

Racial Homophily and Homogeneity as Post-Racial Commodification in *BrokeStraightBoys.tv*

MICHAEL JOHNSON, JR.

The emergence of reality TV presaged a new era in U.S. television. Today, viewers' familiarity with the genre has resulted in a decline in its popularity. However, this essay examines a new incarnation of the genre with the emergence of *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* (2014–), also known simply as *Broke Straight Boys* as well as *Broke Straight Boys TV*, on the Here TV channel. But its appearance there is not quite what it may seem, given that viewers do not access this new reality series through a typical cable network provider. Instead, in lieu of that sort of traditional distribution system, viewers pay a monthly subscription fee to access the Here TV Premium channel on YouTube, where the series airs. During the series' first season, subscribers were granted access to a total of eight episodes of drama-filled reality programming, ranging in length from twenty to forty minutes each, totaling approximately three hours of content (Here).

Until very recently, pornography was something regarded as socially unacceptable by most members of "polite society"—porn stars remained social outcasts and were usually associated with prostitution, and, as a consequence, pornography was something one watched in private but did not talk about in public. Because *BrokeStraightBoys.tv*'s target demographic is primarily gay men, the significance posed by this challenge cannot be overstated, especially given the relative importance that adult film has for the gay male demographic in the United States during an era punctuated by easy and ready technological accessibility like that available through

the Internet (Dixon; Jensen; Thomas). Indeed, according to Joe Thomas, by 2010

the important studios had expanded their web presence—offering pictures, streaming video, and downloads—to the point that Falcon [a major gay pornography studio] expected Internet revenues to exceed wholesale [revenues].... Entirely new studios also emerged with products that were exclusively available as subscription services on the web.... In fact, the Internet soon became major competition to the established studios [75].

Thomas ultimately argues that with the "explosion of Internet porn and the growth of overseas studios, gay porn is clearly a full participant in the new globalized economy" (81). The popularity of pornography in gay culture is related to an identity-making practice, and at least one study has found that gay men view pornographic videos and Internet pornography at more than twice the rate of heterosexual men (Duggan and McCreary 51–52).

According to Thomas, among members of the gay male demographic, pornography has historically enjoyed an elevated position of worth relative to other types of media depictions of same-sex desire. He states, "Porn has always held a more accepted, even exalted position in gay culture than in straight; as sexual outlaws, gays were less concerned about being called perverts.... What better way to assert a gay identity than by the open, casual acceptance and celebration of homophobically dreaded sex acts?" (Thomas 82). Thomas' assertion is supported by other scholars including Michael Bronski, who argues that the "omnipresence of sexual imagery in gay media—even beyond pornography—has been explained as a way for gays to create a 'positive definition' for themselves" (166). Given the foregoing importance that gay pornography has in the popular consciousness of many (though admittedly not all) gay men, it makes sense that a reality TV series like *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* would generate a significant degree of interest among, if not also have a profound impact on the viewing habits of, its target viewers.

As I have argued elsewhere, "Within the wider cultural framework, mainstream gay pornography has a special relationship with the subculture to which it caters.... For gay men, [this relationship becomes] constituted and cemented in the popular consciousness explicitly through the influential discourses of same-sex desire and sexuality depicted in gay pornography" (182–183). *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* accomplishes this same goal, albeit through a different mechanism that leverages audience members' interest in gay porn actors—except without the explicit depiction of sexual acts. It is precisely because the series is "explicitly asexual" that gay men may be even more attracted and incentivized to watch these actors' non-performative behaviors as a potential insight into their "authentic" selves (presumably an identity only perceivable outside of the sexual settings of their employment). Increasingly, gay porn has moved beyond simple scenes of sexual activity to focus

more on plot devices, story arcs, character development, and even serialization in order to remain relevant in the highly competitive digital era, giving rise to viewer interest in actors' off-screen lives.

This phenomenon, whereby the subject of the *straight* male porn actors' lives are examined in much closer detail, in circumstances explicitly outside of the pornographic scenes that viewers are typically accustomed to, makes the series especially titillating and provocative because of its illusion of behind-the-scenes intimacy. What follows is my assessment of both the influence of the series in terms of the messages it communicates to its target audience and the political economic meanings associated with those messages. This essay will also investigate the series' messages about the humanity of its employee/actor/cast members' sexual labor within a highly competitive milieu of mass-mediated commodities and the influence such competition has on televisual racial diversity in an allegedly "post-racial" society.

First, I describe the theoretical background and methodologies employed in this research. Second, I briefly summarize the literature on reality TV and its application to this series. Third, I diagram and explain the complex negotiations that straight men face in their capacity as "gay-for-pay" pornographic actors and in regard to the corresponding economics of their performance. Finally, I conclude with an assessment of the series in terms of its racial politics as applied to its production, distribution, and conspicuous consumption. Although *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* offers only the briefest glimpses of pornographic scenes and alludes to the choreographed preparation required for them, the series itself is intrinsically wedded to the employment of its actors and the ensuing personal and socioeconomic struggles that arise from their unique choice of employment.

Sharif Mowlabocus contends that "gay porn is securing the parameters of gay identity, forming ever more impenetrable boundaries and validating a set of identifications and practices at the expense of all others. If the potential of homosexual pornography is to *queer* reality, then the reality of gay porn serves to condense homosexuality into a single overarching identity; one that does little to challenge hegemonic norms or liberate sexuality" (71, original emphasis). However, I would argue that *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* attempts to illustrate the normalcy of a type of *heterosexualized* liberation from the traditional homonormative foundations of gay pornography by bringing to the screen depictions of gay-for-pay performers as human beings irreducible to their bodily, sexual functions, complete with life goals, aspirations, and problems that most people face outside of the bedroom and other sexual settings. Of course, this is not to say that the series does not suffer from a number of equally problematic issues which, to some extent, undermine its liberatory potential. Ron Becker suggests that there is plenty of evidence to explain how this liberation has come to pass:

Television's queer straight guys certainly suggest that the relationship between hegemonic masculinity and (homo)sexuality is shifting. It would be surprising if it weren't, since LGBTQ political activism and cultural visibility [have] destabilized elements important to certain heteronormative configurations of gender, desire, and identity.... LGBTQ politics ... have advanced alternative ways to think about the purposes of erotic pleasure and have helped normalize a wide range of sexual practices [124].

Becker ultimately wonders "how different straight male sexuality might look in an actually realized post-closet culture where being gay is defined by one's cultural identity rather than one's sexual practice, where the line between gay and straight is assumed secure, and where one's masculinity is not defined by one's repudiation of homosexuality or haunted by the closet" (133). As such, he raises an intriguing and difficult question. One answer might lie in the proliferation of gay-for-pay male actors in the gay porn industry, given the increasing frequency with which these straight men willingly perform gay sex acts (to varying degrees of consumer persuasiveness), especially when they conceive of their gay sex acts perpetually through "heterosexual lenses" of performativity.

BrokeStraightBoys.tv is rife with examples that attempt to answer Becker's question. In the first episode of the series, Denver Grand enthusiastically defines his job as follows: "I have sex with guys, *like they're girls*. That's what I do." For Denver at least, his gay sex acts represent a type of heterosexualized sex, albeit with a male substitution. Another example includes the developing romance between Paul Canon and Damien Kyle, which is featured in the eighth episode. Although Damien has consistently maintained his bisexuality, Paul's original heterosexual identity is depicted as changing to a more fluid one only *after* he has become employed with BluMedia's *BrokeStraightBoys.tv*. But before going into further detail about the depictions offered to viewers through *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* and the concomitant inferences one might draw from the scenes between its performers, I must first explain both the theoretical and methodological approaches utilized in this research. For the purposes of this analysis, given the ways by which this reality television series is both branded by its creators and marketed to consumers, I adopt Jonathan Gray's argument of interpreting popular telenarratives as "entertainment" commodities (811). To that end, I employ a mixed methodology that combines both textual and political economic analysis.

Methodology

Textual analysis, which focuses on discursive forces present in a text, is an important means of understanding how individuals and societies constitute

themselves and make sense of the larger world in which they live. It can usefully interrogate how mass-mediated commodities create identities and “construct authoritative truths” (Saukko 23) for those who use (or are represented as using) them, thereby illuminating the participatory (or non-participatory) role social actors possess in the creation, reflection, and consumption of those truths. The multiple interpretations of a given “text” frequently look different when they are examined in relation to other texts or social sensibilities; as such, the task of analysis is not to ascertain the “most correct” reading but rather to explore some of the possible and undiscovered interpretations embedded in the targets of textual analysis. This proposition is particularly applicable to the study of mass-mediated commodities that engender strong feelings within the reality TV genre as manifested through images and sounds that “invite the reader to ‘feel and feel’ and, thereby, feel in touch with the real” (Saukko 109). Accordingly, this research examines *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* as a type of audiovisual telenarrative text and commodity. It utilizes textual analysis to examine the method by which this telenarrative “text” gains social value over time through its conspicuous consumption by its gay male audience. Necessary to this examination is an investigation that determines the degree to which viewers consume mass-mediated commodities like this series, which is created through a corporatized process of production involving financial transactions whose economic profits accrue in only one direction.

As T.V. Reed points out, “Whatever else popular culture may be, it is deeply embedded in capitalist, for-profit mass production” (141). The strength of textual analysis lies in its ability to expose the (1) discourses through which texts communicate their messages, (2) sociopolitical contexts by which those messages are situated or mediated, and (3) lived experiences those messages attempt to represent or replicate. While attempting to get to the “truth” of a particular target, textual analysis facilitates multiple, multidimensional, nuanced, and tentative ways of understanding while frequently employing deconstructive techniques that expose the “historicity, political investments, omissions, and blind spots of social ‘truths’” (Saukko 21) that are understood as possessing their own continuously contested but often tightly regulated possibilities. This essay’s political economic analysis examines how exchanges of both financial and social capital, along with socioeconomic labor practices, give rise to—or undermine—different kinds of social relations between consumers, employees, and business owners. One of the questions this mixed methodology attempts to answer, therefore, is how do consumers’ social relationships to telenarrative commodities such as *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* work in tandem with evolving conceptions of socioeconomic value for an explicitly gay male audience? In this regard, I argue that *BrokeStraightBoys.tv*’s value is directly proportional to the belief that the scenes viewers are exposed to are

convincingly “authentic” or “real.” But what does “reality” mean in relation to “reality TV” today, and who decides? What is “real” and what is not? This has been a perpetual question since the appearance of reality television programming. If the episodes and/or scenes that audience members watch are contrived, what then constitutes the claim of “reality” promulgated and marketed by such series?

Verisimilitude and “Reality” Television

As Mark Andrejevic has noted, one distinguishing element that television networks and series producers emphasize with regard to reality television programs is that “the surveillance of the characters is, for the period they are on the show, comprehensive.... The premise of the show is that the cast members live in a kind of panopticon—not everything they are doing is taped and watched, but they have to live with the knowledge that at any moment, their words and actions could be taped for broadcast” (260). However, in the case of *BrokeStraightBoys.tv*, this phenomenon does not really apply. Throughout the entire first season, the viewer is never exposed to the kinds of uniform surveillance to which Andrejevic refers. The series’ format does not reproduce many of the typical surveillance tropes commonly associated with related sorts of series, such as CBS’s *Big Brother* (2000–), that it attempts to emulate. Although this essay does not attempt to measure *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* against the ephemeral definition of what constitutes true “reality,” I do intend to explore the way this definition “functions to reinforce the logic of a surveillance-based [commodity]” (Andrejevic 260) whose consumption is predicated upon viewers’ belief in the veracity of the events that unfold before their eyes, as well as the economic inferences one can draw from such consumption. Moreover, as Andrejevic makes clear, series such as *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* function as a type of cultural exemplar that “ought not be considered in isolation from the socioeconomic contexts within which they emerge and gain a certain degree of acceptance” (260).

Indeed, the attraction to *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* is at least partially related to what Andrejevic contends is the myth offered up by such series, whereby “audience members gain meaningful control over the content of television programming when that programming becomes ‘real.’ They are no longer force-fed the rehashed formulas pounded out by hack Hollywood scriptwriters.... Content becomes liberated from the inbred coterie of scriptwriters and directors, to be replaced by the spontaneous rhythms of real conflict and real romance” (261) that hallmark *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* across the various episodes of its first season. Series like *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* reinforce the value of this marketing strategy, which equates self-disclosure with freedom and

authenticity, while simultaneously suggesting that televisual realness can be guaranteed through the persistent gaze of a camera (Andrejevic 268). This endorsement of the camera's gaze as a validation mechanism of authenticity is the method by which audiences are assured that the images and actions they are being exposed to are "real," as is the case with most reality TV programs. Given that the target audience for *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* is already incentivized (as I have previously established), audience members' reliance on the verisimilitude of the series, episode by episode, takes on even greater social significance.

The series' debut episode, which is titled "Welcome to Broke Straight Boys" and aired on December 19, 2014, is tagged with the following description:

Broke Straight Boys is a reality-based docu-series that explores the world of "Gay for Pay," a term used to describe when straight men do gay porn for money. The show focuses on the people involved in this taboo and unconventional lifestyle, exploring the dynamic relationships between the owner of BluMedia, Mark Erickson, his business staff, and the young men who choose to do gay porn to supplement their income by performing for the adult website brokestraightboys.com. As dysfunctional a family as you will ever find, this group of colorful characters *keep you mesmerized at every moment*. From seeing them rehearse scenes in the studio to hearing their unbelievable perspective on life, money, and the pursuit of porn, *you won't be able to look away, even when you want to*. In this episode, a new group of performers arrives at the website owner's mansion for BSB orientation [Here, emphasis added].

From the very beginning, viewers are introduced and acclimated to the expectation that they will be given a behind-the-scenes view of the lives of these actors; the metaphorical language is instructive. It is equally compelling that the description includes the term "docu-series," which invokes the representational belief that the series mimics a hybrid type of documentary. Yet, even in the introductory montage of the series' first episode, viewers learn that "every noise you make is fake, every thrust you do is fake" from the lips of Kaden Alexander, the series' only cast member of color. This disclosure functions in juxtaposition to the series' description of a kind of hybrid documentary to further elaborate upon the "insider's view" gained by one's subscription to the show. Words and phrases such as "colorful characters," "mesmerized," and "dysfunctional" serve as signposts to audience members (and potential viewers as a marketing device) to expect that the series will provide them with a very specific type of performance from its cast members. Moreover, this description further operates to fulfill viewers' expectations that the series will traffic in familiar tropes that can be found within the genre.

In the episode "Welcome to Broke Straight Boys," viewers' expectations are indeed fulfilled when the "boys" are shown being picked up and traveling to their ultimate destination: the home of BluMedia owner Mark Erickson.

This large, modernist home, located in a suburban/rural setting, is emblematic of the reality TV formula with which many viewers are already well familiar. This setting, where the vast majority of the series' action takes place, is reminiscent of the large homes found on *Big Brother*, *The Real World* (1992–), and other reality telenarratives that rely upon ostentatious displays of socioeconomic wealth (in terms of overall square footage, leisure amenities, and ready accessibility to entertainment opportunities) as an enticement to series participants. The similarities do not end with setting, as viewers soon find the cast members traveling to Las Vegas in episode two, titled "Viva Las Vegas." Its description states, "The guys who are 21 and over take a trip to Las Vegas to promote brokestraightboys.com in the clubs and have some fun" (Here). While they are there, viewers find that their employer spends lavishly on his male employees in terms of nightclub entertainment and a stretch Hummer limousine. These are the prototypical characteristics commonly associated with other reality television series, wherein participants eventually accrue material wealth by virtue of their participation. The same rings true with regard to *BrokeStraightBoys.tv*, with the exception that, in this case, the participants are employees rather than contestants. Indeed, just about a minute into the premiere episode's opening montage, viewers learn that "gay porn pays 10X more than straight porn"; these words are accompanied by endorsements from Denver and Cage Kafig. But the series has a very significant dilemma differentiating between the two categories: Are these employees also contestants in a larger, more complex socioeconomic game of chance wherein those who "win" are rewarded and those who "lose" are punished (perhaps with termination)?

Another common trope of the reality television genre is that losing contestants must eventually leave the house (or other setting) of the series. In episode three, "The Moment of Truth," viewers see Denver leave the house in a conflicted, emotional scene that invokes the dual images of "loser contestant" and "employee termination." Not coincidentally, his departure symbolically communicates the unambiguous message to the privileged few remaining about the need to stay relevant in a highly competitive market of sexual attraction, with its demands for constantly new (and disposable) faces. Contemporaneous with Denver's unexpected departure is the arrival of the only Broke Straight Boy of color, Kaden, an attractive, young African American man with a winning smile and a slight but muscular build. Their exchange of place is not lost on viewers when one examines the significance of this development in relation to the pornography industry and its highly prescribed but somewhat limited availability of racial diversity—until this moment, in terms of the overall composition of the residents of the house, the possibility of having sexual scenes with a man of color has not existed. The racial politics of sexual desire are in many ways directly related to the employability of at least one

man in the series. However, the financial consequences of sex work of this kind are also accompanied by an array of adjacent antagonisms that implicate the stability of personal relationships while also calling into question the legitimacy of some men's public performativity of heterosexuality.

I am much less concerned with the economic profitability of the industry as a whole than with the working conditions and financial justifications behind why the actors on *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* appear to be so financially motivated (as they regularly cite money as a primary factor behind their choice of employment) and what influence, if any, money has in terms of advancing a "queerer heterosexuality" among the members of the series' cast. Notably in this regard, Jane Ward states:

The characterization of straight-identified MSMs [men who have sex with men] as closeted also exemplifies the persistent tendency to view sex *acts* as meaningful and objective indicators of a true sexual selfhood and to gloss over larger questions about the gendered and racialized construction of heterosexual and homosexual categories.... The recent insistence that MSMs are actually closeted gay men constrained by ... culturally internal forms of homophobia has helped to solidify a narrow and essentialist conceptualization of homophobia [415, original emphasis].

Pointedly, "The Moment of Truth" episode finds Kaden out on a date with a white girl, whereupon he incrementally discloses the truth about his chosen profession as a gay-for-pay actor. Sadly, his date reacts very emotionally to this news and abandons him with a contrived excuse, to which he responds that "there are more fish in the sea." At least in this example, viewers are compelled to infer that occurrences like this one are commonplace for heterosexually identified men in similar situations; in this regard, Ward's assertions about the meaningfulness of sex acts as objective indicators rings true not only for some men, but also frequently for their potential partners. Indeed, in the same episode viewers are also introduced to the stories of self-disclosure pertaining to Paul Canon and Jimmy Johnson in relation to their family members and friends and the wide array of reactions that result from sharing such news with those most important in these men's lives.

Accordingly, it is perhaps of little surprise when the series directly challenges audience members' notions of the authenticity and stability of its cast members' heterosexuality in its fifth episode, "Someone's Gotta Go," when viewers end up discovering just how "straight" these "gay-for-pay" actors really are as they "undergo boot camp and a lie detector test" (Here). In this episode, BluMedia owner Mark Erickson and chief operating officer Shannon Prewitt decide to subject their employees to a polygraph examination. The rationale they use for doing so is embodied in Shannon's statement that links the "number one question" the boys regularly encounter on their mandatory public outings with expressed consumer skepticism about the existence and stability of their heterosexuality. Thus, the indispensability of an indisputable

heteronormative performativity is linked to the commodification of that identity as a vehicle of profit so much so that, at least in the minds of both the company's owner and COO, scientific proof is required. Pointedly, the polygrapher makes clear that the test can only confirm the veracity of behaviors rather than the assumption of a sexual identity, but it appears to the viewer that, in the minds of the business leadership at least, such information is sufficient for making important business decisions. This perception is confirmed in the eighth and final episode of the first season, "Porn Never Sleeps," when the company's owner makes clear that the hiring process is one that purposely weeds out gay men; the significance of this process to the company's overall business logic is confirmed later in the same episode when producer/director Shane Heiser states, "I think doing the webcam interviews is really crucial because that definitely weeds out the gay guys."

Thus, the overall message that viewers take away from this final episode of the first season is that the convincing appearance of hegemonic heterosexuality is central to the company's profitability and ongoing existence. Earlier in that episode, viewers find Damian Christopher (a BluMedia "creative director") talking with Kaden and conspiratorially asking, "Paul and Damien are close—do you think they're a little bit closer *than they should be?*" (emphasis added), as if to suggest that non-hegemonic heterosexuality demands strict conformity while cast members appear either on the television series or even in the limited privacy of their workplace/home. Christopher's words suggest a rigid and inflexible social policing of both actors to help ensure that they conform to the limiting expectations of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity, and they beg the question of why he is so invested in soliciting information of this kind. Is this salaciousness simply a plot device? Do Paul's and Damien's personal, nonconformist, off-screen sexual acts imperil their employment with the company? Moreover, one wonders what responsibility a "creative director" has in regulating employees' off-screen sexual behaviors? Dissatisfied with Kaden's initial response, Christopher continues by stating that he "keeps hearing rumors ... that something's going on with them. Do you think they're together?" To this, Kaden responds, "They do things that 'normal guys' don't do.... I think the gay porn thing opened up a door ... there's definitely..." and, completing his statement, Christopher says, "Something's going on." The entire conversation traffics in the worst kinds of social policing at the expense of both Paul's and Damien's sexual freedom from the ruthlessly imposed confines of hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity. That this conversation appears to take place outside of both Paul's and Damien's purview further solidifies the conspiratorial nature of the information being discussed as somehow taboo. Ironically, it is the company's owner, Mark Erickson, who states that "It's kind of weird that my two top models are in an affair together.... The members want to see two

straight guys in hardcore gay sex.... It will be interesting to see what happens—will the ratings go up, will the ratings go down.” The consequences for the business and the livelihood of employees on *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* are therefore intrinsically related to, and predicated upon (for better or for worse), a business logic of viewer demand and personal popularity that caters to sexual fetishization of “authentic” heterosexuality.

Unfortunately, that logic fails to account for the fact that many men who choose to eschew a hegemonic heterosexuality can nevertheless still adequately perform to a reliable sexual conclusion. As Jeffrey Escoffier points out, the effectiveness of video pornography “stems from its ability to satisfy the viewer’s expectation that the sex is plausibly ‘real’ in some way.... A ‘documentary illusion’ exists in the photographic pornographic genres, which promise to enact certain sexual fantasies and certify them through the ‘authenticity’ of *erections* ... and *orgasms*” (536, original emphasis), but the fact remains that this sense of authenticity can itself be fabricated with the consumption of today’s pharmaceutical remedy, Viagra, and its other analogues. Moreover, the ability of sexually nonconformist men to reliably and successfully deliver a heteronormative sexual performance is most significantly influenced by their fidelity to the applicable sexual scripts. Even in the most ideal of circumstances in which both gay men are performing, there is no guarantee that sexual arousal and orgasm will occur consistently over the many hours of filming required of them. For as Escoffier notes,

The dramatic fabrication is achieved not only by the performers enacting sexual scenes but also by elaborate editing and montage of the filmed sexual acts themselves. Usually the filming of a sexual scene requires many takes, stops and starts, and requires the performers to regain their erections.... Real sex acts are usually performed, but the video representation of them is more coherent than the actual sexual activity being filmed.... The performed act is interrupted many times to arrange shooting angles and lighting and to allow the actors to “get wood”—to regain their erections.... Thus a fifteen-to-twenty-minute sexual scene that the viewer sees is edited and patched together, with soundtrack added, from footage shot over a six or seven hour period [539, 550].

Given the extensive work involved in this highly choreographed affair, one questions the extensive dedication to the search for, solicitation, and confirmation of a hegemonic heterosexual masculinity embodied in the *Broke Straight Boys* series.

Gay-for-Pay Pornography, Economic Profitability and Social Meaning

The commonsensical definition of “gay for pay” is best understood as a heterosexual man who willingly engages in sexual acts with another (often,

but not exclusively) heterosexual man for financial compensation. However, Escoffier contends that “all sexual conduct in the video porn industry is to one degree or another an example of situational sexuality inasmuch as the performers are often required to engage in sexual acts for monetary compensation that they would not otherwise choose to perform and with partners for whom they feel no desire” (534). Discussing the prevalence of gay-for-pay men in the gay porn industry, Escoffier notes that “the prolific director Chi Chi LaRue estimates the number of straight men in gay pornographic videos to be sixty percent” (535). As such, *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* offers a timely intervention by bringing to light this phenomenon during a period of heightened consumption of gay pornography in the digital era.

The popular belief that porn actors’ labor cannot possibly be difficult, considering that they are paid a wage to engage in sex acts (that are universally constructed as always and inevitably enjoyable), belies the reality that such on-camera performances (1) require diligent effort and concentration (particularly in gay male porn, which necessitates a constantly reliable erection) and (2) are not always fulfilling emotionally and/or psychologically, despite all appearances to the contrary as the actor’s dialogue, facial expressions, and behavior convey the very opposite message of heightened emotional desire and sexual excitement. Indeed, I would argue that this dichotomy only illustrates the highly skilled abilities of the actors involved in constructing a scene of sexual excitement that may, in fact, be entirely devoid of emotional or psychological excitement or enjoyment. The working conditions commonly found in the adult entertainment industry inevitably influence and affect the decisions of actors, and these off-stage conditions are not typically as admirable as the final video products might otherwise suggest. “Indeed, in contrast to their Hollywood counterparts, these actors are not protected by unions [and] they receive no pensions, 401k investment opportunities, health insurance benefits, or percentages of their films’ net profits” (Johnson Jr. 185).

Unfortunately, for a variety of reasons and in contrast to other industries, there is substantially less known about the pornography industry (and even less about gay pornography) with regard to issues of labor relations, working conditions, compensation, and other employment-related subjects that normally are well researched and clearly articulated. Georgina Voss makes clear that “the commercial aspects of the industry—industrial dynamics, strategy, technological capabilities, organizational structure—have been given less consideration, and critical examinations of the industry are notably absent, in business studies” (392), despite the fact that the economic profitability of the business is often cited as a primary reason why scholars must engage with it. She further notes that “the business aspects of pornography are rarely the actual focus of academic studies and are often merely the justification for such research” (392). Indeed, I have regularly been met with silence when

approaching mainstream pornography companies due to their reticence to participate in academic studies of their work.

Fortunately, viewers who subscribe to *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* are provided a generous amount of detail about the labor practices of BluMedia on the company's BSB website and through the content of the various episodes themselves. In the premiere episode, for example, Shane Heiser states that he and his colleagues conduct "twenty to twenty-five scenes a month" as an indication of the volume of work involved and the financial lucrativeness of the business of gay pornography. In the second episode, Shannon Prewitt notes that the boys are "traveling from January to December at different Pride events around the country to meet our fans and to meet new fans." Moreover, he states that "they work hard from early in the morning to late in the night [and] their job is to sell product," and "the most important part of their job is to make every person that they come into contact with feel welcome."

Also in the second episode, cast member Jimmy explains, "So the scene that we're doing today will probably end up being like forty minutes on the Internet and will probably take, like, an hour and a half to two hours to actually do it." His comment further emphasizes the tedious nature of filming adult sex acts between straight-identified men and the highly choreographed nature of moving-image pornography, which is a very labor-intensive process. Additionally, the boys' labor includes intense periods of hyperactivity throughout the calendar year, which, according to cast member Sergio Valen in episode two, occasionally compresses "two weeks of work into three days." Pointing to the difficulties associated with being gay-for-pay in the industry, Denver states in the series' third episode, "You can't do this forever. Most guys can't even do this for six months before it's over for them. So it's not like it's a career or something"; it is with no small amount of irony, therefore, that Denver leaves the series at the end of that episode. Later in the season during the series' seventh episode, "Straight Boys, Gay Drama," Adam Baer hurts his back because of an incident with Cage, limiting both his and his scene partner's ability to earn money, which further illustrates the fragile nature of their unique work environment. But even with these many limitations, a much larger and more significant obstacle exists for some actors due solely to their racial identity.

Racial Homophily and "Post-Racial" Commodification

In the aforementioned eighth and final episode of the series' first season, "Porn Never Sleeps," which aired on January 23, 2015, viewers hear cast member Damien announce, "I am not racist; I am not sexually attracted to black

guys," to which Damian Christopher, BluMedia's gay black male "creative director," responds, "I can be your friend but I can't be good enough ... a black male can't be good enough." "I never said you aren't good enough," Damien adds, during an evening meeting at the house. The episode then cuts away to a subsequent (chronologically later) "confessional" during which Christopher says, "I've tried to move beyond it, and I've tried to not take it personal [sic], but I took it a little personal tonight." Returning immediately to the evening meeting around the patio fire, viewers observe Christopher saying, "It does not feel good for someone to say, 'You know what, I'm good enough to be your friend ... but I'm not good enough to sleep with.'"

Cutting back to the confessional, Christopher continues: "How arrogant do you have to be to say that you're not going to sleep with someone because of their skin color?" Cutting again back to the patio, he continues his argument with Damien by posing the question, "So you're telling me that you've never been in the studio where you've been with another model and you didn't do your job?" (at this moment, the camera predictably pans to the face of Kaden, the only Broke Straight Boy of color in the series during its first season). Damien responds by saying, "Once. And you know what? I did it because everyone talked me through it. You know that guy was colored." A brief aside occurs in the conversation during which Shannon Prewitt informs Damien of his linguistic faux pas, to which Damien appears to offer an honest response, explaining how he was at a loss for an appropriate synonym given the racial ambiguity of his scene partner at the time: "I don't know if he's African American, I don't know if he's Indian, what am I supposed to call him?"

Continuing, Christopher (again in a cut to the confessional) states, somewhat disingenuously, that he's "not here to change [Damien's] mind about who, or what, he's supposed to sleep with. But you're going to tell me that you won't sleep with someone of another color—what does that even say about you?" Cutting back to the patio, Damien continues his explanation by pointing to his disposability: "If you guys want to be mad and whatever, go get a different model. I don't want to do it so I'm not. End of story." Christopher, back in the confessional shaking his head, says, "He's got a lot to learn, a hell of a lot to learn." Back on the patio, Shannon asks Kaden how Damien's statement makes him feel, to which he interestingly observes, "Everyone's always going to take partial offense to somebody not doing something because they're black, but I know black guys that won't have sex with a white girl," at which point the conversation quickly moves away to a brief confrontation between Damien and Cage. In a subsequent confessional, Kaden sums up his personal reactions to the event with, "I could[n't] give a rat's ass—all I want is my money."

The entire event comprises a large percentage of the final episode of the

season and reflects the complicated nature of racial politics in sexual choice, especially as they pertain to the adult entertainment industry—an industry notorious for its racial commodification and fetishization. As John Burger pointedly states, “The gay communities are obviously not immune to racism.... These conditions are too deeply imbedded in the white male heritage to be easily eradicated” (54), and, in describing the segmentation in gay pornographic film, he adds, “One is most apt to find, behind these all-black, all-Latin, and all-Asian videos, white capital pulling the strings and naming the names” (55). Most importantly, Burger concludes by observing that “although gay porn may radically rewrite much of history, it unfortunately has not radically positivized the situations of gay men of color in this country” (57).

BrokeStraightBoys.tv is no exception to Burger’s assertion, given its singular man of color in the series and no apparent men of color in positions of power or leadership in the company that produces it. Although Damien is critiqued for his ignorance about the issues of racial inequality in the industry, his failure to recognize that “preferences” aren’t always rooted in racial bias is equally as compelling as the privileging of whiteness as a racial category. Speaking about Marc Dylan (another popular, but gay, pornographic actor), one web blogger expresses frustration that many in the porn industry are often “trying to shift the problem of racial diversity/stereotyping into a discussion of capitalism, demand, and marketplaces. Sure, if we’re going to completely ignore centuries of racial stereotyping and discrimination that have created and maintained narratives of black inferiority, ugliness, and sexual deviance” (CaptainSnarky). While Damien Kyle may be guilty of adopting a logic that “is completely divorced from any understanding of how his white privilege allows him to act as an arbiter of what’s ‘attractive’ or not and how that white privilege is operative in every porn studio out there” (CaptainSnarky), his critics should also recognize that the decisions about who gay-for-pay actors are paired with are not ones entirely of their own making, as viewers see at the end of the eighth episode, when Mark and Shannon actively sift through an array of men and theorize about future pairings. Thus, the logics of the economic market of desire and the capitalist objectives of profitability are just as compelling motivators—and ultimately bear as much responsibility for the perpetuation of the racial status quo—as are the personal preferences of hegemonically white business leaders and consumers. This is something *BrokeStraightBoys.tv* has yet to publicize for its gay viewership, yet it remains something so necessary if the gay “community” is to move forward with a more enlightened consumption of its entertainment commodities.

WORKS CITED

- Andrejevic, Mark. “The Kinder, Gentler Gaze of Big Brother: Reality TV in the Era of Digital Capitalism.” *New Media and Society* 4.2 (2002): 251–270. Print.
- Becker, Ron. “Guy Love: A Queer Straight Masculinity for a Post-Closet Era?” *Queer TV: Theories, Histories, Politics*. Ed. Glyn Davis and Gary Needham. New York: Routledge, 2009. 121–140. Print.
- Bronski, Michael. *Culture Clash: The Making of Gay Sensibility*. Boston: South End Press, 1984. Print.
- Burger, John R. *One-Handed Histories: The Eroto-Politics of Gay Male Video Pornography*. Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 1994. Print.
- CaptainSnarky. “A White Gay Adult Film Star Shares His Poorly Formed Views on Racism.” *Crasstalk*, 7 August 2013. Web. 6 January 2015. <http://crasstalk.com/2013/08/a-white-gay-adult-film-star-shares-his-poorly-formed-views-on-racism/>.
- Dixon, Wheeler Winston. *Streaming: Movies, Media, and Instant Access*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2013. Print.
- Duggan, Scott J., and Donald R. McCreary. “Body Image, Eating Disorders, and the Drive for Muscularity in Gay and Heterosexual Men: The Influence of Media Images.” *Eclectic Views on Gay Male Pornography: Pornucopia*. Ed. Todd Morrison. Binghamton, NY: Harrington Park Press, 2004. 45–58. Print.
- Escoffier, Jeffrey. “Gay-for-Pay: Straight Men and the Making of Gay Pornography.” *Qualitative Sociology* 26.4 (2003): 531–555. Print.
- Gray, Jonathan. “Entertainment and Media/Cultural/Communication/Etc. Studies.” *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 24.6 (2010): 811–817. Print.
- Here TV Premium. “BrokeStraightBoys.tv.” *YouTube*, 19 December 2014. Web. 5 January 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/user/brokestraightboystv>.
- Jensen, Robert. *Getting Off: Pornography and the End of Masculinity*. Boston: South End Press, 2007. Print.
- Johnson, Michael, Jr. “Queer Negotiations Between Love and Work: A Critical Ethnographic Case Study of a Gay Porn Star.” *Queer Love in Film and Television: Critical Essays*. Ed. Pamela Demory and Christopher Pullen. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 181–191. Print.
- Mowlabocus, Sharif. “Gaydar: Gay Men and the Pornification of Everyday Life.” *Pornification: Sex and Sexuality in Media Culture*. Ed. Kaarina Nikunen, Susanna Paasonen, and Laura Saarenmaa. New York: Berg, 2007. 61–71. Print.
- Reed, T.V. “Popular Culture.” *The Year’s Work in Critical and Cultural Theory* 19.1 (2011): 141–158. Print.
- Saukko, Paula. *Doing Research in Cultural Studies: An Introduction to Classical and New Methodological Approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2003. Print.
- Thomas, Joe A. “Gay Male Pornography Since Stonewall.” *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography, and the Sex Industry*, 2d ed. Ed. Ronald Weitzer. New York: Routledge, 2010. 67–89. Print.
- Voss, Georgina. “‘Treating It as a Normal Business’: Researching the Pornography Industry.” *Sexualities* 15.3–4 (2012): 391–410. Print.
- Ward, Jane. “Dude-Sex: White Masculinities and ‘Authentic’ Heterosexuality Among Dudes Who Have Sex with Dudes.” *Sexualities* 11.4 (2008): 414–434. Print.