

## Book Review:

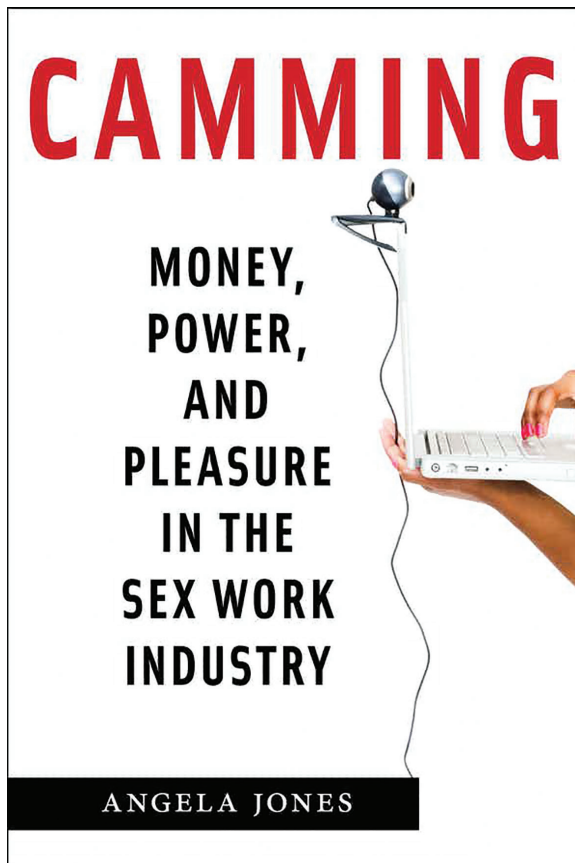
# *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry*

**Jones, Angela**

NEW YORK: NEW YORK UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2020.

**Julia Chan<sup>1</sup>**

CARLETON UNIVERSITY  
Julia.chan [AT] carleton.ca



Camming is a form of online sex work in which models perform for and interact with remote clients via internet-connected webcams. As Angela Jones' book—the first dedicated to this topic—outlines, camming's roots began in 1980s and 1990s phone sex. With early webcam pioneers like the well-known JenniCam site, camming as an industry began in 1996. Today, the camming market is a multibillion-dollar industry.<sup>2</sup> A sociological mixed-methods study, *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry* outlines the various ways in which contemporary cam performers negotiate the world of camming with particular attention to not only the contemporary neoliberal, global capitalist, white supremacist system within which camming is situated, but also the ways in which performers experience a range of pleasures through their work.

Along with other methods such as discourse analysis, autoethnography, surveys, and participant observation, Jones' study comprises a series of interviews with cam performers of

varying ages, genders, abilities, racializations, nationalities, and sexualities. This diversity of performers is intentional; as Jones notes, most popular media accounts privilege the experiences of cisgendered, white, female performers only.<sup>3</sup> The book carefully considers the complicated ways in which overlapping structural oppressions affect cam performers' experiences and their ability to achieve personal, professional, and financial success in the camming world. Importantly, Jones makes clear her own investment and expertise in the subject by including some of her own insights and experiences as a former sex worker and a Black queer woman. Essential to Jones' approach is the notion that many cam models experience complex pleasures from their work—not only sexual pleasure, but those that come from connecting with clients and with other colleagues.

For Jones, “sex workers have always been on the frontlines of the struggle for human and sexual freedom”<sup>4</sup>: sex workers have historically pushed boundaries around sex and pleasure in relation to state and religious authority. In this vein, Jones is particularly interested in understanding how pleasure figures into camming specifically and sex work more generally. She observes that sociology can and should engage with pleasure as a key motivation in people's lives, calling for the development of a “sociology of pleasure.”<sup>5</sup> Pleasure, she argues, is an important motivation for many sex workers, yet is typically denied for most other types of workers. “Why,” Jones asks, “is so much work not pleasurable?” Capitalism, Jones posits, demands it to be so.<sup>6</sup> In the chapter “The Pleasure Deficit,” Jones outlines how evolutionary biology, psychology, neuroscience, and philosophy have approached pleasure and calls for sociology to develop its own contributions, noting that such an approach could “provide new insights into understanding motivations for social behavior and assist sociologists in analyzing social interactions in everyday life and in a range of complex social institutions.”<sup>7</sup> While the governing of sex and sexualities has received much study, Jones observes, the more fundamental question of why pleasure itself must be managed and often “sacrifice[d]”—through the structures and demands of organized religion, family, medicine, law, policy, and so on—has not yet been adequately explored through a sociological lens.<sup>8</sup>

Jones' second major idea is the notion of “embodied authenticity.”<sup>9</sup> A large part of camming's audience appeal is the perception of receiving an authentic, interactive sexual experience with a “real” person who is also experiencing sexual pleasure from the exchange—rather than, say, a scripted, prerecorded pornographic video featuring paid professional actors whom the viewer will likely never meet.<sup>10</sup> In addition, unlike the physical immediacy of in-person sex work, the mediation of the computer screen may act as a buffer or “psychological barrier that, for the most part, makes both parties feel safe and more willing to be themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Importantly, embodied authenticity encompasses not just the client's pleasurable experience of authenticity but the performer's as well.

Jones' study reveals the complexity of the profession and its community, taking pains to illustrate the myriad ways in which cam models experience structural inequalities and uneven access, on the one hand, while demonstrating agency, creativity, and resiliency, on the other. The ways in which the models experience various kinds of pleasure while negotiating particular constellations of structural oppressions is a key thread running throughout each of the book's chapters. While camming provides many advantages for some—such as

flexible scheduling, better hourly wages than many other forms of work, and opportunities for pleasure and connection that most other jobs do not provide—Jones notes that “the industry operates via and reproduces the same inequities that exist in any capitalist workplace.”<sup>12</sup> That is, cam performers who are white, cisgendered, able-bodied, young, conventionally attractive, skilled in speaking English, and, specifically in the context of camming, female<sup>13</sup> tend to earn more than others.

The pleasures that cam performers experience form a complex relationship with the structural realities within which they work. The performers that Jones interviews report pleasures such as the enjoyment of getting to know other people, experiencing sexual pleasure and fulfillment, connecting deeply with particular clients, and just having plain “fun.”<sup>14</sup> Some of the risks include the possibility of developing work-related health issues and encountering forms of harassment like trolling or doxing. In terms of larger systemic issues, models can encounter (sexual) racism, (cis)sexism, ageism, and ableism, in terms of both their interactions with clients and their interactions with “the family” (a slang term models use to refer to the camming community). Cam models are not exempt from the “normative discourses about gender, race, age, and ability [that] shape performances of sex.”<sup>15</sup> Those with “privileged embodiments” (i.e., white, cisgender, conventionally attractive, young, female) may not need to put in as much labor to create and perform the identity they think will most appeal to clients than other embodiments might; such privileged embodiments, Jones emphasizes, tend to earn more and may more easily experience pleasure in their work.<sup>16</sup> To mitigate this inequality, some cam models choose to alter aspects of their camming identities in order to make themselves more attractive to potential clients, such as performing a younger age, bisexuality (since this “allows performers to seem available to all clients”<sup>17</sup>), or singleness.

Jones points out that trans women performers in particular have found themselves excluded from “the family,” such as not being admitted into professional development forums catering to cisgendered women,<sup>18</sup> which can negatively affect trans women’s ability to develop professionally.<sup>19</sup> Similarly, Jones explores the various ways in which sexual racism negatively affects the ability of Black women performers to advance in the community and increase their earning power, noting that sexual racism has not yet been adequately explored in sex-work research.<sup>20</sup> Sexual racism has a detrimental impact on Black cam models’ career and financial prospects, yet a neoliberal interpretation insists that “capitalist market forces and individual consumer preference”<sup>21</sup> are responsible for this inequity.

Finally, Jones examines different kinds of popular kinks that cam models perform, including different types of role-play and humiliation. She devotes several pages to the complexities of race-play, examining instances in which models experience such play as liberating for themselves and/or their clients, as well as instances in which such play is experienced as harmful. She also delves into the larger political implications of certain race-play scenarios. The concluding chapter examines the contemporary US legal context of camming and sex work in relation to the Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act (FOSTA) that was instituted in 2018 under the Trump administration and muses on the possibilities of cam performer advocacy.

*Camming* is the first book fully dedicated to exploring this area of sex work, a fact which already makes it an important study. But perhaps more importantly, the book adds to the growing body of scholarship on sex work and sexualities employing an intersectional analytical lens that emphasizes the experiences of cam performers who are queer, trans, disabled, racialized, and/or not from the United States, Canada, or the United Kingdom. Jones' discussion of research ethics for sexualities scholars at the end of the book includes a useful discussion of self-reflexivity and how personal sexual desire may bias one's work. Overall, Jones' empirical study is a nuanced and thoughtful analysis of the complicated and distinctive ways in which different cam performers negotiate the meshing of identity, structural privileges and oppressions, and personal fulfillment/pleasure within the contemporary context of neoliberal capitalism. Jones' clear, accessible writing style makes *Camming* a potentially useful text for upper-year undergraduates studying media, gender, and sexualities,<sup>22</sup> as well as an important and timely read for researchers of sex work and pornography.

---

<sup>1</sup> Julia Chan is currently the inaugural Postdoctoral Fellow at Carleton University's Institute of Criminology and Criminal Justice, where her research is concerned with voyeurism and surveillant looking. She holds a PhD in Cultural Studies from Queen's University at Kingston. Recently, she was a Mitacs Postdoctoral Visitor in Cinema and Media Arts at York University and the Managing Editor of *PUBLIC: Art| Culture| Ideas*. Her doctoral research—which explored the connections between image-based sexual abuse, surveillance, and cinematic/visual cultures—was supported by an SSHRC Joseph-Armand Bombardier Canada Graduate Scholarship, an Ontario Graduate Scholarship, and an SSHRC Michael Smith Foreign Study Supplement. Her academic work has been published in *Porn Studies* and is forthcoming in the edited collection *Screening #MeToo: Rape Culture in Hollywood* (SUNY Press) edited by Lisa Funnell and Ralph Beliveau. Her research areas of interest include image-based sexual abuse, visual culture, surveillance studies, culture and technology, “screen life” films, critical race theory, feminisms, and sex and sexual violence in culture.

<sup>2</sup> Angela Jones, *Camming: Money, Power, and Pleasure in the Sex Work Industry* (NY: New York University Press, 2020), 66.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38–39.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>13</sup> Jones situates camming within what Ashley Mears and Catherine Connell identify as “display work,” which includes “industries where people make money by selling performances in which they show off their bodies to paying customers” and which

“are the only capitalist markets in which the pay gap between women and men is inverted” (153).

<sup>14</sup> Jones, *Camming*, 110.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 154.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 186–87.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that the book contains graphic sexual imagery.

