

PROJEKT MELODY: AVATAR SEX WORK, THE TECHNOLOGICAL PROSTITUTE  
IMAGINATION, AND INTIMATE LABOR

by

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Dedicated to my parents who never gave up on me, the faculty who touched my life, and my dear friend, Dylan Gale, who inspired this thesis. Additional thanks to my therapist for instilling the belief in myself that allowed me to pursue my passion when I never thought I possibly could.

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PROJEKT MELODY: AVATAR SEX WORK, THE TECHNOLOGICAL PROSTITUTE  
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Projekt Melody is an anime avatar sex worker, streamer, and content creator operated by anonymous individuals. Following their emergence in 2019, Melody has complicated the politics of the online sex work industry with their novel use of technology and their bodiless performance, amassing significant income and popularity in the process. An analysis of Projekt Melody raises questions on how their sex work complicates existing scholarship on sex work studies, media studies, and the economics and politics of gendered, intimate labor. As a digital character that is coded as an Asian woman in a technologically mediated body work position, Melody furthermore illuminates the relationship between technology, Orientalism, and erotics in a technologically mediated body work position. In this paper, I intend to provide an intersectional analysis of the ways in which Projekt Melody simultaneously subverts and reinforces structures of power and provides a compelling glimpse into the future of sex work in the age of adult content platforms.

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## INTRODUCTION

A November 2021 photoset uploaded to a subscription-only Patreon account shows images of an avatar referred to as “Melody”. In these images appear an “e-girl” with purple hair perfectly framing her smiling face from the mouth down, a collar around their neck, a black bikini top, and thigh-high stocking. She sits with her legs spread in front of the camera lens (see Fig. 1). Within the setting of a neon-lit club environment in which she performs, an overhead light illuminates her oiled-up skin and casts pronounced highlights and shadows around her breasts and her barely-concealed vulva. Between her legs is a smartphone in a pink bunny ears case atop a pink tripod; front-facing, its placement implies she is capturing a selfie. It is a compelling representation of digital sex work in the age of Patreon and OnlyFans – the audience gazes upon her full body as she herself captures more intimate sexual images from her own device, enabling her to gaze upon and capture her own performance for yet another implied audience behind the other screen. While this image in any context would be compelling, it is made even more so by the fact that it is not in fact a human woman. Upon closer inspection of her body, her stockings seem bolted together. What initially appears to be straps on her bikini top are purple wires, criss-crossed and connected above her breasts. Projekt Melody is a sex worker of a new kind, existing at a unique intersection of technology and labor within the area of work often (misleadingly) referred to as “the oldest profession in the world.” She is a three-dimensional rendered model of an anime-style avatar who creates content in the form of images, clips, and live performances, wherein she employs sophisticated technology to correspond her avatar’s virtual movements to her invisible physical performance.



We know nothing about the human or humans who created this technological avatar including whether any of them are women, but despite this – or perhaps, because of this – its success in the new age of platform-based sex work has been astronomical. The entity’s Twitter account boasts roughly 618,000 followers and their<sup>1</sup> PornHub account over 83,000, with more modest yet still impressive numbers for their Patreon account and OnlyFans. Projekt Melody first cropped up on social media in 2019 after commissioning the character for \$5,000 (The Verge) just in time for the approaching Covid-19 pandemic and has been accruing not just followers, but a great deal of money, ever since. They secured their fame on the platform Twitch where the avatar chats with fans, plays video games, dances, or watches videos. While Projekt Melody’s relationship with Twitch has been contentious (their account was taken down during a site-wide mass-ban of certain streamers over copyright infringements), they still generate the majority of their income through the platform. Estimates of their networth fall between \$5 and 10 million<sup>2</sup>, and this number seems well within the realm of possibility. We can compare this figure to the average income of female hot tub streamers on Twitch. This brand of streamer bypasses content moderation algorithms by streaming in (often inflatable) pools and hot tubs in their homes. Similarly suggestive in comparison to Projekt Melody, the top hot tub streamers’ incomes mostly fall in the hundred thousands to one million dollar range<sup>3</sup>. As one of the most popular categories of streamers on Twitch, these women, derogatorily referred to as “Twitch thots,” and the fact that

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout this paper, I resist using gendered pronouns for Projekt Melody and instead refer to the character by they/them/their, their full name, or “PM.” As an avatar serving as a representation of anonymous operator(s) of unknown gender(s), is important to make a distinct separation between Melody and embodied personhood and, additionally, femininity and female gender identity.

<sup>2</sup> Income estimate sourced from wikispro.com.

<sup>3</sup> Income estimates sourced from streamscheme.com.

their income is significantly less than Projekt Melody's demonstrates that their human forms are less profitable than an avatar form in the industry of constructing and marketing fantasies.



Figure 1. An image of Projekt Melody from her Patreon, from the mouth down. She sits in a bikini with her legs spread, with a smartphone positioned between her legs on a tripod.

Projekt Melody's avatar streaming and sex work career have not escaped criticism, however. While much of this backlash comes from video game bros and "incels" who resent their effortless rise to fame and the commodification of "female" sexuality in a video game streaming space rife with sexist generalizations. On their subreddit /r/ProjektMelody, prior to their launch on Twitch, one user echoed this sentiment stating "But don't go for Twitch, [only] thots go for that" (AxDman, *Reddit*, 2020, reddit.com/r/projektmelody). Other sex workers also problematize Projekt Melody's place in the digital sex work industry and community. While male gamers on Twitch at times dismiss Projekt Melody's labor on the platform, sex workers conversely take issue with the legitimacy of their sex work. Some argue that despite their use of platforms like Chaturbate – which exist explicitly for the purpose of performances and consumption of sex workers – Projekt Melody's virtual body excludes them from the title of sex worker and the politics of the work. These concerns were especially pronounced because of their rise within the industry immediately following Covid-19, a time in which sex workers as well as "civilians" (those outside of the industry) turned to online sex work more than ever.

Projekt Melody raises significant questions about the future of the industry and where human sex workers will find themselves if Melody's model catches on. An avatar is not limited by the same constraints that "real" sex workers must consider. For example, Projekt Melody does not face the same struggle of mitigating the labor by turning down (or accepting) taxing or degrading requests that fall outside of their boundaries. As a technologically imagined avatar, they are purely a projection of male fantasies and have little reason to say "no" to anything. With Projekt Melody's true identity completely obscured and their physical body being removed from their labor, they do not face the same risks of doxxing, inner struggles with reconciling their

work and embodied selves, “IRL” alienation both culturally and interpersonally, or the physical and emotional exhaustion and discomfort that accompany spending hours each day in front of a camera a day to survive. As a female-coded sex worker, Melody needs no community care to preserve themselves, or to or network. They are outside of the concerns of the activist and advocacy concerns over which sex workers band together. They do not face the risk of criminalization. They are simply a figment of imagination and desire who happens to make a profit from selling a different kind of sex.

Nothing about how Projekt Melody has been imagined is by mistake. Whoever resides on the other side of the screen wearing the body of an anime Lolita performer, they have tapped into the market at the perfect time, with the perfect technological tools, and with carefully considered intention to create a recipe for a cultural phenomenon. Melody’s existence and popularity thus calls for an analysis of their intrinsic embedded politics, which have yet to be examined. I argue that, in addition to the aforementioned critiques of Projekt Melody’s place in the industry, they warrant further skepticism on the basis of their racialized, technological design and persona, their complicity and resistance to postfeminist sex work discourse, and the surprising praxis that constitutes their labor.

In my study of Projekt Melody as a technological, commodified object of desire, I first address the larger context of digital sex work as an industry, providing context on how Projekt Melody is both different and similar to client-facing work. I then review the avatar through current intersectional discourse on sex work on and offline. This includes theoretical frameworks on camming and streaming, the nature of the types of corporate platforms that Projekt Melody utilizes, gendered delegitimization, questions of agency, and the online sex worker community.

My analysis demonstrates how Projekt Melody intervenes with conventions of digital sex work and digital sex work discourse, shifting the ways in which gazing operates and performance takes place. Heather Berg's contributions to *South Atlantic Quarterly's* volume on "Reading Sex Work", for example, lay solid groundwork on questions of risk, economics, emotional labor, and agency. Kate Hardy and Camille Barbagallo, too, address the unique hustle of online sex work in the age of increased digital surveillance and the shifting economy of sex work. I attempt to expand upon their contributions to sex work studies by filling in gaps that emerge as avatar sex work complicates the previous conceptions of adult content creation work.

I then shift my focus to intersectional feminist notions of embodiment in relation to sex work. Projekt Melody's algorithmically-mediated body in the context of online intimate labor invokes feminist work on identity-building in tandem with the virtual and physical body, illuminating how embodiment is practiced within inherently sexual digital spaces that are often riddled with misogyny (e.g. Twitch). Bo Ruberg's "Live Play, Live Sex: The Parallel Labors of Video Game Streaming and Webcam Modeling" fills gaps in online sex work scholarship by drawing attention to the ways in which patriarchy shapes the experience and translation of embodiment in emotionally laborious performances on streaming sites such as Twitch. Scholarship on streaming and webcamming such as Ruberg's is further enriched by scholarship on postfeminist empowerment narratives; such narratives which mediate between agency and exploitation are also pertinent to my argument in this section. I follow this investigation with the construction of the labor of digital sex work itself and how Projekt Melody's interpretation of intimate labor shifts previous conceptions. In doing so, I build upon Eileen Boris and Rhacel

Salazar Parreñas work in *Intimate Labor*, which contextualizes sex work in the politics of feminized service work and the labor of material, commodified care and body work.

I also refer to Marxist analyses such as Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell’s “Service Work, Sex Work, and the Prostitute Imaginary” which points to the possibility of Melody’s feminist praxis under the late capitalist environment. Such analyses help identify the ways in which Melody resists and conforms to characteristics of labor under capitalism. The field of sex work scholarship that applies a Marxist lens to sex work as an industry is useful in my attempts to identify Projekt Melody’s proximity to the proletariat and how Projekt Melody within late capitalism. Economics, technology, and intimacy intersect when a body becomes a dynamic interface for the performance of sexual labor. Projekt Melody generates unique nuance when understood through Marxist works on “the prostitute imaginary.” Such works posit a strong relationship between the labor of sex work and that of the “vanilla” proletariat worker. This framework serves to illuminate the ways in which Melody produces new scholarship in Marxist understandings of sex work as a technological subject and commodity. Lastly, Projekt Melody contains an abundance of implications regarding the intersection of race, technology, and sex work. Imperialist and colonialist constructions of sexuality are intrinsic to Projekt Melody as a technological performer coded as Japanese. To concretize my analysis on the racialized nature of Projekt Melody, I refer to the ways in which AI technology itself encompasses the white gaze and Western technological fantasies, which are additionally gendered. Christopher Patterson’s *Open World Empire*’s analysis of networks of cultural exchange between the East and West and the erotics of play, applicable to a study of PM, provides useful groundwork for this section of my argument. I also refer to David Roh, Netsy

Huang, and Greta Niu's concept of "techno-orientalism" to frame Projekt Melody's intersections of Asianization, technological imagination, and postcolonialism.

In the following sections, I make a case for the necessity for the convergence of the fields of sex work, feminist, media, technology, and critical race studies to allow for the inclusion of avatar sex work in future work in these fields. Each of these areas of scholarship provide valuable theoretical frameworks that would further benefit from considerations of how artificially intelligent sex workers intervene with such discourses. I argue for Projekt Melody's significance as a fantasy that is both subversive and regressive, and as an object that represents uncharted territory within the current digital, economic, and cultural environments. Projekt Melody contains rich politics of gender, race, and labor, serving as an iconoclastic symbol of the future of platform work. Thus, they offer a compelling opportunity to reimagine and build upon existing theories of intersectional sex work studies and the ways in which technology is changing the landscape of platform work. Projekt Melody contains potential for broadening scholarship on what sex work looks like in the digital age and how we can begin to conceptualize the future of adult content platforms and their politics.

## CHAPTER 1

### THE AVATAR SEX WORKER IN THE AGE OF FOSTA-SESTA

Policy and social change related to sex work in an age when the Internet is necessary for sex work providers for both digital and client-facing work, and provides important context for Projekt Melody's business. In an industry characterized as a "hustle" in which sex workers must navigate competition, expand their clientele, and maintain their businesses even outside of sessions or live streams, legislative changes that concern online sex work can be catastrophic.

Of chief importance is the 2018 passage of FOSTA-SESTA Act (Allow States and Victims to Fight Online Sex Trafficking Act). This law prohibits the explicit advertising of sexual services (even legalized work such as digital content creation) anywhere on the Internet. It also fosters strict censorship of user-generated content, which occurs through social media platforms implemented with new algorithms. Under the guise of protecting sex trafficking victims, FOSTA-SESTA has cultivated a hostile and dangerous work environment for sex workers both on and offline. Since the laws' passage, online sex workers have faced significant barriers to income, community, and care. These barriers are also affected by race, gender, and able-bodiedness. Certain creators find themselves under heavier whorephobic scrutiny and surveillance on the basis of racial, ableist, and transphobic discrimination while others are granted more leniency. This presents unique problems for marginalized sex workers online, including new competition with disembodied avatars like Projekt Melody, and in the material world of IRL sex work.

The scope of digital surveillance and criminalization has ripple effects through all sex work communities and spaces. Legislative intervention on the online sex industry that bans



advertising of sexual services greatly limits resources for survival. The internet has been an essential tool for sex workers across all industries to organize and share tools to succeed and remain safe and healthy. Thus, these new terms increase the risk of violence and isolation. Politics on a national scale subsequently brings changes to the inner-politics of sex work networks and those in positions of power in the industry. Institutional power is intricately connected to violence or potential of violence in sex working, inflicted on providers by pimps, strip club managers, and Silicon Valley corporate entities such as OnlyFans which collects twenty percent of creators' earnings. The relationship between political, social, and corporate control is symbiotic and networked.

Heather Berg refers to the consequences of FOSTA-SESTA as a “network governance” effect that has “pushed many in-person sex workers back to extractive working relationships with managers” and “leaves black, brown, migrant, youth, and trans workers at a high risk of police violence” (Berg 487). Nearly always, management over sex workers and their labor in stripping, full service sex work under pimps, or even online platform work includes wage theft, abuse, and/or unethical business practices. In strip clubs, for example, management requires “house fees” for work shifts, and illegally manipulates strippers to tip employees of the club (which is illegal), despite their status as independent contractors. These realities of sex work management greatly depend on sex workers' perceived value to businesses, income, and appearances, particularly race. Pimping occurs in some form across all of these subfields of sex work with those in power - overwhelmingly male – setting all the rules under little to no regulation. Discrimination is commonplace, demonstrated by strip clubs or full service pimps hiring or recruiting sex workers based upon quotas for race, entirely excluding disabled

providers, and upholding hierarchies of workers based upon managements' discretion. Online sex work, too, perpetuates exploitative practices by collecting high percentages of creators' incomes and controlling the visibility of sex workers on the platform. On sites like OnlyFans and Chaturbate, companies additionally assign value and uphold hierarchies with rankings. These rankings are represented by a percentage that is visible in creators' headers that reflects their subscriber counts in relation to the entire user population. Without the ability to post advertisements on now-banned escorting directories, in-person sex workers find themselves in precarious positions, while online sex workers struggle to run their businesses independently and fairly. These challenges are exacerbated by online and in-person clients demanding more under political and social conditions and providers must "hustle" harder to overcome competition. Covid-19 and subsequent barriers to income left many without a choice to turning to sex work, exacerbating these issues significantly. Thus, sex workers become more vulnerable to poverty without the means to promote themselves.

Network governance explains how the power and control that takes place in manager-worker relationships inevitably reflect the prevalence of racism, ableism, and classism, made more pressing under whorephobic legislation. These systemic issues illustrate the harm being inflicted on providers via the network governance of institutional power and subordination of sex workers. All these factors considered, the industry has become increasingly unstable, increased risk, limited access to income, and oversaturation of the labor market as threats to survival. Meanwhile, due to how Projekt Melody's novelty gives them an advantage over the competition, distance from facets of human identity such as race or ability, and exemption from such network governance of an avatar, Projekt Melody escapes many of the network governance effects.

## CHAPTER 2

### ON THE FRINGES OF COMMUNITY

Projekt Melody’s lack of connection to the community of sex workers – a community formation necessary for sex workers’ continued survival – also distinguishes them from the average sex worker whose income depends on content creation. In the feelings of isolation, dissociation, and alienation consequent to the emotional and physical labor involved, sex work has no equivalent within the body work professions. Burnout is common from constant performance and providing service to clients with high expectations and often low levels of respect is common. When the body is commodified for sexual service, the lines between the body as a product and the body of one’s own. This internal struggle to balance the “hustle” with self-care calls for forming bonds with others who have the same understanding of sex work. To combat isolation, sex workers may forge online communities on sites like Reddit or Twitter, organize in-person events centered around joy and connection, or run social media accounts to promote positivity and provide tips. Community networks for sex workers on and offline, encompassed of sex workers of all walks of life, are invaluable to survival and the so-called hustle of sex work. The Internet has long been a tool that sex workers heavily rely on for solidarity, organizing, and the exchange of resources, but these efforts are made more difficult under FOSTA-SESTA. Practices like client vetting, for example, have been much more difficult to access. On social media, new guidelines and algorithmic practices have implemented censorship that outright bans the use of the term “sex work” itself, preventing sex workers from searching for information or finding other members of the community. Instagram has explicitly banned any form of content that “facilitates, encourages or coordinates” sex work, with the

supposed intention of reducing the risk of sex trafficking that FOSTA-SESTA attempts to address (Instagram. “*Community Guidelines*”. Meta, 2023, help.instagram.com). These Community Guidelines ban any content that “encourages” sex work can then include sharing information and resources, building community, and making posts or comments in support of sex work and sex workers. The importance of sex work networking and all of these barriers considered, Projekt Melody finds themselves reasonably distant from any kind of meaningful community, and even incites hostility from other sex workers operating under these new conditions. These ways in which Projekt Melody lacks a purpose or place in sex worker communities serve to illustrate the vast differences in their form of sex work versus human sex work, and vice versa.

It is first important to consider how the Internet as a channel for body work complicates the nature of sex work and the kinds of community care it calls for. A different approach is necessary by nature of its translation of corporeality and sexuality into data to be digitally translated and exchanged, raising new nuance in the often dissociative qualities of sex work. Bo Ruberg offers valuable insight into these nuances in their work on the labor of platform webcam work. Ruberg analyzes YouTube videos in which camgirls offer advice to aspiring cammers. For Ruberg, in contrast to client-facing adult webcamming work depends upon providers’ abilities to handle the exhaustion of constant performance. Camgirls must be capable of “looking enthusiastic, responding to viewers who comment in chat, and [maintain] a running monolog even when there is ostensibly no one to talk to” (Ruberg 1030). This is compounded by the inherently objectifying nature of sexual performance that characterizes cam work. While Projekt Melody, too is faced with these challenges in their performance, their labor cannot necessarily be

described as body work. This separates them from the challenges that the sex work community builds bonds around as they seek support to cope with these qualities of the online sex industry. The performance is divorced from a body to be gazed upon, nitpicked, censored, and that is significantly physically active. Burnout is much more avoidable – not only due to their disembodied form of sex work, but due to their entirely contrived and inhuman personality that they depend on to perform. Melody’s work exists outside of the scope that communities of online sex workers organize to make work and life easier or more fulfilling, and PM has no use for such communities.

Unlike other content creators, Melody also has little need to consider competition and building connections to succeed, cope with stigma, and avoid shadow-banning (the algorithmic practice that limits the visibility of certain user content on social media) and censorship. Their distinction from human sex work content creators is illuminated when we consider how social media moderation policies for Melody and sex workers have been different. When the body is absent in platform sex work, avoiding such censorship is relatively easy. We could take, as an example, when Twitch banned Melody in 2021. The ban occurred over a potential copyright infringement due to their use of a commissioned avatar – not over “lewd” streaming or solicitation. In their scholarship on the hustle of platform sex work, Camille Barbagallo and Kate Hardy echo these concerns with survival and success under exploitative online sex work corporate entities. They point to the ways in which sites such as OnlyFans collect significant portions of adult content creators’ earnings, but nevertheless instill and enforce terms and conditions that present different hurdles for different creators. Platforms are more or less able to implement such forms of algorithmic bias and surveillance under little regulation outside of what

is legally necessary under FOSTA-SESTA due to the newness of the industry. As Barbagallo and Hardy argue, platforms enjoy collecting the profits of sex workers with the knowledge that sex workers lack regulatory protection and are forced into insecure positions. These factors all point to a larger problem which can be succinctly summarized as (human) content creators “[providing] free labor to major Silicon Valley platforms and are rewarded by having their accounts deleted or shadowbanned when such content becomes commercially risky” Barbagallo and Hardy 545). Due to the low risk assigned to them by algorithms and content moderators, Melody is separated from a community of sex workers who rely on one another to surpass, subvert, or cope with shadowbanning and content moderation. These regulations under FOSTA-SESTA have accelerated sex workers’ need to organize and their investment in sex work-positive causes, and in some cases, Projekt Melody not only is free from such concerns but benefits from them. Barbagallo and Hardy’s interviews with camgirls reveal that those with distinctive brands and engagement in the more taboo side of camming swim, while every day camgirls sink (Barbagallo and Hardy 539). These novelty online sex workers are at an advantage due to their prioritization for promotion on platforms and are given more agency to push the algorithmic and community guidelines limits. As a sex worker operating on these adult content platforms, as well as “vanilla” streaming on Twitch, PM’s brand as an avatar allows for a more effortless rise to mainstream success, differentiating them from human sex workers and their communities.

Activism is also often an additional objective for communities of sex workers. Angela Jones, who has laid important groundwork in sex work studies scholarship, touches upon these efforts by noting that studies have frequently revealed the widespread importance of advocacy

and intervention in sex worker communities. Decriminalization, deconstructing stigma, and contesting FOSTA-SESTA are especially salient causes that sex workers organize around. Decriminalizesexwork.com, for example, offers a page on finding sex work activist organizations as well as an abundance of sample letters to submit to legislation advocating for causes such as protecting sex workers' health, racial justice in sex work, and fighting ableism in sex work (Decriminalizing Sex Work. "Take Action [Decriminalize Consensual Sex Work Between Adults], 2023, decriminalizesexwork.com/advocacy). None of these concerns apply to a sex worker who runs their business in the absence of a body, and thus Projekt Melody has no personal investment in such community organizing and causes. They are not at risk of their work causing legal consequences nor at risk of being excluded from platforms. As an entirely anonymous entity, they do not face stigma, creating a great distinction from other sex workers. Access to resources is not made more difficult by their engagement in sex work by falling outside of the norms of the industry and how its providers are oppressed. Causes such as racial, disability, or trans sex worker rights are far outside of the concerns of an avatar; in fact, Projekt Melody has continually and consistently refused to acknowledge any of these political and social realities in any form. It is clear that Projekt Melody does not face any pressing need nor feel any sense of responsibility to participate in the advocacy and activism of the sex worker community.

It seems reasonable, then, that Melody has invoked resentment amongst the human sex work community. This is exhibited by a tweet which argues that "there's also the physical and mental demand it takes, that Projekt Melody is not faced with" (Jenn [@justnobodyhere\_]. *Twitter*, 27 February 2020, [twitter.com/justnobodyhere\\_/status/1233102096276369408](https://twitter.com/justnobodyhere_/status/1233102096276369408)). The user also reiterates the community's frustrations by saying "whoever is doing the rigging doesn't

have that mental pressure because they're anonymous” and notes potential financial strain on other sex workers, tweeting “I’d understand other sex workers seeing this and thinking it’s unfair because this is their livelihood, and also Melody has a distinct ‘thing’ being virtual...while they [human sex workers] had to work harder without the same recognition/popularity” (Jenn [@justnobodyhere\_]. *Twitter*, 27 February 2020, [twitter.com/justnobodyhere\\_/status/1233102096276369408](https://twitter.com/justnobodyhere_/status/1233102096276369408)). “Jenn” furthermore elaborates on Projekt Melody’s advantages in online sex work by pointing out the division of labor under the reasonable assumption that multiple operators are behind the project: “There’s multiple people working on her, while others in sex work are often solo and have to deal with everything themselves...[it is] different between a team and an individual” (Jenn [@justnobodyhere\_]. *Twitter*, 27 February 2020, [twitter.com/justnobodyhere\\_/status/1233102096276369408](https://twitter.com/justnobodyhere_/status/1233102096276369408)). This user points to the frustrations of human providers who face vastly different challenges and explaining why “actual sex workers feel jaded” (Jenn [@justnobodyhere\_]. *Twitter*, 27 February 2020, [twitter.com/justnobodyhere\\_/status/1233102096276369408](https://twitter.com/justnobodyhere_/status/1233102096276369408)) by the rise of AI sex work.

The main critique within the online sex worker and feminist community alike seems to return to the idea that the risk of harm and labor inherent to sex work is a defining characteristic of the job. However, the consistent emphasis on violence against sex workers – whether physical or digital – may not be productive to defining what sex work is and is not. It could be argued that this angle reduces sex work to violence, which may perpetuate the ideology and rhetoric of politicians who frame all sex work as trafficking or trafficking adjacent. Despite this, the problems with Projekt Melody raised by sex workers reasonably reflect the anxieties about a rapidly changing climate and are valid in their observations on differences in labor. The labor of



Melody's business management and implementation of complex technology separates their hustle from that of the average sex worker and inarguably requires marketing, branding, networking, and survival skills. However, in Projekt Melody's case, a body is not the product being sold, unlike all other forms of sex work. Rather, the product of the labor is rather sheer fantasy – a character that can simply be switched on and off.

With the oversupply of sex workers resulting from FOSTA-SESTA – and exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic – competition has become an even more salient component of the hustle. Client-facing and online sex workers alike employ a practice known as “screening,” a process in which providers “vet” clients through background checks and testimonials from other sex workers. This process calls for considerable time and labor. With the current over-saturation of the industry, clients do not have to cooperate with the process and can quickly turn to other providers to meet their demands without the hassle. Hardy and Barbagallo's work highlights that this labor oversupply that presents real safety concerns and additional labor for human sex workers, who “face pressure to not undertake [screening], leading to a decline in health and safety and worsening work conditions” (Barbagallo & Hardy 539). Barbagallo and Hardy's interviews with online sex workers echo some of the sentiments of aforementioned Twitter user Jenn, who pointed to the ways in which Melody is shielded from the harm that has resulted from increased competition, subsumption, and oversaturation.

The connection between FOSTA-SESTA and Projekt Melody's booming camming career may seem tangential; however, they illustrate the stark contrast between its effects on them versus its effects on other sex workers who must meet more laborious demands, face higher levels of surveillance, and certainly the new challenges for client-facing and/or survival sex

workers. Projekt Melody is furthermore exempt from the safety practices that even sex workers whose labor is exclusive to online platforms must consider in order to operate their businesses and reduce harm, including the physical and emotional burnout of content creation and camming. Lastly, as a technological object versus a human sex worker, the performance of the work is likely conducted by multiple operators, separating Projekt Melody from online sex workers who individually manage their content, client interactions, streams, income, and brand without any assistance.

It is also worth mentioning that with this likelihood of Projekt Melody being the product of multiple individuals' labor, it is probable that at least one male participates in maintaining Melody and carrying out the work. This probable scenario shifts the nature of their content creation entirely, in which the avatar and character is an embodiment and performance of femininity. Assumptions that Projekt Melody "is" female – even as an avatar – are problematic and misinformed at best. They inevitably demonstrate the ways in which patriarchy expects femininity to be performed from a male subject position. Regardless, the exhaustion from dealing with the inherently patriarchal industry of sex work online and IRL (in-real-life) is less psychologically taxing and/or traumatic, a reality which Barbagallo & Hardy's interviews also illuminate. With the online sex industry comes unique forms of sexism and objectification due to a lack of proximity between providers and clients. This distance instills a level of cognitive dissonance in customers who often feel more empowered to subject camgirls and creators to harassment, stalking, trolling, or violent language, behavior that naturally bears more profound effects on women who face gendered subordination politically and socially continuously in their every day lives – not just their jobs. FOSTA-SESTA cultivates an environment wherein a

limitation of resources, community, and safety brings about new patriarchal dynamics and working conditions that affect human online providers significantly more than Melody.

## CHAPTER 3

### STREAMING, AUTHENTICITY, AND LEGITIMACY

The streaming platform Twitch, a camming site largely centered on gaming and one that is dominated by males, has been a new domain for misogyny in gaming and of gendered labor online. Projekt Melody relies heavily on the platform to solidify their brand, gauge their audience, and ultimately draw customers into their subscription-based adult content profiles. The minimal amount of misogynistic harassment directed at Projekt Melody within a streaming platform rife with harassment, trolling, and doxxing against women suggests that they are paradoxically perceived as more authentic, an essential component to Twitch streaming success. The character maintains a captive male audience in part due to their lack of participation in feminist discussions, as they never challenge their chatters and customers' sexism – a trait widely appreciated by men on Twitch.

Projekt Melody exists in an environment rampant with misogyny. In her analysis of gender roles and dynamics on Twitch, new media scholar Amanda Cullen comments on how the platform serves as a space for men to perform and validate their masculinity in relation to other male streamers and users. The environment of the platform is not surprising, Cullen notes, due to the “hypermasculinity in games that encourages sexist and misogynistic behavior as a way of signaling masculine authority and in-group identity” (Cullen 544). This problem transpires in a significant resistance to feminism and feminist discourse on streams regardless of the gender(s) of those involved in such discussions. Cullen refers to this effect as “a fear of change and a loss of power” (544) that upholds a toxic masculine culture on Twitch. To gain success on the site, female streamers must meet certain standards of femininity and at times passively submit to the

conventions for and norms of femininity, in addition to presenting their bodies in positions that are digestible to the “geek gamer” (Ruberg and Lark 545). Melody does not present a threat to masculinity in streaming spaces in the sense that she is not only disembodied, but designed – likely by men – specifically to appeal to this sexist platform culture.

Cullen’s investigation into the perceived legitimacy of streaming along gendered lines also reveals male users’ disdain for feminism and for women streamers, including in Redditor comments and Twitch communities. Her study reveals that to the male Twitch community, “the right kind of feminist does not get offended by the fact that “women are naturally sexually manipulative” and “achieves legitimacy by protecting the meritocracy of streaming” (Cullen 546). Cullen’s analysis of the culture of Twitch helps contextualize Projekt Melody’s position as a “woman” streamer, how they create the illusion of authenticity, and why they have been received so well by the platform despite their sex work endeavors. While Projekt Melody’s tolerance and handling of sexist chatters in a “geek masculinity” culture (Cullen 543) and the stigma discourse surrounding “titty steaming” still comprises much of their labor, the consequences of this for an embodied human and for an avatar are clearly different, and the labor itself is perhaps purely technological: weeding out blatant trolls, chatters who violate community guidelines, threats, etc. Melody must navigate the contrasts and similarities of the stream-for-profit sites such as Twitch, OnlyFans, and Chaturbate and their respective cultures and politics while maintaining a cohesive character, reliant on adapting to the audience’s gaze. Building upon the context of the state of online sex work, the state of streaming and camming as a technology and a heavily gendered line of work is equally important to frame the gendered labor and performance of Projekt Melody.

While scholarship in sex work studies has begun to be addressed by scholarship in sex work studies and media studies, the implications of a dual performance of these two modes of streaming are yet to be fully understood. In case studies on creators, Ruberg draws attention to three areas of importance: authenticity, the characteristics of labor, and the gendered terrain of these forms of camming in case studies on creators. As a content creator who relies on each of these avenues, Projekt Melody is a revealing illustration on the platforms' distinctions and commonalities. The most salient similarities between their gaming and webcam modeling labor include their reliance on technology (in Projekt Melody's case, more sophisticated as well as crucial than in the case of camgirls), maintaining an illusion of authenticity, performing the labor of interacting with an at-times misogynistic audience, and adapting to a form of intimate labor in which one is "always on" (Ruberg). As a character coded as a woman, Projekt Melody must perform in ways which pander to "masculine notions of feminine performance" (Cullen 545). The double-life of the online and corporeal selves requires a near-constant performance for any streamer, including Projekt Melody. In addition to the hours per day spent streaming, all online sex workers must be constantly active. Much of the labor of online sex work is personal interaction with clients, keeping up with direct messages, posting content as often as possible, and managing income. However, unlike human online providers who spend a great deal of time on custom content and "flirting" with clients to uphold authenticity, Projekt Melody may not spend as much time engaging with their customers directly.

It is obvious that Projekt Melody's gendered labor as an artificial sex worker operated by riggers who are completely anonymous is entirely distinct from that of human, female content creators. As a technological object, they are instead solely a *performance* of femininity. In online

sex work as well as streaming, this labor of authenticity, the need to remain diligent in their work even when offline, and performing gender comes more easily to an avatar. Despite this absence of a human gender, they must uphold the illusion of femininity by legitimizing themselves and their work in online spaces characterized by misogyny, though the labor of performing as a digital character is certainly reduced. While the operators – not Melody themselves – must labor (physically, but perhaps emotionally) to deal with sexist trolls who may contest their legitimacy, PM also faces the unique challenge of earning the title of a legitimate streamer and sex worker to the female skeptics who often engage in these practices themselves. As a massively successful and popular female-coded streamer, their legitimacy will always be scrutinized, but Melody thrives in these patriarchal digital spaces with a fraction of the effort that women in these spaces expend.

## CHAPTER 4

### MELODY AS A TECHNOLOGICAL OBJECT

How does Projekt Melody's status as a bodiless performer in spaces that inherently fall under the category of body work complicate how scholarship on sex work understands labor? The cultivation of an "intimate, domestic world as the backdrop to self-performances" (Ruberg 1021) has long been considered an integral aspect to camming, dating back to 1996 and the pioneer of camming, Jennicam. Perhaps notions of illegitimacy can be entertained based upon the fact that Projekt Melody subverts the intimate nature of streaming – even in the context of adult content creation and camming – due to an absence of a body as an object of the gaze and because Projekt Melody performs in entirely virtual contexts that are neither domestic nor public. With Projekt Melody, the intimacy inherent to baring one's body, even if clothed, to an anonymous audience in one's own personal home workspace is absent and the labor of curating an authentic "performance of personality" that stands out from other cammers is irrelevant (Ruberg 1021). If intimacy is synonymous with authenticity and of equal importance in building and sustaining a successful streaming brand, then the fact that with Projekt Melody the sense of realness is neither intimate nor is it seemingly necessary to their audience. This makes PM an exception to "a cultural economy that privileges authenticity" (Tran 513).

One aspect of Projekt Melody's labor that encompasses all their performances, sexualized or not, additionally isolates them from these scholarly discourses. Projekt Melody must continually adapt the appearance, movements, and branding of their virtual body and adapt accordingly to effectively maintain themselves as an idealized object of the male gaze, a form of labor that being an anime avatar makes more complex. In his study of interactive female avatar-



building streams, Noel Brett characterizes this practice of “white heteronormative assemblage”, where the designer collaborates with the audience to build an object that is the most universally appealing, as “collective, relational, and therefore self-reinforcing” (Brett 453). Brett performs a case study on a live stream in which the audience collaborates to dictate character design in the rigging process. Predictably, his study reveals that the resulting model was not a product of the community’s efforts to create an avatar that would be approved by the operator. Rather, the model only reflected the collective gaze of the audience, who possessed sole control as they discussed the ideal breast size, eye color, outfit, etc.

In Projekt Melody’s case, this process does not occur live, but it is both gendered and racialized in identical ways as an interactive anime avatar. Projekt Melody was imagined as a Japanese-coded character, with the avatar’s fair skin, large breasts, wide hips, a big butt, and signature big, round manga-styled eyes, designed to appeal to the men who comprise the main audience for Otaku. Melody’s character was designed behind the scenes, but the viewers’ participation in this assemblage process, in their streams on Chaturbate, Twitch, or other platforms, is still notable. In their streams, on Chaturbate, Twitch, or other platforms, For example, Projekt Melody published a tweet on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2023 announcing an outfit design contest, including both “safe for work” and “non-safe for work” submissions. Projekt Melody also notes applicants may change the avatar’s hair style or may design robots for them, which they describe as “toys”, for the design ([@projektmelody]. *Twitter*, 5 April 2023, [twitter.com/ProjektMelody](https://twitter.com/ProjektMelody)). In the replies for the tweet, users ask for basic renders of her nude body, ask how many entries they are allowed, and request an extension for the deadline to allow them more time to perfect the design. PM utilizes technology to build and rebuild their anime

avatar body fluidly and temporally. In Melody's case, they continuously adapt to their audience by the nature of their work – Melody changes their clothes, speaks, creates settings, and styles their hair based upon what garners the most views and money. PM frequently creates themed content, such as photo sets and streams for holidays, affirming both authenticity and intimacy.

For Valentine's day, we see a lingerie-clad Melody laying on a bed covered in rose petals, posed as if they are inviting the viewers into the scene. Such depictions speak to the relationship between Melody, the audience, and the male gaze by demonstrating PM's "realness" and reflecting the viewers' desires. Projekt Melody, presented as a complex and fluid character, allows the viewers enjoy the fantasy of a "girlfriend experience" with an anime avatar who is eager to adapt to their gaze and fantasies. Their body becomes a site of interactivity that produces and reaffirms itself as well as its contained cultural and social meaning. Beyond this implicit collaboration with their audience based upon their reception of their performances, a different form of collaboration takes place between the designer(s) and the avatar (see Cullen). The labor of the designers maintains Projekt Melody's appeal to the otaku male gaze, while they are also viewed as autonomous, though eager to adapt to viewers' and customers' desires through assemblage.

Is this practice entirely patriarchal? Melody's operators aim to emulate an exaggerated female beauty ideal in collaboration with their male audience's gaze, a practice that certainly seems to conform to heteropatriarchy. Projekt Melody's use of both technology and the webcam (which the operator does indeed perform in the form of Melody behind the screen) is subversive in a few ways. In their studies of female sex workers and male gamers' guides to streaming, Ruberg stresses the significance of technological proficiency required for streaming in any form

(Ruberg 1029). Projekt Melody certainly embodies the most elaborate and extreme example of this. In their extreme technological fluency, Projekt Melody subverts the sexist stereotype so prevalent on Twitch that presumes women streamers are technologically inept – a stereotype summarized by the term “camwhore” that is frequently used to refer to female streamers. They are also not labeled with another derogatory Twitch colloquialism, “titty streamer” – in part due to their lack of real human breasts, but also because of their sophisticated operation of technology. As an e-girl, Projekt Melody’s distance from a corporeal sexuality and embodiment of a fictionalized fantasy, combined with their “not like the other girls” streaming style and persona (they frequently communicate with their audience through otaku-centric memes and language), affirms their audience’s positive perception of Melody as a woman. They strike the ideal patriarchal balance between a hypersexual, submissive, and conventionally sexy woman and an “authentic” technologically-savvy one-of-the-boys woman.

In the case of Projekt Melody, their body and persona are obviously completely produced and represented by an avatar. This total agency over the ways in which they portray themselves as a “woman” – down to their environment, freedom with camera angles, and voice – are shrouded by bodilessness. Although it is easy enough to view PM as another instance of a camgirl created for the purpose of the male gaze, such a perspective is complicated by Melody’s technological sophistication and, more importantly, seeming technological control over the gaze itself. As Michele White argues about women’s photographic practice, by making the body and space invisible and possessing total control over their representation, the woman’s gaze “[highlights] control of the apparatus, establishing an empowered gaze by seeing things that the spectator cannot view, and being visible and visibly not available” (White). In other words,

practices of refusing full transparency of the gaze may reflect and instantiate agency. In the case of PM, this happens as PM chooses to hide embodied feminine sexual performance behind their rendered body, thus mediating between reality and fantasy on their own terms. Indirectly, Melody is asserting a sense of feminist intervention on the conventional webcam gaze.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE MARXIST PROSTITUTE IMAGINARY

As is the case of in-person sex work, the conceptions and practices of online sex work under late capitalism reproduces both hegemony and praxis, as is the case with in-person work. As an industry that arose and sustains itself from patriarchy, sex work involves obvious gendered and racialized violence, which upholds larger systems of power. Sex workers often find themselves subjected to the violence of pimps, managers, abusive clients, and extractive corporations such as Chaturbate. While the “hustle” of platform sex work vastly reduces a sex workers’ exposure to violence and the type of victimization that is inherent to pimping, certain comparisons can be drawn if we return to the idea of network governance. Power dynamics common in sex work persist on these platforms, apparent in their collection of creator funds, surveillance and enforcement of algorithmic bias, and ranking systems. However, sex workers also often work independently, they participate in community care and activism, they run cash businesses, and so on. These qualities of sex work illustrate that the work may be subversive and empowering in ways that differentiate it from other forms of capitalist labor. Sex workers are further removed from the structural conditions of “civilian” work, and “[produce] wage labor not as an *alternative* to but as a *complement* to capacity for reproduction” (McClanahan and Settell 498). McClanahan and Settell note the intrinsic nondirect wages in sex work, a quality of the labor that can provide agency for providers and empower them in unique ways. The industry “troubles the boundaries between productive, unproductive, and reproductive work” (McClanahan and Settell 498), and this quality of sex work distinguishes the labor from that of “civilians”. Furthermore, some sex work can be a form of feminist praxis allowing women in the

industry to be in full control over the labor they do or do not perform, their time, and the cost of their work. Projekt Melody's labor which I have argued is, from an economic and structural perspective, is paradoxically both affirmative of misogyny and capitalist labor and empowering. This sex work studies framework emphasizes this paradox by framing sex work as a literal example of capitalist labor, while simultaneously pointing to the distinctions the productivity of the work. This Marxist sex work scholarship serves to highlight these connections, demonstrating the ways in which the industry can serve as a metaphor for all forms of labor under capitalism while addressing how sex work can also be viewed as an anomaly that subverts these same systems of power.

Karl Marx refers to this relationship as the prostitute imaginary, which considers sex work as “a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer” (McClanahan and Settell 493). This theory presents the argument that while hegemonic realities are perhaps more visible and literal in the case of body work, many of the same conditions exist in all forms of labor under capitalism. Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell adapt Marx's perspective in “Service Work, Sex Work, and the ‘Prostitute Imaginary’”. In their work, they echo the longstanding argument that the industry is “driven by both fantasies and fears about sex and the value of human life” (McClanahan and Settell 494), and that is metaphoric of larger conditions of capitalist affective labor under capitalism. Under such conditions, the body and the individual loses meaning in the process of doing labor, labor which alienates and objectifies the worker. When considering an industry that is widely viewed as the most literal form of selling oneself to survive, we must also consider the similarities to other systems and work. The prostitute imaginary contests the notion that sex work is an act of “selling one's body” by drawing a

comparison to all laborers under capitalism, who, it has been argued, partake in the same practice. Sex work positions the worker as a commodity subject as well as a commodity-object, per their participation in the capitalist online sex work market. Despite this, the debate over whether the sex worker represents the proletariat subject in Marxist analyses of sex work persists.

Because Projekt Melody exists on for-profit platforms, a Marxist analysis that might see their lucrative sex work as subversive of the system of alienated labor is complicated. The fact that such lucrative sex work benefits from streaming platform corporations and their capitalist owners complicates such a claim. Due to Projekt Melody's lack of a physical, visible body that performs that labor, they are an anomaly in body work. The commodity in question, too, is intangible. Whereas the sex worker's body is regarded as the product itself, this is clearly not the case for Projekt Melody. This begs the question of where Melody, a disembodied subject and object, is positioned in the political economy of intimate labor as a disembodied subject and object, and whether their work, despite its invisibility, is truly non-productive despite its invisibility, as has been argued in some areas of Marxist scholarship. When the body in question is literally a technological object, the politics of their commodified social body are entirely unique, and this complicates theories of productivity. Projekt Melody's performance of labor, while consistent with all service work and modes of emotional labor, subverts exploitation through the production of an invisible commodity by an artificial body that is not being "sold" in a literal sense. If Marxist sex work studies centers the laboring body in the labor and under capitalism, Projekt Melody seems to upset previous notions of the ways in which the self is commodified under these systems of power. If Marx posits that "feminized vulnerability is a sign

of the coercion of ownership and private property” and “is the inanimate [if also ‘very delicate’] commodity” (McClanahan and Settell 178), the classic model of the commodity-subject and commodity-objects relationships excludes online avatar sex work. Still, the product Projekt Melody sells – intimacy, companionship, and virtual sex – is as invisible as the physical body behind the screen. This contradiction echoes discourse on the productivity (or lack thereof) of sex work, including Melody’s model.

In their work, Annie McClanahan and Jon-David Settell highlight this ambiguity. Perhaps to a greater extent than the conventional online sex worker, the interpretation of Projekt Melody’s labor as productive, unproductive, or reproductive is difficult to distinguish, as is the paradoxical nature of their labor as public (within the market) or private (domestic) (per McClanahan and Settell). The spaces in which their labor is performed are not exempt from the neoliberal conditions of online content creation work. Returning to Marxist conceptions of the commodification of labor in sex work, I argue that Melody operates within the public corporate sex work market which would position them as a commodity-object. Yet, the domestic or private nature of Projekt Melody’s form of service work is decidedly far less vulnerable from other modes of service provision on and offline, wherein the erasure of their body and identity makes their work less exploitative and alienating versus more so. Further, we can bring into consideration the fact that what we assume to be a team of operators upholds the character of Melody and the labor they entail. While the commodity of Melody is controlled and mediated by private, neoliberal corporate entities, a hidden labor collective exists beneath this surface in the commodification process. Projekt Melody, then, occupies the space between the public and private service markets, where they perform disembodied labor and product an invisible product.



If it is to be argued that sex work is inherently exploitative and humiliating by virtue of the body – whether physical or virtual – being the commodity, one which depends on the performance of authentic, enthusiastic service work, then Melody is a direct contradiction. This is to say that while all labor under capitalism is alienating, Projekt Melody’s disembodiment distances them from exploitation, and this distancing can be regarded as praxis and could furthermore solidify their place in the proletariat. A circumstance in which the body being commodified is immaterial complicates previous Marxist analyses of sex work, which have been based on the idea that the sex worker’s body is the commodity. Melody manages to subvert the “total commodification of human activity” (McClanahan and Settell) by commodifying a body that is purely technological but is still a participant in the public sex work market, and in fact, their labor would not be possible without the use of corporate platforms. While they do not participate in sex work organizing and activism within the community nor do they address any discourse on the structural or political conditions of sex work whatsoever, Projekt Melody indeed has a place in these discussions.

## CHAPTER 6

### INTIMATE LABOR

As any sex worker does, Melody commodifies intimacy as any sex worker does, albeit immaterially. These forms of labor, which rely heavily on constant performance, require emotional labor that complicate embodiment and identity. If intimate labor produces the degradation of the self and the body, the exclusively technological nature of Melody's (and their operators') work is a compelling addition to the literature on intimate labor. Eileen Boris and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas argue that the emotional labor of affective, intimate work, arguably most apparent in the realm of sex work but also extending to labor such as nursing or housework, is largely a process of embodying a character. They note that this practice takes place in one or both of two ways. Surface acting is defined as the process of *pretending* to be a character, whereas deep acting involves a process of transforming to the character entirely, completely embodying and internalizing the role of the service provider's emotions, behavior, and characteristics either temporarily or persistently. The consequences of either form of commodified performance thus blurs the boundaries between the body, identity, and the labor itself, a process Boris and Parreñas refer to as "emotional dissonance" (Boris and Parreñas 6). Projekt Melody serves as an extreme example of surface acting. But one must also consider the possibility that their daily performance as an imaginary character – one that requires the operator to inhabit two bodies at once – could also be an unconventional but emblematic performance of deep acting, one that might lead to emotional dissonance (Boris and Parreñas) from the continual practice of performing in physical and virtual space simultaneously. While it can be argued that labor provided through technological means is inherently less intimate, Melody's total

abandonment – or their operator’s total abandonment – of a body to provide the experience of intimacy represents one of the most profound forms of emotional labor. The lines between self and provider are not simply blurred, but entirely dismantled. To maintain the fantasy, the audience easily and voluntarily neglects to consider the human on the other side of the avatar to maintain the fantasy, but as the operator’s/operators’ steps into Melody as a character and body, their corporeal self is still intimately involved in the performance as they physically move in tandem with the character. Physically, emotionally, and sexually, the operator and Melody become one body, day in and day out.

While the immateriality and invisibility of Projekt Melody’s labor complicates feminist scholarship on intimacy, it is no less affective, further supporting the argument that it is indeed intimate. Just as Boris and Parreñas argue is true for the affective laborers and industries they study, so too does Melody “produce a social relationship.” Their labor illustrates the potential for producing “collective subjectivity, sociality, and ultimately society itself” (Boris and Parreñas 18). Because this labor is generally carried out tangibly despite producing the intangible product of intimacy, it could be argued that Melody’s exclusively technological performance might be outside of what is generally considered affective labor. This conclusion overlooks that the potential of the technologies employed can in and of themselves be intimate by serving as tools to provide the intimate experience PM’s audience seeks.

The ways in which technology mediates intimacy and service are heavily gendered. This is clear exhibited in the gendering of artificially intelligent personal assistants and chatbots, for example in Apple’s feminine personal assistant Siri or feminized home AI Alexa. While Projekt Melody does not meet the criteria to be considered an AI, their performance and the service PM

sells is not dissimilar. Melody exhibits traits and behaviors commonly attributed to feminized AI personal assistance. Such technologies promote a sense of intimacy and companionship. Pedro Costa's work on gendered AI (e.g. Siri, Cortana, and Alexa) characterizes the relationship between "female" personal assistant and user as being "influenced by feelings of intimacy, closeness, and empathy" (Costa 62) and can have the effect of attachment or fondness. The role of gender in this relationship is demonstrable in such virtual assistants' association with passive behavior, commitment to service, and always-on features. Costa points to the ways in which they can exhibit both modesty and charm when offered affirmations or compliments, mimicking stereotypical feminine responses that adhere to patriarchal social norms.

The notions of gendered AI that Costa discusses extend to Melody in notable ways. Adhering to these same norms with different tools, Projekt Melody symbolizes an extreme example of gendered, intimate technologies, adhering to these same norms with different tools. Melody's personality can be characterized as bubbly, eager, coy, submissive, and witty, anthropomorphizing a digital body that exists solely for the purpose of feminine labor and service. As PM performs, viewers easily forget the distinction between the technology and the intimacy they provide.

This use of technologies to perform sex work, though the labor is disembodied, becomes a means of "articulating" the body (Boris and Parreñas 20). Melody's body is literally articulated by technology. This technological articulation serves as an invisible boundary between the physical and the digital, demonstrating technology's valid inclusion in affective, intimate labor as an "[embedded] environment for the self" (Boris and Parreñas). For example, we might consider that if a glitch takes place while Melody is doing a strip tease on Chaturbate, the

intimate experience is entirely lost, even if for just a moment. Thus, the technology is not simply supplemental to the service provided; it is the intimate experience itself. It is affective in both the digital and tangible sense. It produces both “real” and digital reverberations – first and foremost in their Projekt Melody’s audience, but also in extending into the social and cultural landscapes, as they disrupt our notions of intimacy, sex work, and technology. The technologically enforced distance is the fantasy itself. Even Melody’s subtle bolts and wires point to the significance of technology and in their desirability and the intimate experience that their audience seeks.

## CHAPTER 7

### ASIANIZATION, TECHNOLOGY, AND DESIRE

Projekt Melody, coded as an Asian woman, contains racialized implications. Melody's anime character design and persona draws on the popularity of Asian media genres within digital spaces. They embody the Western conceptualization of East Asian women as passive, sexually submissive, innocent, and obedient, a stereotype that is reaffirmed in the genres of manga and anime and by the male otaku who consume them. But this aspect of gendered racialization is furthermore intertwined with the racialization of technology, both of its industries and conceptually.

Japan's rise to global economic and technological prominence in the eighties was then encoded into popular culture and the Western imaginary through cyberpunk novels and other genres engaging with media industries. In the field of Asian media studies, David S. Roh, Betsy Huang, and Greta A. Niu trace the historical, cultural, and economic conditions that propelled the West's shift towards a romantic view of Japan as a symbol of technology and of the future. Cultural shifts coincided with shifting informational and trade relations with the East and signaled a departure from the West's longstanding Orientalist fantasy that imagined Eastern Asia as a beacon for traditionalist values (Roh, Huang, Niu 2). The West's imperialist desire to further cultivate trade relations with East Asia in order to access technological expertise fueled a growing interest in a reimagined Japan that promised capitalist market power. Yet, as these shifts occurred, historical notions of Orientalism persisted and they contradicted more modern Western fantasies as these shifts occurred. Traditional Western Orientalism shifted in its romanticization of tradition to a romanticization of an optimized future. Roh, Huang, and Niu propose the term

“Techno-Orientalism” for the “phenomenon of imagining Asia and Asians in hypo- or hypertechnological terms in cultural productions and political discourse” (Roh, Huang, and Niu 2). “Techno-Orientalism” signifies the reductive colonialist view of the “‘Orient’ undergoing rapid economic and cultural transformation” (3), and evoking a white, Western fascination with Japan’s transformation into an optimized and “productive” society. This Western imaginary places value on technological optimization, yet looks to Japan as a society that symbolize supposedly lost social and cultural values. This negotiation between the past and the future represents the West’s ambivalence about capitalism and neoliberalism, where the West simultaneously craves power and finds appeal in the “simplicity” of collectivism. The evolving ideologies that dominated the Western imaginary of Japan and China specifically continue to permeate, exhibited by an exponentially increasing interest in Otaku culture. Below the surface, this fantasy of Japan as the pinnacle of technological progress yet also the embodiment of traditionalist culture is also woven into the construction of the fantasy of racialized sexuality.

The West also looked to Japan’s embedding of gender in technologies, an embedding that is apparent in robots, in the gendering of personal assistants, and other objects that correlate with service work, which is a form of labor that is historically feminized. This connotation of service is embedded in the origin of the word “robot” itself, which derives from the Czech word *robota*, meaning “drudge laborer” (Robertson 4). It is no coincidence that since artificial intelligence technology emerged and evolved, with Japan at the center of this innovation, robots are embedded with and reflective of patriarchal framings of service work. The gendered and racialized implications that robots contain, particularly when developed in Japan, are implicitly seen to reflect and validate techno-Orientalism by representing hegemonic power politically,

socially, and culturally. In *Robo Sapiens Japonicus*, Jennifer Robertson elaborates on the gendered, sexualized, and racialized nature of robots by design. She quotes factory owners who confirm the supposed importance of gendering robots bodies, voices, etc. “Female” robots “are needed as ‘waitresses, shop-girls, [and] secretaries’,” their construction echoing “the sexual and gendered division of labor in human society” (Robertson 5). These roles reflect the ways in which we associate gender, labor, and technology, as previously discussed in the context of artificial intelligence.

Robertson’s analysis of the gendered nature of robots calls attention to the non-neutral nature of such technologies and positions them in the social world and its biases. Robertson further expresses this point by stating that robots “tend to both mirror and embody state and corporate ideologies and priorities” (Robertson 82). Artificial intelligence and robots bring about interesting considerations in relation to gender that can be applied to Projekt Melody, who encapsulates this convergence of patriarchy, Orientalism, and technology. Projekt Melody is an example of what is essentially an Asianized sex robot – albeit an intangible one. The nuts, bolts, and wires on Melody’s body, their cyberpunk scenes, and the technology used to create and operate PM, and her “kawaii” anime aesthetic all point to a parallel with this gendered and Asianized fantasy of robots.

These aesthetics also raise racialized considerations of the Otaku culture to which Melody appeals to on which the avatar capitalizes. Anime’s popularity in the West can be attributed to the correlation between Japan and play. In *Open World Empire*, Christopher Patterson comments on how “acts of play are made possible by a vast transpacific network of global exchange that partitions Asia into an open frontier of technological advancement”



(Patterson 9). While Patterson refers to games, his insights about the nature of networked culture extends to Otaku culture and its loyal followers. The whimsical cuteness of “kawaii” culture, Harajuku, and iconic characters such as Hello Kitty have become quintessential in white Westerners’ perception of Japan and its cultural production and offer opportunities for vicarious play. These associations are also prevalent in anime and manga, texts that frequently include youthful and hyperfeminine women and girls. Otaku culture, frequently associated with white men, celebrates these qualities of the female characters and immerse themselves in desire for fictional romance and sexuality.

Projekt Melody is a product of Otaku culture and its fantasies. In Projekt Melody’s case, the avatar is a hypersexual object of desire reflecting these Asianized and gendered fantasies associated with anime (As a point of note, not all Otakus literally eroticize anime). Rather than as a character herself, Projekt Melody is a layered, fictional context, as described in Kotani M, a Japanese psychiatrist who takes a psychoanalytical perspective on otaku. Tamaki considers the relationship between the Otaku and the fictional object of their affection to be one oriented towards a sexually fulfilling possession of the character, who is inherently “lacking” (Tamaki 234). This intrinsic lacking, as Kotani Mari notes in the introduction to Tamaki’s *Robot Ghosts and Wired Dreams: Japanese Science Fiction from Origins to Anime*,” has the desired effect of a projection of one’s own sexual lack onto the visual object. The fictional, intangible nature of the characters is desirable *because* it does not exist, not necessarily pure sexual attraction to the appearance of a character. Further, the character who represents a projection of the narcissistic desires of the consumer provides an opportunity to own the object for their personal erotic satisfaction. With a lack of a body and human identity, otaku with sexual relationships with

anime and manga reinforce patriarchal fantasies of objectification. Owning the fictional fantasy and possessing control may be fulfilling to such otaku rather than sheer sexual satisfaction.

In light of this, Projekt Melody, then, is an ideal object for otaku fantasies. In addition to their cuteness, Melody is a fictional space wherein viewers and customers enjoy the avatar's complete submission and lack of corporeality. Projekt Melody's hyperfemininity and hypersexuality is intentional and apparent in their behavior, movements, and personality, and their "lack" is supplemented by role play that further immerses the viewer into the erotics of fiction. The viewer can possess Projekt Melody because they are not only a mere technological, anime avatar object, but they are additionally interactive sites for sexual gratification. As I have noted, the female avatar on Twitch is a fluid object that is constructed and adapts to the patriarchal projections of ideal femininity, and in this sense, collaboratively. The fantasy is still lacking; however, fulfills the need for possession over the ways in which Melody acts, looks, and talks. This is apparent when we consider the fact that PM is a genderless subject, who is the product of anonymous operators and riggers of unknown genders. Yet, this genderlessness does not interrupt the projected erotic fantasy. It could be argued that a projection of femininity onto bodiless anime characters reflects yet another layer of patriarchy, and that Projekt Melody is a compelling example as an interactive object of fiction.

## CONCLUSION

Sex work and streaming are as uncertain as ever in an age wherein an avatar can achieve the commercial and financial success that Projekt Melody has amassed. Concerns raised by other sex workers reflect this uncertainty – whether Melody is a sex worker at all, how Melody so easily skirts competition and censorship, and what it means for sex workers’ job security and success. In the context of Projekt Melody, who performs the labor of body work not only in the absence of a body, but also in the absence of an embodied gender, intimate labor is reimaged. Projekt Melody is simply coded as a female and as an object of desire, and is viewed as a sex-working woman (or a term more frequently used by her audience, “girl”) despite her avatar body. This notion of genderlessness is a thread that runs through all the political implications I have argued for: technological, economical, racial, and so on. When sex work is removed from gender, how may we approach the subject? How is the perception of authenticity so easily maintained? And how is the concept of the prostitute imaginary disrupted? We may only consider Projekt Melody as a projection – of patriarchy, technological fantasies, and race. The politics of their labor is as complex as it is invisible, with Projekt Melody performing intimate labor in ways that align and depart from how it has been previously imagined by feminist scholarship. Projekt Melody furthermore represents the intersections between technology and gendered labor, and the ways in which, when we consider an avatar sex worker, sex work may be differently or reconstructed. When, as is the case for gender, when the body is absent, coding a technological avatar as Asian further complicates these discussions of avatar sex work. Based on my analysis of Projekt Melody, I call for a convergence of sex work studies, media studies, and technology studies to begin to lay groundwork for the future the avatar may point to. At this

intersection, we may anticipate the shifting landscape of online sex work and its potential consequences. Projekt Melody embodies a patriarchal fantasy of gendered intimate labor and the possibilities of technological optimization of sexuality, simultaneously subverting conventions of streaming and sex work labor in other ways through their use of technology in other ways.

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Jenn (@justnobodyhere\_). “I’d understand other sex workers seeing this and thinking it’s unfair because this is their livelihood, and also Melody has a distinct ‘thing’ being virtual (without the mental/physical consequences) while they had to worked [sic] harder without the same recognition/popularity” *Twitter*, 27 February 2020, [twitter.com/justnobodyhere\\_/status/1233102596480655369?s=46&t=WVa\\_ILFgnux7cMkWjFgRfw](https://twitter.com/justnobodyhere_/status/1233102596480655369?s=46&t=WVa_ILFgnux7cMkWjFgRfw).

Jenn (@justnobodyhere\_). “I think there’s also the way sex workers are treated. There’s still a stigma around people who do sex work, especially women where people think women should be ‘pure’. There’s also the physical and mental demand that it takes. In which case, Projekt Melody isn’t faced with…” *Twitter*, 27 February 2020, [twitter.com/justnobodyhere\\_/status/1233102596480655369?s=46&t=WVa\\_ILFgnux7cMkWjFgRfw](https://twitter.com/justnobodyhere_/status/1233102596480655369?s=46&t=WVa_ILFgnux7cMkWjFgRfw).

Jenn (@justnobodyhere\_). “...that stigma because it’s a virtual sex worker. Whoever is doing the rigging doesn’t have that mental pressure because they’re anonymous. They also aren’t met with the physical demands of camming because it’s a virtual model, essentially just an animation” *Twitter*, 27 February, [twitter.com/justnobodyhere\\_/status/1233102596480655369?s=46&t=WVa\\_ILFgnux7cMkWjFgRfw](https://twitter.com/justnobodyhere_/status/1233102596480655369?s=46&t=WVa_ILFgnux7cMkWjFgRfw).

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## **BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH**

Katherine Hitt was born in Dallas, Texas. She obtained her Bachelor of Arts degree in Emerging Media and Communication from The University at Texas at Dallas, where she continued her education to obtain her Master of Arts degree in the Critical Media Studies program. During her time in the Master's program, she spent both years as a teaching assistant for a writing class and a media psychology class.



## CURRICULUM VITAE

### KATHERINE HITT

#### Education

The University of Texas at Dallas – Master of Arts  
Richardson, Texas  
ATEC, Emerging Media Studies  
August 2021 – May 2023

The University of Texas at Dallas – Bachelor of Arts  
Richardson, Texas  
ATEC, Emerging Media Studies  
August 2021 – May 2023

#### Profile

Academic background in media, culture, and technology with strong writing and editing skills. Experienced researcher. Proficient and creative use of social media.

#### Writing & Editing Experience

The University of Texas at Dallas, Teaching Assistant  
Richardson, Texas  
*Writing for ATEC*, Dr. Laura Beltz Imaoka  
August 2021 – May 2022

Assisted in grading and written feedback for student papers and homework. Managed classroom logistics, grade book, and student evaluations. Responded to student questions and concerns. Planned lecture, activity, and discussion on John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*.

The University of Texas at Dallas, Teaching Assistant  
Richardson, Texas  
*Attitudes and Behaviors*, Dr. James Fraley  
August 2022 – May 2023

Assisted in grading and written feedback for student assignments. Managed student emails and tracked attendance. Met with students individually for career planning and academic support. Planned lecture, activity, and discussion on media literacy and false narratives.

## **Honors and Awards**

HASTAC Inductee and Scholarship Recipient, The University of Texas at Dallas  
Richardson, Texas; 2021 – 2023

Graduate Student Advisory Council Nomination Recipient, The University of Texas at Dallas  
ATEC Master of Arts Representative  
Richardson, Texas; 2021 – 2023

Teaching Assistant Scholarship, The University of Texas at Dallas  
Richardson, Texas; 2021 – 2023

Outstanding Capstone Nominee, The University of Texas at Dallas  
*Girls on Screens: Facetune and Transfemme Representation on Instagram*  
Richardson, Texas; 2019

## **Professional Memberships and Organizations**

Moderator, The University of Texas at Dallas  
Career Spotlight – Anne Cong-Huyen  
Richardson, Texas; 2021

Graduate Student Advisory Council, The University of Texas at Dallas  
ATEC Master of Arts Representative  
Richardson, Texas; 2021 – 2022

Humanities, Arts, Science, and Technology Alliance and Collaboratory (HASTAC).

Presenter, Research, Art, and Writing Conference  
*Arca: Technologically Imagined Transfemininity and Constructions of the Real*  
Richardson, Texas; 2022

## **Hobbies & Interests**

Poetry, design, cassette collecting, blogging, vintage fashion, social justice, interior decorating, popular culture, and reading. Cat lover.