

"Making a Spectacle of Herself":¹ On Women's Bodies in the Skin Trades²

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we undertake a reading of erotic dance/dancers through the body lens attending to questions of meanings and subjectivity. Women's bodies in strip clubs emerged as contested terrain so that while the axes of beauty, sexuality and labour were oppressive, they were also the sites of subversion and resistance. Additionally, the research revealed erotic dancers to be simultaneously defined as in danger and dangerous. We conclude that their ownership of sexuality as spectacle and their spectacle of sexuality threatens patriarchal discourses and practices.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article nous faisons une lecture de la danse/de danseuses exotiques à travers la lentille du corps, en prêtant attention aux questions de sens et de subjectivité. Le corps des femmes dans les boîtes de strip-tease est apparu comme étant un terrain contesté qui tandis que les axes de beauté, de sexualité et de travail étaient oppressants, ils étaient aussi les sites de subversion et de résistance. De plus, les recherches révèlent que les danseuse exotiques sont définies comme étant en danger et aussi dangereuses. Nous concluons que leur possession de la sexualité en tant que spectacle menace les discours et les pratiques patriarcales.

Curiously, at a time when the discrete object called the body is being theoretically deconstructed, technologically fragmented, and politically reterritorialized, it has become an object of intense intellectual fascination, a realm for futuristic fantasy, and, indeed, a grounding point of profound social anxiety.

(Terry and Urla 1995, 3)

The body may be the home of the soul and the pathway of the spirit, but it is also the perversity, the stubborn resistance, the malign contagion of the material world. Having a body, being in the body, is like being roped to a sick cat. (Atwood 1994)

You can get fired for anything. Being too fat, for having a big ass, because the owner doesn't like you, for looking too young. I've been fired for looking too young. (Sarah)³

I found I liked being a sex object, because the context was appropriate. I resented being treated as a sex object on the street or at the office. But as an exotic dancer that is my job. (Sundahl 1987, 176)

Pole work is a lot of hanging upside down, it's a lot of balance, muscle technique. It's hard to look sexy when you're upside down and all the blood's rushing to your head! (Diane)

INTRODUCTION

Body. Black. White. Red. Aging. Hair. Breasts. Fingernail. Pimple. Wrinkle. Menstruation. Pregnancy. Birth. Menopause. Premenstrual syndrome. Cosmetic surgery. Sex. Make-up. Foot binding. Pornography. Prostitution. Rape. Reproductive technologies. Female genital mutilation. Electro-convulsive therapy. Eating disorders. Models. Sex tourism. Self-mutilation. Body piercing. Tattoos. Medication. Flesh. *Sati*.⁴ Witch burning. Veil. Smile. Baby's smell.

At different times and in different cultural spaces, the body emits different meanings. The body is not a still, objective entity. Rather it holds complex, multiple, ancient and deep significance. It is part, creator and mediator of cultural artefacts. Since bodies do not exist in terms of an *a priori* essence, anterior to techniques and practices that are imposed upon them, their representational vicissitudes require investigation.

They are neither transhistorical, sets of needs and desires nor natural objects preexisting cultural (and, indeed, scientific) representation. They are effects, products, or symptoms of specific techniques and regulatory practices. In short, bodies are points on which and from which the disciplinary power of scientific investigations and their popular appropriations is exercised.

(Terry and Urla 1995, 3)

Following from these observations, is one to conclude that women's oppression is located in her oppressive body? Is the body only negative? Is the body only passive? Or does the body resist? On this issue, McNay writes:

Although oppression of women is based on the appropriation of their bodies by patriarchy, it does not follow, therefore, that oppression derives from the body or sex, or that the notion of a natural difference can be used to explain gender inequalities. Rather, the "natural" body must be understood as a device central to the legitimation of certain strategies of oppression. (1992, 21)

In this paper, we explore these tensions by turning to the strip club, a unique social space that is premised on women's bodies and where, at least at first glance, it would appear that women are *only* body. After presenting the theoretical and methodological approaches which underpin our study, we narrow the field and consider more specifically the interface between the meanings scripted onto dancers' bodies and how those bodies are subjectively experienced. At the core of our journey is a section entitled *Recasting Women's Bodies* where we ask a number of questions. What meanings and purposes are invested in women's bodies in strip clubs? How are these understood and negotiated by the dancers? What are the implications of this tension between script and subjectivity and how does this get played out in the interactive order?

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

Historically and even to some extent today, the body represents a theoretical gap and void at the heart of the traditional academic enterprise. The mere acknowledgement of the body seems to cast a shadow on the pursuit of rationality and objectivity of both the social theorist and the conditions of the production of knowledge. In fact, Smart (1989) argues that: "It has been essential for the acceptance of the claim of objectivity and scientificity that there be a clear dissociation from supposedly natural elements like the functions of the body" (91). The radical feminist critique of the hierarchical binary and their challenge to the assumption that women must eliminate their femaleness, their flesh or their body to be capable of rational acts notwithstanding, the Cartesian dualism continues to resonate in multiple discursive and social sites.⁵ Certainly, workers in the skin trades, whose labour is explicitly predicated on their physical appearance, are often silenced or dismissed. Even radical feminist analysis frequently reproduces that which it seeks to displace by arguing that pornography transforms women into the object of men's gaze (Griffin 1981; Dworkin 1979).

Over the course of the last two decades, feminists have begun to put the body at center stage in disciplines as diverse as sociology, psychology, medicine, anthropology, philosophy, law, geography, biology, psychiatry, politics, art, history and criminology. When examining the feminist contributions to the study of the body one can trace a movement from the negation of the body to the celebration of the body (Currie and Raoul 1992). The first conceptualization was premised on the idea that the body should not be acknowledged because it has been the source of oppression of women. This first movement rested on the belief that in order to be held up as objective truth, knowledge should not be contaminated by the body. The result being that objective knowledge was equated with disembodied knowledge. In that respect, "Women" as a category has been posited as "other," negativity, as the embodiment of difference, unreason and otherness. In order to be rational, women needed to eliminate all traces of their femaleness. Subsequently, within a broader

rethinking of mainstream/malestream assumptions, explorations emerged which were characterized by the celebration of the body. This second movement postulates that our body inspires greater knowledge because of our specific location and social experiences of/as female bodies.

The latter literature opens up the space to challenge the meaning inscribed onto the body. When the emphasis is on the oppressive character of the body, we are limiting ourselves in understanding women only as manipulated and passive. More recently, a few feminists have called into question this "unilateral characterization" (Beausoleil 1994, 37) of the body. Beausoleil's work on makeup and appearance practices (1994 & 2000) confirms "that while limited by structural forces of domination, women are actively 'negotiating the body' (Fisher and Davis 1993)" (Beausoleil 1994, 37). It also constitutes the space where women resist.

In this paper we pursue this subversion. Rather than demonstrating women's transcendence of the body through mind (and thereby inverting but not subverting the hierarchy) this paper is unapologetically about women's bodies. By mapping subjectivity onto the physical and social spaces of erotic dancers' labour and paying attention to the complexity of sexuality, we are positioned to forge a conceptual space for the exploration of the multiple meanings invested in women's bodies in strip clubs. As assumptions become destabilized, it is apparent that the erotic terrain is imposed but also owned and manipulated - a source of power, pleasure and resistance. In short, while women's body has been a source of their oppression (Spelman 1982, 123); it has also been a source of pleasure and achievement. For example, Adrienne Rich places a positive emphasis on the specific female experiences of the body:

(...) female biology the diffuse, intense sensuality radiating out from the clitoris, breasts, uterus, vagina; the lunar cycles of menstruation; the gestation and fruition of life which can take place in the female body has far more radical implications than we have yet come to appreciate. Patriarchal thought has limited female biology to its own narrow specifications. (1977, 21)

As we trace some of the dominant themes of the representations of erotic dancers' bodies the symbolic order unfolds. Women are located in lacunae and point to major cracks in this symbolic order: the masculine order. The dominant themes discussed in this journey display, we will suggest, the "fascination for and fear of the female body" (Young 1990, 45). Woman is already other and deviant. Russo suggests that Bakhtin's concept of "grotesque" is embodied in a series "...of taboos around the female body as grotesque (the pregnant body, the aging body, the irregular body) and as unruly when set loose in the public sphere." In fact, "she....is making a spectacle of herself" (1986, 213-14). However, Becki Ross nuances this by drawing our attention to the importance of class and "appropriate" sexuality: "Beginning in the late 19th century European sexologists, anatomists, psychologists and physicians sought to territorialize the prostitute body as a working-class body grotesque, diseased and distinct from the bodies of bourgeois wives and chaste daughters" (2000, 2002)

While all women are at risk of making (unwilling) spectacles of themselves, erotic dancers actively embrace the spectacle by flaunting their eroticized bodies on display. The result, as we will see, is complex and speaks to their reappropriation of the spectacle.

This paper represents a merging of research projects undertaken individually by the authors. While the two studies relied on different theoretical points of entry they were both informed by feminism and committed to addressing women's historic silencing through the documentation of ordinary (unfamous rather than unexceptional) women's lives. By re-centring the "other other" (Stanley and Wise 1990) and beginning "from the standpoint of those outside ruling regimes" (Smith 1990, 631) a space for the absent subjectivity emerged.

More specifically the insights garnered during ethnographic research on the representations of women's body in prison undertaken by Sylvie Frigon provided the theoretical foundations of our analysis of women's bodies in the skin trades. For this earlier qualitative research twenty-five open-ended interviews with incarcerated women in Canada were conducted in the summer of 1998 to uncover the various mechanisms of control over

their bodies. A series of questions guided this investigation: How does confinement work and change the body? How is the body invested through the deployment of power? How is it controlled? How is confinement engendering deviant female bodies?

Frigon's finding that the body is simultaneously dangerous and in danger (Frigon 1996; 2000; 2001; 2002) provided an enlightening point of entry to rethinking the ethnographic data on strip clubs that had been undertaken as part of a dissertation by Chris Bruckert (2002). For this study, in addition to participant observation and support staff interviews, fifteen women working as erotic dancers in Ontario in 1997 and 1998 were interviewed. It is impossible to draw a composite profile. The women ranged in age from 21 to 46. All had been working in the industry for a minimum of one year, but most had considerably longer careers. Approximately half the women were mothers, while one was a grandmother. Their backgrounds spanned the class spectrum from very marginal, criminalized parents to comfortable middle-class. All except one were Anglophones. Two were women of colour. Although not all interviewees spoke to sexual orientation, two noted that they were exclusively heterosexual, three indicated that they were bi-sexual while two self-identified as lesbian. The in-depth interviews, which centred on questions of work experience, were self-consciously unstructured and flexible to allow ideas and issues to develop, for individuality to emerge and for participants to identify what was important (Reinartz 1992, 21). While the body held significance for all interviewees, the extent to which this was put forward varied so that issues and articulations around the body emerge more explicitly in some of the narratives than in others.

SITUATING EROTIC DANCERS' BODIES

Women's bodies in strip clubs fulfill two essential roles. Firstly, they justify the establishment. It is the woman at some phase of undress on the stage and the scantily clad women scattered throughout the club, chatting, posing and giving off the visual and verbal cues of availability that mark the space as a strip club. A strip club without strippers is a particularly dismal place. Secondly, and somewhat ironically, erotic dancers

facilitate the reenactment of an environment reminiscent of the taverns that earlier generations of men enjoyed. The whore-Madonna dichotomy, in relation to which not only men but women also operate, ensure that "respectable" women do not frequent strip clubs. Those that venture inside are both subtly and actively discouraged and generally pushed outside through physical and verbal cues. In fact exclusionary processes are not always so subtle: unaccompanied women are sometimes asked to leave the establishments. Not surprisingly, female customers are rare. Women, who are evident throughout the public space of the bar, are confined by their roles. From the perspective of the patron, the female employees in the strip club are there to serve by catering to his physical or sexual desires - either servants or whores. In either case, any pretense of equality between men and women is suspended and the concessions afforded "good" women in this supposedly emancipated age are unnecessary. Men can behave as if no women were present at all. In short, dancers' bodies are both peripheral and essential - it is the very proliferation of female bodies, and the discursive and spacial centrality of those bodies, that secures the club as a male space.

RECASTING WOMEN'S BODIES

The strip club is a business that self-consciously relies on women's bodies. Other industries, including airlines and tourism (Adkins 1992; Hochschild 1983), use women's bodies to make a product or service more appealing. Here, the service and the body are conflated and the expectation of physical attractiveness appear embedded in industry practices. While there is certainly some legitimacy to this assumption, the meaning of women's bodies is considerably more nuanced. In order to show the complexities, we have undertaken a "reading" of the material through the "body" lens. The following is organized according to the themes that emerged: the beautiful body; the sexy body; and the labouring body. We then speak to the tension of women's bodies as simultaneously in danger and dangerous by turning to risk and resistance and thinking about the ways these beautiful, sexy, labouring bodies in strip club are the site of control at the same time as they are the site of resistance.

BEAUTIFUL, SEXY, LABOURING BODIES

The traditional skills women are required to bring to the labour market include not only the ability to assume an attractive "made-up" appearance so that "part of job for women consists of looking good" but also explicitly or implicitly require a feminine and sexualized presentation-of-self (Adkins 1992, 216 & 218). In fact, much of the publicly visible labour that women undertake has a sexual sub-text. Put this way, the erotic component of strippers' work situates them on a continuum of visible sexuality which frequently characterizes women's labour force engagement.⁶

The Beautiful Body

The industry is understood by insiders as clearly stratified by the appearance standards imposed by management: "If they have a nice bar and, uh, the girls are good looking they're not going to hire somebody who's overweight That's how it works. The really pretty girls get to work in the really nice bars" (Diane). At the same time, managers increasingly appreciate that beauty is subjectively defined. Certainly the variety of body types scattered throughout most of the clubs speaks to greater fluidity in terms of sex appeal than the mass media would have us believe. Nonetheless, women whose bodies are defined as un-beautiful may find their employment options severely limited. Here we see an intersection with cultural practices so that bodies must be young: "It's very limited now because of my age. Some bars think it's great, some bars, over twenty-five no way!" (Marie) and not "excessively" large: "If I gain ten pounds it's a big deal. Why should it matter? My customers are still coming in to see me. I'm still doing my job, taking my turn on stage. So what if I gain a few pounds" (Rachel). Other bodies are "marked" as unacceptable. Judgements and assumptions that the bearer of tattoos also possesses other characteristics, including being tough, cheap and unfeminine (Sanders 1989), are unquestioningly reproduced within the club.⁷ Managers regularly refuse tattooed women employment because "with all those tattoos ah ..we don't want those kind of girls, we want nice girls." Consequently, many dancers carefully conceal their body art and attempt to pass.

The only thing that was holding me back was my tattoos and my lack of tan lines....and it still does - there's only two clubs I can dance here. Well I need tan lines, that's what I've been told by, like every club owner except one or two. I need tan lines and I need to cover up my tattoos. So I wear stockings but the ones on my legs are hard to cover. (Jamie)

The beautiful body is also a racialized body. The industry standard continues to be the young fair-skinned, blond, well-endowed beauty with tan lines.⁸ Managers' recognition of beauty as diverse notwithstanding, the existence of an ideal type has implications for women of colour. In some places, job opportunities for visible minority women may be restricted (Anderson 1999; Stella 2000). At other times, women of colour may be defined as "exotic." While the latter can operate in the economic interests of individual dancers either scenario speaks to powerful political discourses that reproduce and reflect social stratifications (Bordo 1994).

The hierarchical beauty script which permeates the strip industry cannot be disentangled from broader social discourses about race, class, and gender. In the environment of the club this is played out in the marginalization of women whose physical body marks them as outside the parameters of the ideal type women who are not thin, not white, not young, or whose bodies are "marred" by tattoos. In real terms the limited employment options of these women renders them particularly vulnerable to exploitation (fines, labour demands) and restricts their ability to employ informal or formal strategies of resistance.⁹

When we turn our attention to subjectivity, the question immediately becomes: what are the implications of engaging in a labour activity that so clearly relies on physical appearance? One might assume that this would undermine women's self-esteem. Unlike most occupations where success and appearance are mediated, in the club the relationship is experienced much more directly. Certainly the failure to make money can be perceived as rejection: "...you get feeling like you're fat, you start feeling like you are ugly" (Rachel). Most of the dancers interviewed had good distancing skills and made sense of the experience

in ways that did not ultimately undermine their sense of self worth: "You know you can't take it personal" (Debbie). In fact, rather than diminished confidence quite the opposite effect is evident, the acceptance and open appreciation of their bodies seems to translate into a positive body image. In a finding that directly challenges the notion of self-loathing resplendent in the dominant discourse, dancers express considerable satisfaction and actually like their bodies.

The Sexy Body

When we abandon the male gaze and instead start from the experiential reality of women working in clubs, the meaning of the interface between sexuality and labour is immediately destabilized. The distinction between the appearance of sexuality and the experience of sexuality, between presentation and feeling, are brought into sharp focus. On stage, erotic dancers have to smile, or at least assume the appropriate sexually vacant expression - "I think about doing laundry or watch the TV" (Debbie) while engaging with the indicators of sexuality. This link to the erotic and nudity appears to define her job as a stripper, however, subjectively this most explicitly erotic labour is not about sex but nudity and the visible presentations of the erotic: "You manipulate your body in a certain way and you throw a sexual aspect to it" (Debbie). Put another way, the dancer engages in surface acting where "the body not the soul is the main tool of the trade. The actor's body evokes passion in the *audience*, but the actor is only *acting* as if he had the feeling" [emphasis in original] (Hochschild 1983, 37). The eroticised setting, available props, and their own expectations may ensure that audience members project their erotic expectations but the experience of workers is rather different:

At the Blue Lagoon it's a lot easier because there's TVs. I can't see anyone from the stage so I watch TV. I'll listen to music and I'll watch TV and I'll just dance. I've been doing it, you know when you do it so often you're you're looking straight at people's eyes but you're going, you're kinda looking over yonder type, looking at the TV there. You're doing your little

crawl and you're like giggling inside cause there's some show on. I mean I've lost it completely because I was doing a show and I was trying to talk to someone and The Simpsons came on TV and I started pissing myself laughing. I couldn't do it anymore. I walked off the stage. (Debbie)

Not only does the dancer manage sexual presentation she also draws on subjective definitions of sexuality/private to establish and legitimate her personal boundaries. As the following comments by Debbie suggests, breasts may be reinterpreted as essentially non-sexual:¹⁰

If it's, I mean if it's gonna benefit my wallet, pardon me, I'll do it except I will draw the line, I will not step over the line. To me, I guess to me prostitution is actual penetration or ah ah whether it be hold, holding his ah genitals with your hand, your mouth or ah there, that's that's the line. Cause, cause I mean, I've had several people touch my chest, to me my chest is nothing. You touch me there [crotch] and we'll have words. That's the line. That's the only thing private to me. (Debbie)¹¹

What does this engagement with the markers of sexuality mean for erotic labourers? We would argue that in spite of a labour site that is permeated with the markers of sexuality for the dancers it is a script with roles that are played in a half-hearted manner, "you do little moves and stuff" (Diane) - a skill to be manipulated and employed. At the same time, strippers are hardly naive and recognise that management as well as customers view them with a pornographic eye: "...we're meat, we're meat - that's all we are" (Debbie). Or, as Sarah notes: "They don't care about us as long as there's a body on stage." The very transparency of the sexualized expectations appears to help "I found I liked being a sex object, because the context was appropriate. I resented being treated as a sex object on the street or at the office. But as an exotic dancer that is my job" (Sundahl 1987, 176). Given that "[sexual harassment] is all over, in what I do, *no*, that's the place" [emphasis hers] (Tina), in the strip club sexuality is acknowledged and therefore can be managed: "Wouldn't you say in a restaurant, the

owners, the cooks they're gonna grab you for free at their convenience. But in a bar, first of all they *don't* grab you, they're gonna be thrown out, and whatever happens they're always forking out the bucks for it you know." [emphasis hers] (Kelly).

At the same time what is important is a sexualized self-image so that "you feel good about yourself" (Sarah). Put another way, self-sexualization, perceiving oneself to be sexually appealing and worthy of male adoration, is subjectively important. This engagement with sexuality and the comfort around their own and other naked bodies with which there is continual interaction in turn opens up new spaces for erotic expression:

I'm experimenting right now. So it's [stripping] opened my mind to.... to ah different things. I mean I would never ever ever in a million years would I ever think about touching another woman when I was growing up. Now there are certain women oh I would love to go to bed with. I would! You know just ah, it's opened my mind to new.... it's expanded my way of thinking. (Debbie)

The Labouring Body

Stripping is a job that requires erotic dancers to employ their beautiful sexy bodies as an instrument of labour. First, a dancer must labour to create her body:

I get up. I shave. I put my war paint on - that's what I call it, I'm not ah, I'm not a cosmetic girl. I don't like, I don't like to do my hair. I like to look like shit. But I pretend I'm somebody else and I'd get all glamorous and I go into work. I'm one of these [hair over eyes] [laughter]. A lot, a lot of men find my hair sexy because I don't do anything to it. So you know a lot of guys like to touch your hair, the more unruly your hair is the better off you are. Ya. So I go into work, I change into a bra, g-string and a wrap, sometimes I'll wear a dress, like a gown - a tight fitting dress. Sometimes, I'll wear a body suit. Put my shoes on and I go on the floor.

Evidently, a physically appealing body is not, in itself, sufficient. A stripper must work her body on stage, on the floor and in the champagne room. In the first instance she is required to periodically "do a stage." Many develop a strong stage presence and are competent dancers, proficient not only in the standard stripper moves but able to incorporate, and execute (in very high heels), their own eclectic mix of ballet, jazz, acrobatics, aerobics and posing. Although the difficulty of the work is obscured by the performance component and nudity, it is physically demanding manual labour. And like so much physical labour it can be dangerous. There is a danger of infectious disease from unsanitary stages, poles and chairs as well as the obvious potential harm in dancing in stiletto heels. "You wreck your knees when you do floor shows" (Kelly). It is also exhausting and technically difficult: "Pole work is a lot of hanging upside down, it's a lot of balance, muscle technique. It's hard to look sexy when you're upside down and all the blood's rushing to your head!" (Diane). Put another way, the moves can only be erotic if they appear effortless and natural, a feat which necessitates practice, skill and considerable muscle development. Erotic dancers are highly cognizant of the fact that being beautiful and sexy is not natural or easy but demands work. Paradoxically the more effective the illusion, the more sexual the portrayal, the more the work is invisible.

As already noted, erotic dancers' incomes are generated through their engagement with patrons who purchase their services. Here again we see that the mere possession of a beautiful, sexy body is not enough. The dancer must employ interpersonal skills, sales tactics and emotional labour.

There was a girl that worked at Fred's. Like all of us would be sitting around, and good-looking girls, and this girl, she was tall, skinny, she had no boobs and no bum at all, nothing and short fuzzy blond hair. And, she'd come out and wouldn't sit down the whole night. She'd walk around and even if there was only four or five people in the bar, she would stop and say "hi" to each person, and try to talk to them. And sometimes she got a dance.

She'd always make money. (Diane)

In short, to generate income, strippers must master a complex sets of skills which, as is the case for so much women's labour, are neither recognized nor compensated (Cockburn 1986). They must not only create an appropriate body but also work that body by engaging in public erotic labour (stage shows), private erotic labour (private dances) and, most especially, emotional labour (private interaction) (Bruckert 2002; Wood 2000). That the latter is largely absent from public and academic discourse speaks not only to the embedded Cartesian dualism but highlights the ways the "male gaze" is reproduced when analysis emerges from "outside."

BODIES IN DANGER, DANGEROUS BODIES

When we take the body as a lens of analysis, we find multiple examples of women's bodies as simultaneously dangerous and in danger. The witch trials, for example, show how women and their bodies needed to be controlled, regulated and even exterminated. It was believed that women possessed disruptive bodies and minds that threatened religion, the emerging medical discipline and rationality. Throughout history, women have been controlled because of their mysterious bodily functions: menstruation, pregnancy, maternity and others. This control continues today and we invite you to think of how witches, premenstrual women, sex trade workers, pregnant women, imprisoned women and erotic dancers are all seen as possessing "disruptive bodies" which can render them in danger (victims of Satan, at the mercy of their raging hormones, at risk of sexually-transmitted disease and abuse) and dangerous (mysterious satanic powers, leading them to kill, to infect clients, to endanger the fetus by adopting dangerous practices and/or lifestyles).

Strippers' bodies are in danger but they also resist, and therefore are dangerous. They are at risk from the state, from the customers and from other dancers, and yet, because they resist the script, the authority of managers, customers and patriarchy, they pose a threat to discourses and practices of subjection.

Bodies in Danger...from the State

Women's bodies in strip clubs are situated within a web of medical, legal and moral discourses that legitimate state-regulatory practices. The Ontario Labour Minister ruled in 1995 that lap dancing constituted a potential health hazard for workers contrary to the *Occupational Health and Safety Act* and so arguments about morality became supported with medical justifications. Notwithstanding the apparent concern that dancers' bodies were at risk, the initiatives that followed speak to the desire to regulate strippers' bodies by prohibiting practices such as lap dancing because they pose a risk. In addition, the danger of moral contamination was promoted by community groups who feared that strip clubs were "breeding grounds for rapists and murderers" (Adami 1982) and increase the sexual danger engendered for other women. In this discourse, the very existence of strippers' bodies threatens the sanctity of the community and legitimates the extra control such as licensing and zoning to which the industry's workers are subjected. Finally, the danger that dancers' actions pose to the moral order and women's equality (*R v. Mara*) justifies coercive criminal justice interventions. Police regularly lay charges for "immoral theater performance" (*Canadian Criminal Code* 167), "public nudity" (*CCC* 174) and most recently, being in a "Bawdy House" (*CCC* 210), against dancers.¹²

Erotic dancers know that whatever their own behaviour, simply being caught in a raid will endanger their freedom, their economic well-being and possibly their public identity if their occupation is made public:

When they raided Hogans in Oshawa, every girl that was in the champagne room went to jail, for ten hours. They paid a twenty-five hundred dollar fine, the bar was charged five thousand dollars per girl, in the champagne room. The customers went to jail as well, their names were printed in the paper, along with the girl's names. So, those girls...their career is shattered, um, they were given stipulations which they've all broken - but they're all back. There's no anonymity for them. (Debbie)

The implications of being defined as dangerous and diseased undermine the potential for attaining the status of workers and, therefore also for engaging in organized labour resistance. As Becki Ross notes "as long as stripper bodies conjure up popular associations or worthless, diseased, lazy, drug-addicted, oversexed, dangerous and unCanadian bodies, the erotic labour performed by dancers, past and present will never be appreciated as labour" (2000, 240).

Bodies in Danger.....from Customers

Stripping can be a physically dangerous occupation. Not only is there the danger of physical injury discussed earlier but there is also the ever-present threat that customers will act aggressively. Although all research participants had developed strategies to protect themselves, over half had stories of violence, often sexual, perpetrated against them: "I've had to have the bouncer physically remove a customer, from me....several times. Um, same with other girls, I've seen girls get cornered in the booths and the doorman is, he's not quick enough, because that sudden thing is what stays with you for the rest of your life" (Debbie).

Like their working class sisters in the manufacturing industry, these workers receive little protection from their employers who appear all too ready to blame the victim. In addition, there is a realistic danger of customers contravening the established parameters and criminal law by attacking a dancer outside the club.¹³

Bodies in Danger...from Dancers

Physical acts of aggression are not only committed by customers. Relations between dancers, shaped by an individualistic and competitive labour structure, are frequently antagonistic. Fights are certainly not the norm but they do occur and can be frightening in their intensity:

There was a new girl dancing in a club, and there was a house girl and she was infamous for her ah - temper. And this new girl approached this girl's customer, and the customer touched her. She didn't know any better. I mean she told the

customer "no," but the girl saw her customer touching her and her and her friend jumped this poor girl, in the back room and beat the crap out of her - to the point of hospitalization. (Debbie)

Debbie later suggested that some of this hostility may also be a result of the labour situation that leaves dancers frustrated and angry: "They're taking the violence out that they get from a customer on another dancer. And they're taking their frustrations out on her."

In short, women's bodies in strip clubs are in danger. There is the real danger of physical aggression by customers and other dancers, as well as the dangers engendered through the labour process itself. At the same time, and somewhat paradoxically, they are also in danger precisely because they are constructed as dangerous. It is the threat that they are presumed to pose to the moral and medical well-being of the social order that informs and justifies regulatory tactics so that these women's bodies are rendered "malleable under power" (Grosz 1992, 56).

DANGEROUS BODIES / RESISTING BODIES

Erotic dancers' bodies may be at risk from the state, from customers and from each other. However, to read the process in a unidimensional manner fails to do justice to dancers' engagement with, and employment of, their bodies. A broad understanding of resistance gleaned from anthropological (Scott 1985; 1990) and ethnographic accounts (Paules 1991; Sacks & Remy 1984), is useful to explore the ways in which the body is both instrument and the embodiment of strategies employed by strippers to resist the ability of management and clients to dictate their labour and to subvert gender discourses and roles. In doing so, a notion of resistance as "merely the obverse of a one-dimensional notion of power as domination" (Rose 1999, 279) is broadened to include an appreciation of the politics of the everyday actions.

....resisting the script

As the literature on violence against women has highlighted, transforming women into

objects is both violence in its own right and, in turn, facilitates violence. Women in the clubs are rendered objects of the male gaze and, as recounted above, subject to acts of aggression. However, these women's bodies are not simply objectified; dancers are also positioned to return the gaze. On stage (and also on the floor) they establish the interaction with the audience, determine the pace, the actions, the movement of the show and, while they may constitute a sexualized object in the patron's gaze, it is their own sexualized and managed construct. From the perspective of a well-lit stage, the audience is invisible and devoid of personality or importance.

Further nuance is revealed when we appreciate that bodies are not simply scripted but subjectively realized. For example, the strip show itself can also function as a "show" of resistance that embodies insiders depersonalizing discursive construction of clients, when it is performed in a highly sarcastic manner, and even taken to the point of absurdity as the dancer parodies the genre in which she is situated. A dancer from the early 1980s noted how she played with the audience:

I gotta charge out of what I was doing. Sometimes I would include the audience. Y'know, and stuff. If I knew the guys, and, one night I went up there and I just thought "what do I care." These guys are fuckin asleep. So I put a bunch of toilet paper up my crotch took my T-bar off and there's like a pack of toilet paper there. "Oops", y'know. Some guy screams "your flags showing" I said, I said "*I surrender*" [emphasis hers](Alex).

This strategy can be personally rewarding¹⁴ whether or not the audience appreciates the irony:

Van Halen, Alice Cooper - "I'm Eighteen it's my Body"... all that stuff "Only Women Bleed" for my floor show. That was an interesting one "Only Women Bleed" [laughter]. Fuck ya. *I used to gross them right out* Maryanne Faithful - "Why'd You Do It," why'd you let her suck your cock. I used that one for the fuckin guys who had lunch! [emphasis hers]. (Alex)

...resisting the authority of managers

Dancers also employ their bodies in their own interests and as a strategy to undermine the authority of managers. While some dancers' bodies are marked and marginalised in the industry, other dancers are positioned to capitalize on their organizational and material assets to manipulate their labour experience. To illustrate: Janet, an exceptionally attractive dancer socializing with friends was approached by a manager who politely and amicably requested she "work the floor." She responded in southern belle fashion, complete with drawl and invisible fan, "if I have to leave here where will I go?" Since her employment had not been threatened, her response deliberately raised the stakes by reminding him of his relative powerlessness in the face of her alternatives. He implicitly acknowledged her victory when he laughed, retreated and had a drink delivered to her table.

Whether they quietly threaten, dramatically pack their bags, or simply fail to show up for work, dancers implicitly or explicitly identify themselves as valuable and position themselves to dictate aspects of their own labour process. Awareness that the club relies on their bodies renders management vulnerable and facilitates self-empowerment: "...the way I look at it, they need me, I don't need them, my customers will follow me to the next bar I want to dance" (Sally).

....resisting/reciprocating aggression

The body can also resist in the most obvious way - as an instrument of aggression. Given that they are endangered both from customers and - should the situation cross the obscure but very important line between dirty and straight¹⁵ - from the state, dancers employ a variety of tactics to protect themselves. Unlike most female employees who are victimized by inappropriate sexual attention, erotic dancers are positioned to effectively reverse the harassment and exploit the customer's own vulnerability.

A couple of weeks ago a guy bit me on the ass and I said to him "I'm in here giving you pleasure and you fucken come in here and disrespect me like that. I'm doing

you nice things and you bite my ass. Is that a normal thing in you life? You bend over and bite people on the ass?" I fucken belittled him something awful. How dare he? Drove him in the head with my elbow...he hit the wall "what you do that for?" "What did I do that for?" Bite me again and I'll show you why I did it. I made him pay me fifty bucks! It was the first dance, I had my knees on his balls, I said "that's fifty fucken dollars, ra ra ra". I said "you pay it or I'm gonna break your balls." Ah, I wasn't gettin off him either - *best defence* [emphasis hers]. (Sally)

Erotic dancers will also work together when they perceive threats to their autonomy or income, sometimes taking action on behalf of another:

Well I've been grabbed....I hadn't been dancing that long and I just like freaked. And I walked in the back, and I was freaking out, ah, and then the doorman, actually it happened at the Cleopatra, and the doorman came in and ah I told him and he said "well what do you want me to do about it?" And I said "well obviously kick the guy out, fuck." Y'know...like, Carmen's with me and she's like "kick him out" so he goes back and he comes back and he says "well I told him he has to leave after he finishes his beer." So Carmen got all upset, so Carmen walked out and wacked him over the head with one of the stools. [laughter] Ya. (Diane)

In short, while dancers' bodies are in danger they also employ their endangered bodies to maximize their income and protect themselves. Again we see surprising implications of occupational location. As the above incidents illustrate, strippers learn to assume control over situations and to assertively enforce their expectations through the strategic employment of their bodies.

...resisting patriarchal discourse

Finally, stripping may be dangerous to

patriarchal discourses. Engaging in the skin-trades is an explicit and highly graphic rejection of patriarchal control realized through a divisive whore-Madonna discourse of respectability and morality (Jeffreys 1985, 60). Skin-trade workers use a commodified representation of their sexuality for maximum personal gain in the market. Such non-shameful display and retention of agency in the commercial and social interaction together constitutes a transformation that challenges acquired gender roles.¹⁶ Like the waitresses in Paules' (1991) study who inverted the symbols of servitude, the dancer inverts the sexual role and sees herself as controlling and manipulating her own, and her client's, sexuality for profit. In both cases the inversion is a "hidden transcript" (Scott 1990) that is empowering; and in both, marginalised women use public discourses to their own advantage.

For some, the use of sexuality to undermine men's power is individually rewarding in more than economic terms: "I used to be overweight, and I lost the weight, and I wanted to pretty much get back at every man who ever used me. And I, was, ah told this was a good way to do it. And I went one night - tried it - I made a complete fool out of myself but I loved it" (Debbie). Later in the interview Debbie reiterated: "Ya, like I said, it's payback, and watching men cringe is, it gives me, it gives me a form of satisfaction." Explaining her disdain for men in general "yuk..that's what I think of men - yuk" [emphasis hers]. Tina explained:

Nah, they all the same.[long pause] They must have a life, no? They must have a wife, a girlfriend? Ya, at least I get paid for this, you know. If I have a boyfriend and I am at home waiting, you know. For example, if I'm home expecting him, I have kids and I make the supper and wait, you know and at the end of the week you know we're missing some money for this, for that, and he went there (in the strip club), you know. I prefer to grab the money. (Tina)

Taken in this way, Tina is capitalizing on not only the customers but at a broader level the gender structure and commodification of sexuality.

We can perhaps best understand this resistance as an example of maximizing gain within real and perceived gender relations and expectations. Of course, employing subordination for personal gain does not challenge stereotypes nor the legitimacy of the hierarchy (Scott 1990, 33) and may support the status quo. Nevertheless, it can be a personally empowering strategy. This is not false consciousness, but an accurate assessment of structural and institutional realities. Imbalances in economic and social power may mean that although individuals negotiate an imposed script they retain agency to the extent that they exploit and employ those scripts to maximize advantage (Scott 1990, 133) and subvert the social relations symbolized in the script. Put another way, the strip club becomes the site where the hidden meets the public transcript (Scott 1990, 7) and where gender, sexuality and autonomy intersect and become contested terrain. The irony is that while stripping appears to epitomize gender roles and women's subservient position, when dancers invert and manipulate the gendered scripts that would oppress them, it also becomes a space to resist.

CONCLUSION

When we consider women's bodies in strip clubs and attend not only to the apparent script but to subjective engagement, tensions emerge that highlight the manner in which women's bodies are contested terrain. Clubs reproduce fairly conventional understandings of beauty and sexuality. However, the meanings of these take on extra nuance when we appreciate the ways those bodies are not only objectified but also subjectively realized. Similarly, while dancers' bodies are in danger because of their labour force activity, they also assume agency when they employ both their bodies and the social construction of their bodies to undermine the very practices that would oppress them. Turning to the question of danger, strippers are in danger from customers and other dancers but also from the state. Ironically, the state first defines dancers as in danger then implements regulatory strategies which further marginalizes them and therefore endangers them. In addition, dancers are defined as dangerous. At one level, their ownership of sexuality as spectacle and their spectacle of sexuality threatens patriarchal discourses. At a more concrete level, they use their bodies to undermine and resist - physically and discursively.¹⁷

ENDNOTES

1. Russo (1986) explains how women, in contrast with men, make spectacles of themselves. In fact, she writes:

For a woman, making a spectacle of herself had more to do with a kind of inadvertency and loss of boundaries: the possessors of large, aging, and dimpled thighs displayed at the public beach, of overly rouged cheeks, of a voice shrill in laughter, or of a sliding bra strap - a loose, dingy bra strap especially - were at once caught out by fate and blameworthy. It was my impression that these women had done something wrong, had stepped, as it were, into the limelight out of turn - too young or too old, too early or too late - and yet anyone, any women, could make a spectacle of herself if she was not careful. (1986, 213)

2. The term "skin trades" is useful not only to distinguish the labour from that performed by women in the "sex trades" but highlights the engagement with physical presentation.

3. Quotes from the interviews are followed by the research participants' pseudonyms. For a more detailed discussion of methodological issues (see Bruckert 2002).

4. Widow burning in India (Narasimhan 1990).

5. Eastern political thought has been premised on the applications of dualisms that "lead a subterranean existence, structuring Western thought in general and its political tradition in particular" (Coole 1988, 2). They include mind/body; subject/object; reason/passion; culture/nature and, associated more directly to politics, we find: state/individual; public/private; universal/particular. Within this conceptual framework the polarity male/female serves to give meaning to the rest and to reinforce the dichotomies.

6. In Canada, under Ontario's current freelancing system, dancers exchange bar fees, compliance with house rules and labour in the form of stage shows for the opportunity to solicit private dances from clients. As a result, the stage, though physically dominating the club and discursively centred in the concept of stripping, is peripheral to the women who work the stage.
7. The strip club is also a site where stigma designations intersect with discourses of respectability, taste and class (Bourdieu 1986).
8. Tan lines are very important. On the one hand, the lighter flesh highlight the sexualised zones of a woman's body (her breasts and derriere). On the other hand, the existence of these lines reinforce the idea that the client is being given access to something illicit, forbidden and normally hidden from view.
9. See Ross (2000) for an historical consideration of how erotic dancers in British Columbia negotiated and experienced racist stereotypes.
10. This is an understanding that is not all that different from that espoused by Gwen Jacob who challenged the Canadian indecency law by publicly exposing her breasts and walking through the streets of Guelph, Ontario and was ultimately supported in 1996 by the Ontario Court of Appeal (*R v. Jacob*).
11. Similarly during the field work, a dancer entered while Bruckert was changing in the dancer's dressing room. She matter-of-factly glanced at my exposed breasts and advised me that "my tits used to look like yours – that's why I got them done." Her tone and expression assured me that her intention was not malicious but rather observation. She later offered the name of her plastic surgeon.
12. This designation alone marks the site as deviant. Other labour sites are patrolled by relatively invisible inspectors.
13. The driving service is perceived as offering a level of protection when leaving the work site.
14. Dragu retells a number of stories that demonstrate how the performance itself can be a satire (Dragu 1988, 18).
15. "Dirty dancing" refers to illicit touching between customer and dancer.
16. See Carlen (1985) for further instances of women's resistance through "deviance."
17. Care must be taken not to slip into liberalized celebration of the individual which obscures social constraints. Women's bodies are never simply of our own making. The sexual, the beautiful and the feminine are culturally constructed. We are at some level constrained within the discourses of what is sexual, what is erotic, what is acceptable. We must recognize that erotic presentations within already scripted discourses of sexuality are not necessarily emancipatory. In fact, the body in erotic labour must be disciplined. Bartky's (1988) Foucauldian analysis suggests that in modern society all women are alienated from their physical reality.

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