

## Uncategorized: Genderqueer Identity and Performance in Independent and Mainstream Porn

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JIZ LEE

**Jiz Lee** is a genderqueer porn star known for their androgynous look, female ejaculation, vaginal fisting, strap-on performances, and fun, sex-positive attitude. The award-winning performer prefers the pronouns "they/them," and advocates for ethical pornography that creatively and authentically reflects queer sexuality. Ever fascinated by the radical potential of sex, love, and art, Jiz runs a personal blog and philanthropic "Karma Pervs" pay site at JizLee.com. They are editor of the upcoming anthology *How to Come Out Like a Porn Star: Essays from the Porn Industry on Family Matters*.

*I'm wearing a bright pastel blue suit I hand-dyed myself to match the suit worn by David Bowie in his music video for "Life on Mars." I'm a dapper version of Bowie, standing for photos with a golden glammed-up Adrianna Nicole in one of the biggest and most outlandishly decorated homes I've ever seen. Adrianna has handpicked her co-stars, creating scenes from her personal fantasies. She reclines on a white chaise lounge, gold lamé legs wrapped around me, wide eyes hungry. My large, flesh-colored strap-on cock juts out from the fly of my David Bowie blue pants and my hand pushes forcefully into her mouth. It all feels so good. Warm, wet, incredibly intimate. My fingers probe her wide mouth. I could do this for hours. At some point, I see a trace amount of blood in her saliva, tinted spit against the white of her teeth. I hesitate for a second, but she lets me know she's fine. We fuck in different positions, ending as Adrianna cums hard with a Hitachi Magic Wand against her clit and my thumb pressed far up her pink ass.*

Pause. Rewind. Let's watch the scene from the beginning. Where does this porn really start? Maybe in 2005, on a bright San Francisco day, where I met an erotic photographer named Syd, and I hit on her. My desire was twofold: I wanted her and I wanted to create sexual art.

I was curating a queer Asian Pacific Islander (API) dance performance and the theater I rented had a large lobby with empty wall space that would be perfect for visual art to complement the show. Syd's work was part of a queer Asian women's art show titled "SLIT," and her large prints of androgynous Hapa (mixed-heritage) queers in BDSM scenarios portrayed an element of sexuality that I could relate to. It's not often I see artists I could identify with, other queers like me. I felt a magnetic familiarity with Syd and the models in her photographs. An attractive, brainy art student with a muscular build, Syd's freckled cheeks held a blend of American-European and Japanese ancestry; her slightly butch demeanor was contrasted by curly light brown hair in pigtailed. It was genderqueer Hapa love at first sight.

Weeks later, I found myself in her bedroom talking about her work, which decorated the walls of her small apartment in the Mission. After agreeing on which of her prints we'd hang, I casually mentioned that I would be interested in modeling for her if she was doing any new projects, to which she responded positively; she added that if I were interested in being filmed, a friend of hers was starting a queer porn company and was casting. She pulled out a Post-it note and wrote a phone number and the name "Shine Louise Houston."

Six months later, Syd and I were lustfully dating . . . and preparing for our first scene together in what would become a smash dyke porn hit, *The Crash Pad*. I say our dating was lustful, but I'm not sure if that's the right word. Libidinous? We would *plow* over each other at sweaty queer dance parties, making out like ravenous, rabid dogs in heat. We were in love, in the most limerence-is-a-drug state imaginable, our orifices and sexy parts engorged extensions of the braingasms we had for one another. I don't think our connection can be put into words; it was best expressed through art and on several occasions, as we made love on film.<sup>1</sup>

People often ask me, "What made you decide you wanted to do porn?" and I tell them the truth: I want to share my sexual expression with others. I like it, it feels liberating, and I know that it helps others feel free too. I want to show more representations of people like me. I use words like hegemonic, homonormative, and marginalized. These are words I learned as I put myself through college, but I knew the meanings before I earned my degree. I share stories about people who have written to me, thanking me for putting my sexuality out there, for helping them become proud and stronger in their own battles. All of this is true and it's a part of why I did it. But what I don't say is: I did it for love.

And by that, I mean simply that I wasn't really thinking about it.

When I did my first feature, I wasn't a porn star. I was going to do one film with Syd to see what it was like. And I loved it. When I did my second feature, I remember expressing in an interview: "I'm not a [air quotes] 'porn star.' I'm just me." However several films and awards later, and most certainly a porn star, people ask me, "What made you decide to do porn?" and I now reply that each and every project is still a decision to do porn. To keep doing it, and to do it while being "just me."

As a queer performer, I strive to be as authentic as I can, celebrating visibility and using porn as a tool to educate and validate our lives. When Hollywood rewrites and recasts our experiences, and schools ignore our histories and sexual education, queer porn is one of the few mediums that can explicitly tell our stories. As I explore my role in the industry, from indie to mainstream, I question the ways in which I can do porn and be visible while continuing to be myself.

Without agents in the business, I've developed my own organic process that includes meeting directors and costars first before agreeing to shoot with them. If I felt they've understood me and I could trust them to represent me accurately, I'd give working with them a shot. For the most part, it's worked brilliantly.

It's also created some interesting scenarios, each a challenge for me to test the ways in which I navigate my gender expression and other identities in an industry best known for its hyper exaggerations of gender and the physical attributes of sex; where well-endowed men and big-breasted women prevail, I find myself curiously outside the box. I'm queer. And though to the untrained eye I may seem like a lesbian, I'm not.

I'm not even a girl.

While many first-time fans and porn reviewers may read me as a lesbian, I think my own gender and sexuality—and often, the identities of my lovers too—exceed beyond "women loving women." I am queer and have all different kinds of lovers on film and in my personal life. I've performed with men, both trans and cisgender, and with other genderqueers as well as with trans and cisgender women. I think because I've done most of my mainstream work with women, and because I was "assigned female at birth," and appear to most viewers as "a girl" when naked, many assume that I am a lesbian.

I don't mind so much being read as a woman, if it means that I can bring dyke visibility or butch visibility to a larger audience. But if someone wants to really know me, they'll understand that my gender is fluid, androgynous. For the last few years I've been vocal about my preference for the pronouns "they/them." I feel it's the most commonly used gender-neutral pronoun in the English language. Not everyone shares my

opinion however. I've even had a journalist outright *refuse* my request of preferred pronouns because she sees them as grammatically incorrect. Her article, on the subject of queer porn, was published describing me with feminine pronouns—something I found even more offensive than the fact that she also described me as “exotic.” Singular pronouns have been used by the English for centuries, and modern social media sites like Facebook use they/them when a person's gender is unspecified—so it's really not all that unusual of a pronoun choice, and so far it's the closest I've found to a neutrality that makes me feel comfortable.

Of the several things I call myself, the one I struggle with most in my work is the word “genderqueer.” I don't identify as a woman, nor do I identify as a man. To me, genderqueer is a conscious queering of gender, or an aware nongendering. Oddly, occupying this fluid, undefined status is the most secure I've ever felt. It took a long time to find. I was a slutty tomboy who yo-yo'd through subcultures trying to find a sexuality that fit. Long hair or no hair, goth makeup, short skirts, hoodies, khakis, high heels, ties, sagging jeans, the pages of my photo albums read like extreme makeovers. *What am I?*

When I first learned the word “transgender,” I thought I might be better suited as a man. However, after a summer of discovering new social pressures beyond butch, I quickly realized that I didn't want to be a man any more than I wanted to be a woman. Yet it was within a trans identity that I realized gender is fluid, and that my body, strong in some ways and soft in others, was already perfectly suited for me. It became my canvas for art and sex.

What a discovery to find that gender could be a tool, even a sex toy! Expression can be playful, erotic. I found it comfortable to explore my femininity in queer porn. I was performing with friends and lovers, for friends and lovers. San Francisco's queer porn scene is about being sexy in your own skin, reclaiming sexuality for ourselves. Playful or not, I could look exactly the way I wanted to and others like me would find it sexy. I didn't have to change a thing.

For example, the decision to shave my legs for queer films, like *Superfreak*, was my own. The key is that it is a choice, not an ultimatum. Once I was booked to work with a mainstream company and two days before the shoot, the producer found out I usually shoot while “naturally hairy.” I was told immediately that I was required to shave everything for the scene. My choice in that situation was to decline the shoot. Similar sentiments about hair have come from other companies; “Please shave; we're trying to sell movies to people in the midwest.” Here we see cisgender

pressures based on my perceived female presentation for (queer-phobic) straight male consumers; these companies want me to look more like a woman.

Choice, or performers' sexual agency, is one of the main differences between queer porn and mainstream genres. Recently, I suggested using dental dams on a "lesbian" set in Los Angeles and the director laughed at me, saying flat-out, "No, you can't use a dental dam. No one would want to watch that; it's not sexy." I love safer sex and jump at the chance to portray it on camera. I can even ejaculate, forcefully, against a firm dental dam; feeling safer makes me more confident and sexy. If there's one thing that makes queer porn different, it's respecting a performers' choice—the choice to safely fuck how they want and to look how they believe is sexy.

I'm used to sex-positive productions with queer porn companies, however being outside the bubble helps reinforce my values and better define my objectives. What started as performing for my community, has now afforded me the opportunity to perform for those outside my community, and there's power in that, especially when it comes to fucking within the nuances of the mainstream.

Mainstream porn relies on categories and this naturally involves a lot of assumptions. A porn website employee in an office somewhere combs through porn scene after scene, clicking various boxes that "describe" the scenes: #lesbian, #big ass, #brunette, #asian, #fingering, #strap-ons. Or maybe: #small tits, #short hair, #white, #lesbian, #doggy-style. My co-stars and I could be perceived many different ways, depending on hairstyle, the lighting, the person clicking the boxes. When am I white? Asian? Lesbian? The labels are quick attempts at descriptions I'm not even sure are useful to a consumer, but it's fascinating as a performer to be labeled something you're not, or not completely.

Being tagged online is not much different than interacting with strangers while walking down the street or while applying for a job. At various times, I'm not sure if I'm being read as something I may or may not be. At least with a tag on the Internet, I can tell how someone else has read me. Queer porn usually doesn't tag like mainstream porn does, which is why that's where I feel the most comfortable. A queer porn movie can have various porn scenes that include people who might be trans, femme, boi, fag, cisgender, queer, and more. The range of diverse representations is a lot greater than in mainstream productions; in queer works, you'll find performers of all sizes, a higher percentage of people of color, and different displays of gender expression. There's too much to categorize. Boxes fly out the window.

I've experienced great reward in being visibly outside the box. I'm

proud to have mainstream websites like Fleshbot.com refer to me by my preferred gender pronouns, and educate their readers on my gender identity. I'm thrilled to have been nominated AVN Awards Best New Web Starlet—sending countless online visitors to my website where they can learn more about me. Through my blog and work in the industry, I was honored as Feminist Porn Awards' "Boundary Breaker," a title I now share with its previous winner Buck Angel. Accepting the award, I wept and professed my gratitude for colleagues in the industry who value and understand my identity, helping me to feel more accepted and empowered in pornography than I have at any other time in my life.

It's true that I've gained so much from porn, something many consider a four-letter word, but I respect as being so much more. For one, performing publically has helped build my confidence in writing and overcome my fear of public speaking. I've presented at a handful of academic institutions, from Mills College to Stanford University. I'm now even an independent studies advisor at California College of the Arts. I've also led workshops on impact play, fisting, bondage, and queer sex topics, and have traveled outside the United States to appear at award ceremonies and film screenings in Canada and Europe. I was the first in my graduating class to completely pay off my student loans, and I was able to pay for LASIK eye surgery through funds raised from sex work. I've raised thousands of dollars through my membership website Karma Pervs to benefit queer, sex-positive, and kink-friendly nonprofit organizations. And I've met some of the warmest, smartest, and most supportive people I know. It feels like a calling more than a career. It feels fun, which is how I like it.

My mixed identities have led me to conclude that there's no right or wrong, no definitive experience, no one way of looking at the world. Nothing is black or white, and that fact is even clearer when you're gray. I believe there's beauty and education in inconsistency and contradiction, in the vulnerability and constant questions that come with passing as one ethnic identity or another, one gender identity or another, one sexual identity or five more. I sit on a fence, as the saying goes, and I don't mind because if the angle is just right, it feels really, really good.

#### Notes

1. We collaborated between 2005–2009 as the performance art duo "twincest." A mirror of our emotional relationship, we separated with a piece on death. Our epitaph is the website twincest.net.