry, a primary motivation for selling sex online, alongside decent wages and autonomy, is to explore sexuality and experience pleasure. A political strategy that hinges upon demonstrating how similar sex work is to other forms of service work unintentionally glosses over the radical and essential labor sex workers do to push social boundaries and make the world a less sexually repressive and more pleasurable place.

Governments around the world craft policies and laws that constrain the rights of sex workers and enact a pernicious form of state-sponsored violence on their bodies. While governments and their law enforcement agencies mobilize moral police forces to govern the lives of citizens, sex workers resist these forces. For centuries, sex workers have resisted the policing of sex, bodies, and the acquisition of pleasure by the state, religious institutions, and various other social institutions; workers in the camming industry contribute to this long history of resistance.

The Camming Industry

In the 21st century, as access to the Internet became more widespread, e-commerce flourished, and sex entrepreneurs and sex workers also started selling sex online. Technology has diversified forms of sex work and the rise of online sex work presents new opportunities for studying and theorizing about sexuality, gender, race, inequality, and labor.
The Internet has helped to create new opportunities for sex entrepreneurs and workers to craft a labor environment that is more appealing to workers across social classes. My research suggests that the increase in online sex work is not a reflection of a unilateral move of sex workers from offline to online environments. Instead, given the improved working conditions of online sex work, erotic labor may now appeal to people who previously were unwilling or unable to perform sex work that occurs offline. More workers may be open to performing sex work because the online context provides physical safety, autonomy, and access to pleasure they could not find in other areas of sex work or the economy more broadly. Workers who were previously unable to secure work in other forms of erotic labor because of their gender, race, sexuality, age, disability, or embodiment have found new labor opportunities in the growing camming industry.

Carl, a 31-year-old bisexual Black cisgender man from the United States, said:

If this was never an option, I probably wouldn't have done any type of sex work because . . . I'm kind of introverted and shy. . . . But I think with the sex cam stuff, also the stuff that I do on this show, there's no way I could do on a stage, at all. So, I think it's also cool in that sense, that it offers an alternative for people that don't think that stripping is right for them . . . just knowing that you could do this at home and not have to worry about how uncomfortable actually being at the physical strip club can be; so, that's definitely a benefit. And I know it's definitely a benefit to me because, well, my sexuality is well, a little out there, compared to what other available strippers do.

The online environment makes people feel safe and less inhibited. The working conditions appeal to those who would not consider performing sex work that involves physical contact.

Carl is known for his extreme anal shows, acts he couldn't perform in a strip club. When Carl noted that his sexuality was “out there,” he was highlighting the point that camming provides a unique space for sexual exploration—whereas strip clubs are generally highly regulated environments. For male performers like Carl, it is challenging to even find employment as exotic dancers. According to cam models, the cam-
The camming industry has opened up opportunities for people around the world who before the Internet would have never performed sex work.

The growth of the camming industry reflects an expansion of the online market of sexual commerce. The camming industry has not replaced the demand for traditional pornography; it offers sexual consumers an additional way in which to consume pornographic content online. Camming is different from traditional pornography because camming is interactive. Clients, who cam models told me were overwhelmingly cisgender men, are purchasing a live and intimate encounter with a cam model(s), which is substantially different from purchasing a prerecorded and scripted pornographic film. Unlike traditional pornography, cam models use chat rooms to sell a range of erotic fantasies to online patrons—from intimate conversation to erotic striptease to explicit sex acts. The model chooses when, how, and if they climax—a movie producer does not direct the cam model. On some cam sites, cam models perform in public shows and receive tips called “tokens.” On other cam sites, cam models perform in private pay-per-minute shows. There are cam sites that offer both public shows and private shows. While many cam models build up a following of regular clients that they perform private shows for on platforms such as Skype, most cam models still perform on one or more cam-site platforms. Despite the rapid growth of the camming industry, there is a paucity of empirical data about the industry and research that explores how the rise of online sex work can contribute to our thinking and theorizing about sexuality, gender, race, inequality, and labor.

There have been many mainstream news media accounts of the camming industry, yet most, like Sean Dunne’s 2015 documentary Cam Girlz, focus on cis women, called “camgirls,” who work as adult webcam models. Even if unintentionally, these stories can erase the lives of all the other erotic webcam models of various genders who work in the industry. Journalists focus primarily on White cis camgirls from Romania, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Mainstream stories about the camming industry have left many questions unanswered about the diverse groups of people who work in the camming field.

Fortunately, new research has emerged that has begun to document the camming industry empirically. Paul William Mathews has published an important study of women who work as cam models in the Phil-
Kavita Nayar has examined the complex ways camgirls use both their professional and amateur statuses in the camming industry to maximize wages. Similarly, although not limited to women, Van Doorn and Velthuis have studied how cam models “hustle” or navigate the competitive economic environment on the cam site Chaturbate. Additionally, there are rigorous studies of online sex work that examine the lives and workplace experiences of cam models. Teela Sanders, Jane Scoular, Rosie Campbell, Jane Pitcher, and Stewart Cunningham recently published *Internet Sex Work*, the most inclusive and comprehensive study of Internet-facilitated sex work to date. However, their extraordinary research covers a wide range of online sex work (not only camming) and focuses exclusively on sex workers in the United Kingdom.

*Camming* presents a holistic portrait of the contemporary camming industry by drawing from my five-year mixed-methods study of the erotic webcam industry. I use multiple methodologies, which include web analytics, participant observation on cam sites, statistical analyses of data collected from cam-model profiles, content analyses of web forums for cam models, survey data, in-depth interviews, and autoethnography. *Camming*, the first book devoted solely to the camming industry, empirically documents the industry’s current size, profitability, history, and analyzes the motivations and the experiences of a relatively diverse sample of cam models. This thorough examination of the camming industry uses a transnational lens and, as a result, provides a unique vantage point from which to understand and theorize around sexuality, gender, race, and labor in a time when workers globally face increasing economic precariousness and worsened forms of alienation, and desperately desire to recapture pleasure in work.

**Embodied Authenticity**

Most customers perceive camming as authentic. Cam models construct what scholars of sex work call “manufactured identities.” They perform under screen names in order to protect themselves from doxing and harassment. In addition to these manufactured identities, cam models’ shows are performative—models do often have to engage in some amount of acting. However, cam models often spend copious
time talking with customers online, and, in many ways, they are being themselves. Their rooms are often their bedrooms, and from the perspective of a consumer, everything about the experience appears real. The model uses a stylized performance to offer an authentic presentation to customers, which is highly valuable in the world of erotic labor. Cam modeling appeals to what cultural anthropologist Katherine Frank has called customers’ desire for “realness”\(^\text{15}\) or what sociologist Elizaboth Bernstein has called “bounded authenticity.”\(^\text{16}\) As both have noted, in contemporary sex markets, customers want to feel they are having an authentic sexual encounter that, while bounded by the economic exchange, is also characterized by intimacy. Cam models provide what I call \textit{embodied authenticity} to clients.\(^\text{17}\)

While it is no secret to most customers that cam models are working, the appeal of the erotic webcam market is that performers are perceived as amateurs— as real people, who have turned on their webcams. The allure of camming is that a viewer can get glimpses into the lives of strangers from all over the world. According to the popular cam site CAM4:

\begin{quote}
CAM4 has been supporting sexual openness, freedom, and equality for over ten years. It provides consenting adults with a place to express themselves on webcam—regardless of sex, race, size, or sexual preference. A community with a strong focus on social networking, CAM4 is much more than a traditional webcam site. People can make global connections and form communities without discrimination—they meet, make friends, explore their sexuality and, in some cases, even get married. CAM4 is translated into 42 different languages and boasts over 23 million members from more than 230 countries. CAM4 allows for genuine interactions of real, intimate and personal moments by adults who all share a desire to connect to form a global society from the comfort of their own homes and beyond.\(^\text{18}\)
\end{quote}

While CAM4 overstates the likelihood of cam models and clients forming romantic relationships, this marketing material nicely highlights my conceptualization of embodied authenticity, which underscores the importance of clients feeling like they are purchasing authentic experiences with “real” people. The pleasure cam models and clients experience are born out of these intimate social encounters with strangers from all
over the world. Given that these interactions take place in real time, online, and are interactive, the client is purchasing a one-of-a-kind experience with an individual(s) whom the client may not be able to interact with intimately and sexually in their everyday life. Webcam modeling has an authentic character that other forms of sex work often fail to deliver to clients.

Throughout this book, I use the term *embodied authenticity* to emphasize the importance of embodiment in effectively delivering authentic performances. Crucially, the online context and interactive experience ostensibly allow clients to verify the authenticity of the performance and the mutual experience of pleasure. In the camming market, the online context and the agency that cam models do have allow them to also experience pleasure while working. Cam models frequently said things to me such as “I get paid to have orgasms.” Clients are paying not only for their pleasure—they are also paying to watch the cam model experience pleasure. The online context makes it easier for cam models to deliver embodied authenticity to clients. The computer-mediated interaction between model and client forms a psychological barrier that, for the most part, makes both parties feel safe and more willing to be themselves, which also opens up the potential for more pleasure for the worker.

Pleasure and Online Sex Work

While this book focuses on both pleasures and dangers in the camming industry, my focus on pleasure makes a unique contribution to studies of sex work and to broader theories of labor. The nascent literature on sex work in the digital era has primarily focused on the practical benefits of Internet-based sex work, such as better wages, better and safer working conditions, and a decline in risk exposure. While these benefits are important, with little exception this literature does not highlight the way the online environment fosters a space in which workers have a greater potential to experience various pleasures.

The online context shapes the acquisition of pleasure in the camming industry. Many people adhere to an offline/online binary, distinguishing between the virtual and physical worlds. People often think of the virtual world as an alternative reality or as a realm of social experience that is
separate from the “real” physical world. Following this line of thinking, some people may believe that interactions that occur in cyberspace are less “real” than face-to-face interaction in physical space. Like sociologist Christine Hine, I too caution against understanding cyberspace in this binary way. The Internet and the spaces that people have formed and created on the Internet are real spaces. Offline and online spaces are merely different contexts. Moreover, the spread of mobile computers and communications technologies means that increasingly people (with access) are simultaneously immersed in both offline and online contexts. Our offline and online experiences are diffuse and symbiotic.

The online context shapes the acquisition of pleasure in the camming industry precisely because people rely on the virtual/physical world dichotomy. While our actual embodiments do not change in either context, based on my research, many people still see the consumption of virtual embodiment differently than they see the consumption of physical embodiment. The absence of physical touching and the computer-mediated sexual exchange make many people perceive sexual encounters online as not sex—as something other. The computer-mediated sexual experience may qualitatively shape the cam models’ and customers’ experiences of the sexual encounter, but the interactions are most definitely still sex. Mutual masturbation online does not cease to be a sex act because it occurred in cyberspace. The online context, like any social space, shapes the ways people experience the sex act. However, given that people adhere to the virtual/physical world dichotomy, camming, for participants, is a more socially acceptable form of sex work than stripping or escorting because they use only virtually delivered projections of their embodiments. Middle-class sex workers and consumers employ this logic as a form of stigma management—to rationalize both the selling and consumption of sex online. Importantly, these contextual elements create the conditions under which people open themselves up to experiencing new forms of pleasure.

Pleasure is not only an initial motivation for camming—it is also often the reason why people continue in the industry. As Rita told me, she became a cam model because she “really needed the easy money . . . [but she] stay[s] one because [she] actually like[s] it.” Crucially, the more pleasure performers experience in the field, the more likely they are to continue camming. The pleasure they do experience allows them to ef-
fectively deliver embodied authenticity to clients, which increases wages. My case study suggests that sex worker job satisfaction is directly tied to pleasure. Future lines of inquiry in sociological studies of labor, especially research on sex work, should explore the role of pleasure in work.

I hope my focus on pleasure throughout this book will help people better understand the motivations for working in online sex work, as well as the complex social interactions between cam models and customers. The sociological theory of pleasure I offer emphasizes that societal institutions, social norms, culture, and social context all shape how our bodies experience pleasure, and that pleasure is an understudied motivation for social behavior. Pleasure is a social experience. The pleasures we feel in our social interactions reflect a complex interplay, or a symbiotic relationship, between affectual and corporeal pleasures that are conditioned by social context and culture. My goal is to open up an entirely new subfield in sociology—the sociology of pleasure. The sociology of pleasure can provide new insights into the motivations for social behavior and assist sociologists in analyzing social interactions in everyday life.

Critical Pedagogy

My investment in critical pedagogy guided the writing of this book. In traditional positivist empirical research, there is no room for social critique and personal experience. My goal is to educate people about the camming industry, but pursue this goal with a deep commitment to transformative social justice, and I present and incorporate data in ways that I hope inspire readers to think about this capitalist industry in critical ways. In what follows, I discuss my use of progressive stacking, autoethnography, and the pornographic imagination, and I discuss my belief that these choices advance critical pedagogies. I hope that other sociologists will adopt and expand on these critical pedagogies in ways that advance the discipline by not only making sociological research more inclusive but by bringing more critical attention to the social-justice issues the people we study face. This will require that researchers be willing to adopt queer methods and let go of their investments in rigid positivist epistemological and methodological traditions in the interest of advancing transformative social justice.
Progressive Stacking

Activists use progressive stacking during their meetings to structure the flow of dialogue and to ensure that marginalized people's voices are heard and they have a voice in all decision-making. When used by the Occupy Wall Street movement in the United States, activists emphasized that people who have been historically marginalized by the systems of capitalism, White supremacy, cissexism, heterosexism, and ableism should always speak before people who are privileged by these systems. As another example, there are educators who use progressive stacking in their classrooms. I do not doubt that there are also researchers who prepare and publish their data with an eye toward being inclusive. However, the widespread, intentional, and systematic use of progressive stacking is not evident in contemporary sociological research. The use of progressive stacking in the presentation of research is not merely a symbolic gesture—if used widely by researchers, progressive stacking has the potential to transform knowledge.

As the writer of this book, I have an enormous amount of discursive power because I decide whose voices to use, and how and when I use their voices. With this in mind, I used progressive stacking to determine the ordinal presentation of both quantitative and qualitative data. In the social sciences, in the presentation of quantitative data related to gender, researchers generally present data for men first. Often, researchers do not even survey transgender and nonbinary people. This persistent practice by social scientists reifies the social hierarchy created by patriarchy and cissexism; applying progressive stacking resolves this problem via the inversion of hierarchal systems for all demographic variables. Scholars can apply progressive stacking to the presentation of qualitative data, as well.

I applied progressive stacking both to the selection of quotations and to the order in which they appear. The application of progressive stacking prioritized the voices of people of color, people from Latin America, trans people, queer people, and people with disabilities. This strategy does not mean that I do not present the voices of people who came from privileged social locations, but I made deliberate choices to ensure, for example, that the lives of people of color and trans people are prominent and visible. This strategy is crucial because people of color and trans
people are underrepresented in mainstream or so-called generalist sociological research.

Progressive stacking is an imperfect system, and its application in research can be tricky. My goal here is not to construct a highly systematized rubric that could be applied by scholars uniformly—doing so would be a misstep. Any attempt to create a standardized instrument for applying progressive stacking will miss the importance of researchers thinking carefully about how intersecting systems and various contexts shape people's social positions, as well as their experiences with inequality. It is difficult to neatly apply progressive stacking because identities are intersectional and overlap. The spirit of progressive stacking and the idea I am advocating, though, calls for researchers to be more thoughtful about how they choose what data to present and to acknowledge that how scholars present data matters. I believe that progressive stacking and inclusive methodologies must become the rule in sociological research—not the exception. I call on more researchers to embrace progressive stacking as a formal research technique because doing so can directly increase the visibility of marginalized people and if adopted on a grander scale can help to disrupt various systems of oppression and their institutionalization in academic research.

Autoethnography

Anthropologist David Hayano refers to autoethnography as the use of ethnography by a researcher to study their “own people.” Sociologist Carol Ellis and communications scholar Arthur P. Bochner describe autoethnography as “an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.”

Autoethnography allows the researcher to use personal narrative constructively, as data, to reveal insights about social institutions and social interactions.

I decided to also use autoethnographic vignettes and stories about my experiences as a former sex worker. As sociologists Orne and Bell note, “Many forms of autoethnography are based in a critical pedagogy, seeking to disrupt the often colonial and powerful ‘researchers’ with indigenous, post-colonial, and marginalized voices.” I push back on what it means to be a scientist and researcher. My voice, along with my
participants, can help to push back against positivist sciences that often silence people of color, poor people, trans people, and people such as sex workers whom society too often sees as deviant and whose voices are deemed invalid. As Ellis, Adams, and Bochner argue:

Those who advocate and insist on canonical forms of doing and writing research are advocating a White, masculine, heterosexual, middle/upper-classed, Christian, able-bodied perspective. Following these conventions, a researcher not only disregards other ways of knowing but also implies that other ways necessarily are unsatisfactory and invalid. Autoethnography, on the other hand, expands and opens up a wider lens on the world, eschewing rigid definitions of what constitutes meaningful and useful research.²⁹

Using autoethnography can help to bring an honesty and intimacy to writing that we do not often find in scientific research. I hope using autoethnographic vignettes and reflections will help to introduce a writing style that my readers find engaging.

The Pornographic Imagination

Researchers often censor depictions and accounts of actual sex from scholarly work. This erasure can cause scholars to miss essential features of people’s lives. In “The Pornographic Imagination,” Susan Sontag observes that pornography is generally denounced as lowbrow trash and famously makes the case that literary texts that foray into the pornographic are, in fact, literature. She argues that because scholars in the humanities cannot divorce their moral sensibilities from their evaluation of literature, they will never see pornography as valuable art. I would like to raise a line of inquiry similar to Sontag’s. What explains the lack of pornographic imagination in sociology? What explains the absence of actual sex in a lot of the research published in the sociology of sexualities? If a sociologist employs material categorizable as pornographic—that is, if they ask explicit questions about sex or if they include graphic narratives from respondents about sex acts or if they dare to accompany a text with pornographic imagery—would these choices call into question the scientific legitimacy of their work?
A sociological imagination is not antithetical to a pornographic imagination. If a sociological text reads pornographically, it does not cease to be sociology. As Sontag notes in her discussion of Bataille, certain works of his qualify as pornographic texts insofar as their theme is an all-engrossing sexual quest that annihilates every consideration of persons extraneous to their roles in the sexual dramaturgy, and the fulfillment of this quest is depicted graphically. But this description conveys nothing of the extraordinary quality of these books. For sheer explicitness about sex organs and acts is not necessarily obscene; it only becomes so when delivered in a particular tone, when it has acquired a certain moral resonance.

Sontag’s words are instructive. The problem in sociology, not unlike in the humanities, is that the mere sight of pornographic data, language, or imagery triggers concerns around morality, stigma, and legitimacy. Yet, I would argue, and as I hope to demonstrate here, sociologists can write explicitly about sex without compromising the quality and value of their empirical and theoretical contributions. It does not devalue the work, quite the opposite—the use of pornographic questions, the inclusion of pornographic data, and the use of pornographic language and pornographic imagery give us a deeper insight into humanity and human behavior. In this book, I do not shy away from explicit discussion of sex and I present pornographic imagery. The people I studied sell sex online; to hide frank discussions or imagery of sex would do them an injustice and would fail to capture the most radical elements of their work. Only through the presentation of pornographic data can I thoroughly analyze the complex forms of pleasure that performers experience.

Analytical Frameworks

*The Polymorphous Paradigm of Sex Work*

Feminists have written extensively about sex work. Their debates about sex work became known to academics as the Sex Wars. The first charge in this proverbial war was led by culturally conservative radical feminists
who focused on only the exploitative characteristics of sex work (particularly misogyny in pornography).³² Pro-sex feminists fired back by focusing primarily on the agency of sex workers and the empowerment found in sex work.³³ Sex radicals argued that sex work is contingent on both danger and pleasure.³⁴ Carol Vance argued that the theoretical debates among feminists over whether sex work is inherently exploitative or empowering were problematic because they were reductive. Concurring with Vance, sociologist Ronald Weitzer refers to this as the oppression/empowerment paradigm. As Weitzer argues:

Both the oppression and empowerment perspectives are one-dimensional and essentialist. While exploitation and empowerment are certainly present in sex work, there is sufficient variation across time, place, and sector to demonstrate that sex work cannot be reduced to one or the other. An alternative perspective, what I call the polymorphous paradigm, holds that there is a constellation of occupational arrangements, power relations, and worker experiences.³⁵

My analyses are guided by the polymorphous paradigm, or the theoretical standpoint that the experiences of sex workers are fluid—workers in any field are likely to have varied experiences of exploitation and job satisfaction. The camming industry is exploitative, and workers face other forms of discrimination in the market based on their subjectivities and embodiments—camming is still capitalist labor—but their work also allows them to subvert antiquated ideas about sexuality, and thus also produces empowerment and pleasure.

**Intersectionality**

As noted above, this project’s analytical framework draws from the polymorphous paradigm of sex work and the recognition that adult webcam performers’ workplace experiences are diverse and likely to include both experiences of exploitation and empowerment. However, workplaces are not neutral meritocracies. Worker’s social identities play a role in how their employers and customers perceive them and remunerate workers’ for their labor.³⁶ The experiences workers have in the workplace are affected by their social positioning in various systems of stratification.
Intersectionality is a critical framework used to analyze the ways that various social markers of identity simultaneously work to condition our all our experiences in society. Beginning in the 1980s, legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw criticized conceptions of discrimination for analyzing subordination along only one single axis. Challenging legal policies regarding race-based and sex-based discrimination lawsuits, she wrote:

[T]his focus on the most privileged group members marginalizes those who are multiply burdened and obscures claims that cannot be understood as resulting from discrete sources of discrimination. . . . Black women are sometimes excluded from feminist theory and antiracist policy discourse because both are predicated on a discrete set of experiences that often does not accurately reflect the intersection of race and gender.37

In subsequent work, Crenshaw used cases of battering and the rape of women to further her astute analysis of the deficiencies within both feminist and antiracist discourses in addressing the marginalization of Black women.

Along with Crenshaw, sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has famously critiqued liberal feminism and gynocentrism38 by noting that Black women’s oppression is experienced along three interlocking dimensions, which she refers to as the economic, political, and ideological realms. All women do not have a core or shared experience of oppression, because other aspects of identity (e.g., race) also affect our experiences of oppression. Black feminists have a strong track record of highlighting the importance of race, gender, class, and sexual identity in conditioning individuals’ experiences.39

Scholars tend to use intersectionality in studying the lives of people who are situated on the lower tiers of social hierarchies—that is, people who are disadvantaged by capitalism, racism, sexism, heterosexism, cissexism, and ableism. However, people have both advantages and disadvantages due to their positions in multiple systems.40 As with my cautionary note about progressive stacking, in many cases, intersectional identities can be complex and tricky; an individual could receive privilege from their position in one system (e.g., race), but be disadvantaged because of their position in another, overlapping system (e.g., gender).
Intersectionality has now become a standard analytical tool in gender studies. The primary way scholars employ intersectionality has been through the case study method, which is how I use it in this study of erotic webcam performers. Generally, those scholars “who are interested in intersectionality use the case study method to identify a new or invisible group—at the intersection of multiple categories—and proceed to uncover the differences and complexities of experience embodied in that location.” McCall identifies this method as the “intracategorical approach,” while Choo and Ferree call it the “group-centered approach.” Whichever term is adopted by scholars, the point of this intersectional research is to study an invisible or hidden population—one that has been ignored by scholars and social institutions. My intersectional approach aims to demonstrate how cam models’ positioning along different social axes conditions their workplace experiences. Since the full range of what can be accomplished via the use of intersectional analysis in sociological research has not yet been achieved, this case study of webcam modeling also contributes to the advancement of intersectional theory.

Overview of the Book

*Camming* tells a pornographic story about a growing online sex work industry where people find decent wages, friendship, intimacy, community, empowerment, and pleasure. This book is not a utopian tale. Cam models, like all sex workers, must grapple with exploitation, discrimination, harassment, and stigma. It is also crucial that we think transnationally and remember that economic growth is not evenly felt and that the camming industry remains inaccessible to many. The inequality generated by global capitalism means that, for so many people around the world, the costs associated with becoming a cam model are prohibitive and access to the technologies and private space required to cam are not available. The resources required to begin camming can force people to work under exploitative conditions in studios, and can also be a reason why street-based escorts working under deplorable conditions who want to migrate into online indirect sex work cannot. The camming industry can be lauded for creating an opportunity for safe and legal sex work that allows workers to earn decent wages, have more autonomy, work less, find community, and experience pleasure.
However, this opportunity is not open to the most economically vulnerable people around the world and the market privileges White bodies and native English speakers, especially from the US.

This book uses the camming industry as a springboard for an analysis of sexuality, gender, race, and labor in a historical moment when workers globally are facing increased economic instability and alienation, and who under these conditions also desperately want to recapture dignity and pleasure in work. People are not solely motivated to sell sex online because they need a job to pay their bills. Their stories are complex and show that a desire for pleasure and intimacy guide their decisions to become and stay cam models. What makes camming unique and unlike other employment in the gig economy is that it is a capitalist industry that does not require the sacrifice of pleasure. Being successful requires that workers provide pleasure to others and acquire pleasure for themselves. In camming, unlike other sex work industries, the safe conditions of labor provided by the online context contributes to the experience of pleasure as a fundamental part of their work.

My theory of pleasure applies not only to sex work or to industries like camming where people say their work is pleasurable. If people say their work is not pleasurable, this raises revealing questions. Why is so much work not pleasurable? Why and how do different aspects of worker subjectivity also compound the experience of displeasure in work? Traditional capitalist labor is rooted in exploitation. As Karl Marx argued, capitalism thrives through the estrangement of labor, through the alienation of workers. Capitalism necessitates the sacrifice of pleasure. For scholars who study work, studying pleasure—even its absence—is essential. By drawing on the experiences of erotic webcam performers, I demonstrate the usefulness of a sociological theory of pleasure.