



Emotional Consumption: Mapping Love and Masochism in an Exotic Dance Club

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The commodified relationships that occur within an exotic dance club are sexually charged interactions between a customer who buys time, personal contact and erotic fantasy from an exotic dancer.¹ For an occasional customer, these interactions are infrequent, titillating and entertaining – and are most often associated with events such as a 21st birthday, a bachelor party or ‘a guys’ night out’. These customers place demands on dancers for services and attention, but many dancers find these men annoying, at times fun and most often harmless (Egan, 2003; Liepe-Levinson, 2002). Interactions between dancers and customers shift and become more complex as men move from being an occasional customer to a regular customer. A regular customer is a man who comes to the club on a frequent basis (at least once a week) to see a particular dancer with whom he has formed an erotic and romantic attachment. The regular spends large amounts of time and money (in the form of paying for her services) on a dancer. Moreover, regulars frequently give gifts such as roses, computers, fur coats, plastic surgery and cars to dancers with whom they are in relation (Egan, 2003).² These relationships are saturated with power, sexual desire and fantasy, all of which move

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throughout the interactions between dancer and regular in multiple ways (Egan, 2003; Frank, 1998, 2002).

With regulars, dancers must perform emotional labor to a far greater extent than with the occasional customer (Frank, 1998). Regulars provide sustained and lucrative income and therefore must be made to feel good over a prolonged period of time. Dancers develop a phenomenological bond with their regulars and discuss the complexities and nuances of the various aspects of these men's lives. In the exotic dance club the relationships between dancers and regulars, not unlike other romantic relationships, are sites where the mundaneness of everyday life intertwines with emotional intimacy and sexual desire. Conversations about work problems, marital dissatisfaction, misbehaving children and stress, as well as erotic titillation and the desire for a lap dance are common facets of these interactions (Egan, 2004; Frank, 2002; Wood, 2000). Unlike other romantic relationships, however, the interactions between dancers and regulars are governed by the rules of the club, which are dictated by the owners and predicated upon monetary exchange, and stipulate acceptable types of erotic performance.³ For example, although a dancer may perform a lap dance where she literally grinds against the regular's lap with various parts of her body, the customer must keep his hands to his side at all times during this interaction.⁴

Dancers develop deeper engagements with regulars than other customers and often develop feelings of care, friendship and even trust (Frank, 1998). In these relations, regulars engage in a fantasy wherein their relationship is perceived as one that is atypical of the commodified framework of the club and thus perceive their relations as real. In part this is true, as dancers at times truly do enjoy the company of their regular, but also false as these relations are squarely situated within a commodity exchange (Egan, 2003). Regulars fetishize the performance of emotional labor of dancers. As such, it is imperative that dancers, in order to continue earning the money regulars provide, perform emotional labor as authentically as possible (Rambo-Ronai, 1992). I am particularly interested in one aspect of this relationship – love, and how regular customers discuss feelings of love for the dancers with whom they were in relation. The love regulars profess falls into the category of being *in love*, which is conceptualized as inherently narcissistic (Verhaeghe, 2000).⁵ As in other modes of work which involve emotional labor (i.e. nurses, air flight attendants, psychologists or waitresses) dancers' attentiveness to customers is an important aspect of their job, particularly to get tips (Hochschild, 1983). However, unlike other emotional laborers, dancers must fit into and reproduce the erotic fantasies of the customer, performing the role of what one dancer described as 'a whorish wife'.⁶

Regulars perceive their love for dancers as real, which produces profound

feelings of both elation and despair in the regular. The primary question guiding this inquiry is why is it that men fall in love in an exotic dance club? Furthermore, what type of love is it? Lastly, how is this form of masculine love related to larger psycho-social structures? This article emerges from 18 months of ethnographic work between 1998 and 2000 in two exotic dance clubs in the New England area, where I performed participant observation. This research was formed from my own experiences as a researcher and a dancer, as well as from observations and semi-formal interviews with other dancers and regular customers. In order to illuminate the complex interactions in the club, I draw from psychoanalytic, feminist⁷ and post-structural theory for the analysis of my observations, experiences and informal conversations.

Sociological literature on exotic dance (see Barton, 2002; Bruckert, 2002; Erikson and Tewksbury, 2000; Forsyth and Deshotels, 1997; Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Murphy, 2003; Rambo-Ronai, 1992, 1993; Wesley, 2003) has, for the most part, focused on the experiences of exotic dancers themselves, or only on the cursory customer (for exceptions see Brewster, 2003; Frank, 2002). For example, Carol Rambo-Ronai (1992) explores the performance of feigned authenticity as part of the emotional labor performed by exotic dancers and the challenges this produces for the dancer. Customers desire 'the real thing' with a dancer, so dancers must feign authenticity in multiple and often emotionally tiring ways (Rambo-Ronai, 1992). Craig Forsyth and Tina Deshotels (1997) examine the ways in which women give meaning to their work, and the symbolic interactions with customers and management which form dancers' experiences of their work. Katherine Liepe-Levinson (2002) investigates the performance of self of male and female exotic dancers, and the ways in which these performances are subject to the objectifying gaze of the customer and how dancers resist these gazes. Moreover, through her research she finds that exotic dance is not simply a site of exploitation of women and men, but is a site of agency and resistance. The importance of understanding the labor of women who work as exotic dancers is crucial to a further enumeration of women's work and emotional labor in multiple settings. However, to comprehensively understand exotic dance as a site of investigation, it is also sociologically imperative to understand the meanings and experiences of its consumers. To this end, emotional consumption also needs to be an area of sociological study.

Emotional Consumption

The sociology of consumption has most often focused on large-scale consumption patterns of populations (Bourdieu, 1984; Emmison, 2003; Schor, 1998), the

semiotics of consumption via advertising (Goldman and Papson, 1996, 1998; Goldman et al., 2003), the environmental degradation of consumption (Schor, 1998) or the ways in which consumption can culturally reinscribe the intentions of producers (Kopytoff, 1986). This research is most often based on inanimate objects and the desires, alienating effects or resistive possibilities of consumerism. This focus is due to the way in which commodities themselves have been theorized. Marx (1971) theorized commodities as objects imbued with use value, which can be exchanged in discrete economic transactions. Marx viewed this as an endemic aspect of capitalism and part and parcel of a system which alienates its populations from their own labor and the goods they produce. However, as anthropologists have shown, the exchange of objects is a facet of all cultures in one way or another (Kopytoff, 1986). Culture inscribes meaning onto commodities and thus infuses economic transactions with moral and cultural estimations which in turn affects which objects fall into acceptable sites of economic exchange (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963; Ewick, 1993; Kopytoff, 1986). Moreover, what becomes acceptable as a commodity shifts over time and is usually designated as such due to its cultural status – as infinitely interchangeable; whereas objects that are deemed unique or sacred (in the Durkheimian sense) are not viewed as acceptable commodity objects (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963).

A guiding theme in this literature is a one-way relationship between the consumer and the object that he or she consumes – for example, a type of clothing might offer someone a particular identity (i.e. cool, rebellious or professional). This formation of self is due to the cultural meaning attached to the object (which is formed by the producer and marketed via advertising) thereby assuming *de facto* the ontology of the object as inert or passive. Cultures can inscribe different meanings onto an object, so that, for example, what a water heater means in Boston (a necessity) is very different from what a water heater means in Antigua, Guatemala (a luxury item found in very few homes). However, the assumption is that what makes a commodity shift meaning is a culture; the object itself has no part in this process.

The study of consumption becomes more complicated when the product being sold is another human being's services in live interaction. This shift makes consumption and the interactions between consumer and commodity a dynamic interaction wherein a consumer may engage in a process of emotional attachment – and thus emotional consumption. In such cases, pure economic exchange begins to merge with a sense of relationality. Emotional labor requires service providers 'to offer emotion as part of the service itself' (Hochschild, 1983: 5), which produces non-reciprocal meanings for customers and laborers. Customers project a form of relationality that is typically found in non-commodified

relations onto a commodified context. Obviously, this is a skewed perception and often times one not shared by both parties. However, to understand service in a more complex fashion we need to attend to the ways in which various people are subject to and subvert forms of emotional labor, as well as examine how the consumer may blur the distinctions between economic exchange and feelings of relationality.

Emotional consumption, then, is the other side of emotional labor. It is a function of the interaction between two people – a consumer and a service provider. Although one might argue that men fall in love with their cars and women love their clothes, this differs from emotional consumption in a service industry. A car might be beautiful and run like a gem, but it is not involved in a dialectic relation where it speaks, reassures, encourages or discourages the owner. Emotional consumption involves an affective relation that emerges within social interaction. A woman may project meaning onto her favorite leather jacket, but the jacket itself has no part in either reaffirming or dissuading her projection – although her friends who see her on Saturday night can tell her that she looks great or that her jacket does not work. Owning an object and consuming service labor differ significantly in that you can own an object but you cannot own the person providing the service. Therefore, in the service economy property itself is displaced in the transaction. Moreover, the difference between the salesperson selling a car and the person selling a service is that it is emotion itself that is being consumed which is transitory and thus, does not last after the exchange is over (Hochschild, 1983).

Transference provides the framework for understanding the consumption of service labor as a dynamic and intersubjective experience. Psychoanalysts use the term transference to understand the patient's relationship and projections onto the therapeutic process and the analyst (Egan, 2005). Transference involves the displacement of affect from one idea (or one person) to another (Lacan, 1977a). Patients displace the affect they feel in one context onto the interactions between themselves and the clinician (the service provider) (Lacan, 1977a). Transference is an effect of the dialectical interactions that take place between an analyst and an analysand. Although, one could argue that part of consuming Nike sneakers is also consuming the male (e.g. Michael Jordan) or female (e.g. Mia Ham) athlete who promotes the products, consuming a service wherein a person interacts, touches and dances for you further complicates the psycho-social dynamic. Attending to the affective components of consuming another person illuminates production and consumption as a polyvalent interaction wherein both participants continuously reframe, reinscribe and project meaning onto commodified interactions. By reconceptualizing consumption, we can shift the focus from a

one-sided relation (that is projected onto all forms of consumption) to a dynamic experience that is influenced by both the emotional labor of the worker and the emotional investments of the consumer.

In viewing emotional consumption as dynamic and intersubjective we see that consumption involves both social interactive and psychic investments on the part of both parties. Emotional consumption produces a phenomenological givenness or intelligibility between the consumer and the person performing emotional labor. Additionally, emotional consumption involves projection, transference and identification wherein the consumer projects fantasies onto the commodity which have little to do with the person providing the service being consumed, and which have both compassionate and violent possibilities.⁸ Therefore, emotional consumption can be thought of as a social psychoanalytic phenomenon, thus opening a sociological investigation into how, for example, a consumer could fall in love with the human whose service they are buying. Male regulars' emotional consumption is anything but static and involves both social and psychic complexities which create the emotional attachments they feel in their interactions with female dancers.

Looking for Love in All the Wrong Places

I love her. I could spend the rest of my life with her. I just want to make her happy. Get her away from this place . . . you know make a life together. She deserves that. (Vinny 7/99)⁹

What does love have to do with the intersubjective relations between an exotic dancer and her regular? How does the economic connectivity between a commodity/dancer and a buyer/regular shift from erotic fascination and titillation to loving the commodity and all that this implies? The word 'love' permeated the sites within which I conducted my research, slipping off the tongues of regulars into the ears of dancers on a regular basis. I take this love seriously and will map the complexities of regulars' feelings as a site of love and masochism, a feeling that, from the very beginning, is bound to fail. Therefore, my contention that regulars feel love differs from feminist theories of love (see hooks, 2001; Irigaray, 2003) that require equity among partners and mutuality as foundations of love itself. In these theories, love is mutuality and anything else falls into another category (i.e. infatuation, lust, etc.); however, to assume that love functions only on a rational ('I will only love someone who is my equal') and/or political ('My love is based the feminist tenets of equity and is thus completely mutual') register misses the complexity of the various manifestations of love. This is not to say that these theories of love may not be far more desirable within

romantic relations, but it is to say that we also need to attend to the way love can operate in non-mutual and, at times, narcissistic ways.

Lacan theorizes love as a function of narcissism and thus auto-erotic. Love is narcissistic as 'it's one's own ego that one loves in love, one's own ego made real on an imaginary level' (1988: 142). Paul Verhaeghe (2000) designates this form of narcissistic love as being *in love*. Verhaeghe (2000) and Lacan (1988) both argue that narcissistic love functions differently for men (as more sexual) and women (as more intimate), which produces tensions and divisions in heterosexual relations.¹⁰ Being *in love* differs from what Verhaeghe (2000) terms *love*, which is steeped in mutuality and recognizes and allows differences to emerge, thus overcoming the barriers inherent to being in love. Given these distinctions, I would argue that regulars are *in love* with their dancers.

This form of love is mediated by another context – commodification – and therefore, this love is intertwined with another psychic phenomenon – masochism. Deleuze (1991) argues that masochism has been falsely linked with sadism in psychoanalytic literature. Masochism is not the other side of sadism, but is rather a different type of symptom, since a masochist can exist without ever being in relation with a sadist (Deleuze, 1991). As theorized by Deleuze, 'in place of a dialectic which all too readily perceives the link between opposites (sadism and masochism) we should aim for a critical and clinical appraisal able to reveal the truly differential mechanisms' of each symptom (1991: 14). Masochists are 'victim[s] in search of a torturer'; however, a masochist would dissolve the relationship if they ever came in contact with a true sadist who would deny their subjectivity (1991: 20). The masochist seeks pain and relation, whereas the sadist has no interest in their victim and seeks only pure violence. Through watching their disappointments with their inevitable 'break-ups', and the fantasies of future relationships in which they engaged, I conclude that regulars are masochists. Regulars want love in an impossible context, and return repeatedly to a scene that will always cause them pain. The love regulars express is also a form of masochism which is the result of a particular form of heterosexual masculinity that needs a rigid division between subject/object in order to secure its own boundaries while simultaneously desiring the transgression of those very boundaries. They want to possess the dancer and simultaneously want to obliterate their position of mastery that is inherent in their desire of possession. Regulars are also masochists by the very fact that they seek love in a commodified milieu from women who perform a service as opposed to women who can mutually engage and give back outside a commodified context. Masochism in this context, then, is reconceptualized from a particular form of sexual expression (sado-masochism) to a social psychoanalytic symptom (Deleuze, 1991).

There is nothing inherent in men that makes them more prone to interlink masochism and love. Rather, it is a form of affection that emerges from the contemporary social order and the ways in which the discursive production of patriarchal heterosexual masculinity closes avenues to mutual gender relationality (Bordo, 1999; Kimmel, 1996) and makes men more prone to explore relationality for sale. In my attention to the cultural and discursive production of masculinity, I move away from other feminist theorists who view male sexuality as inherently violent (Dworkin, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989) and the consumption of sex work as the natural outcome of this form of sexuality. Patriarchal masculinity produces male superiority, perpetuates the objectification of women and promotes a lack of intersubjective relationality (Bordo, 1999; Kimmel, 1996; Messner, 1997). Although patriarchy produces cultural privilege for men in both structural and interpersonal relations in ways that have serious effects on women's lives, patriarchy also hinders men. As a result, men often times find it difficult to express emotions such as fear, or to easily give over their position of authority and admit to their dependence on other human beings (Bordo, 1999).

This explanation of masculinity alone does not explain why men would come to an exotic dance club and form such strong emotional connections with dancers. With the rise of second-wave feminism in the 1970s and 1980s, patriarchal forms of masculinity have faced massive critique. This critique produced more open and mutual relations for some men, and a backlash and the need to solidify heterosexual and patriarchal privilege in others (Faludi, 1991; Frough, 2004). Exotic dance clubs are sites that feature nude women solely for the pleasure of male consumption, and therefore actively seek to create and perpetuate a patriarchal service industry (Egan, 2004). The job of an exotic dancer is to make men feel good and make it easy for them to let down their guard (Egan, 2004). Exotic dancers are paid to be archetypal sex objects, and in the hope of encouraging repeat business, they also often provide the therapeutic service of listening to the customer and his problems (Egan, 2003; Murphy, 2003; Rambo-Ronai, 1993; Wood, 2000).¹¹ Katherine Frank argues, '[i]n [a dancer's] interactions with a regular, then, a dancer is also trying to produce for him the subjectivity of a man who is worth being listened to *regardless* of the money that he pays her' (1998: 200, emphasis in the original). Given the structure of exotic dance as a service industry, it make sense that some men might be apt to return for the services provided and ultimately fall in love.

A regular seeks a subject who he fantasizes will give him what he wants (to be loved), but who can never give him what he wants because of her performance as an object. The exotic dancer positions herself as an object of desire and male fantasy, and thus denies the regular the authenticity he desires. It is her

service that is being sold – not her subjectivity. In her performance as a dancer, she actively becomes objectified (something which is often characterized as what men want) and blocks his desire for her to be a subject. Regulars feel for dancers and want to believe that dancers also have romantic feelings for them – they construct and perpetuate a fantasy of intimacy and connection. They fetishize dancers' labor strategies and desire something long-lasting. For example, after the end of a relationship, Vinny (who had been coming to see a dancer named Shelia for eight months) openly cried in the club and told me that 'I feel like I am going through a divorce. . . . I loved her so much. . . . I don't understand how she could leave me.' Regulars feel for dancers and want to believe that dancers also have romantic feelings for them – they construct and perpetuate a fantasy of intimacy and connection.

Regulars want something that is almost impossible in a scene of commodification – real connection (love), something other than the relation of commodity exchange in which they are situated. However, if the woman were to see him in a non-commodified context, she would fail him because she would stop being an object providing a service and would be a subject who makes demands.¹² Because he cathects to her as an object, the complexity of her subjectivity would fissure the emotional investment he places on her service. Moreover, the regular pays the dancer for a service that he finds unsatisfying, but if he did not pay for the service he would also be left unsatisfied. If a regular received a dancer's service free, his desire for the dancer/girlfriend would also fail because, as a masochist, it is the economic exchange that sustains his interest. Thus this form of emotional consumption involves two modes of affection – love and masochism.

The emotional consumption of regulars is riddled with the elation that is common with falling in love, and the pain of its failure. Regulars engage in a mode of phallogocentric masculine subjectivity which produces a precarious subject who is trapped between the desire for his own autonomous position of authority and the fragility that continuously threatens its dissolution. This form of emotional consumption threatens the hierarchical structuration inherent in a service economy. The regular who desires the approval and love of the dancer automatically threatens his position as the consumer – which he also ultimately wants to maintain. This is a highly contradictory form of masculinity plagued by dominant forms of patriarchy and the limitations patriarchy places on men.

Loving a Commodity

Slowly, I move off stage and to his table. He smiles and says 'Hola carinosa'. I greet him with a peck and a hug. We talk about his work, my school, and the usual. After which he tells me

... 'I told my mother about you.' Shocked by this admission, I asked 'Why?' 'Because I love you,' was his reply. My silence urges words to slip from his lips ... 'You know I love you. You are unlike anyone I have ever met before. I want to be with you forever.' While these proclamations slide across the table between us ... I think, 'What's love got to do with this?' It is in this moment that I know he seeks a return ... my face shifts to glass and mirrors as I reply, 'Me too.'

The love regular customers express in the club involves both fantasy and narcissism. The longing expressed by the phrase 'I love you' is a dialectical psychic function of the regular seeking to be loved by the woman on stage or on their laps, who is sought to fulfill his fantasies for pay. The woman on stage and with whom he interacts becomes a fetish for him, one who is seemingly able to give him something – love. Henry, a regular, expressed his love for Helena in this way,

H: You know I have never felt this way before, not even with my wife. It is incredible because I love her and she loves me. I am so lucky.

D: Uh huh.

H: I am the luckiest man alive. She makes me feel so special. ... I just hope I make her feel the same.

Henry's love functions on a fantasy level in two ways: he fetishizes Helena herself, and he fetishistically occludes the emotional labor involved in his intersubjective relations with Helena. Her feelings and actions were for him alone. Therefore, the fetishism in the service economy resonates with Marx's theory of the commodity fetish. Marx (1971) argues that commodities come to possess magical qualities and that the labor involved in the production of commodities becomes erased in the process of consumption. Although Marx limited his analysis to commodity objects, in emotional labor a similar erasure takes place. In the interactions between dancers and their regulars, it is the regular who engages in a delusion and fails to recognize that the performance in which the dancer takes part is a product of her labor. One could argue that all customers, regardless of whether they are cursory or regular, engage in this form of fetishism. However, the difference between the cursory customer and the regular customer lies in the fact that, for the cursory customer, exotic dance operates as a form of entertainment and produces an understanding of the dancer's performance as work. The regular, in contrast, projects authenticity onto the dancer's performance and views himself as different from other customers. She is his, he is hers and he is lucky. For Henry, Helena makes him feel special in ways even his wife has been unable to do.

In the interactions between dancer and regular another mode of fetishism is also at work. Freud (1927) theorizes the fetish as a fantasmatic way for men to

overcome their fear of female genitalia, which according to him are inherently lacking – the fetish object becomes a phallic substitute and safeguards against the threat of castration. However, in light of Freud's unacknowledged sexism and his own lack of recognition that his understanding of female genitalia was garnered vis-a-vis the social, I wish to expand his notion of the fetish.¹³ The exotic dancer is a fetish because, as a commodified sexual object, she safeguards against the threat of female reprisal and rejection. She is a fetish because her subjectivity is irrelevant. Unlike a wife, whom one loves but who also fights and complains, the dancer is an archetype and a fetish object. The dancer performs eroticism and does not ask the man to wash the dishes or pick up his laundry. She is an object who fulfills his need for recognition. As such, her subjectivity is erased when she becomes a site through which he can obtain narcissistic fulfillment. As a result, the phrase 'I love you' really means, 'I want you to love me' (Lacan, 1977b).

James, a regular, discussed his relationship in this way:

Well, we fell in love. It was crazy, we just clicked. She knows about my life and I know about hers and we just work. . . . She is sexy and she cares about me. I think it's pretty crazy for something like that to happen here but it did. She makes me feel complete. . . . I never get that at home. So I make sure she is taken care of. I am hoping that at some point she won't have to work here because that would make her happy and I want that, but for right now this is good.

James and I had this conversation one night over drinks while Jenny was dancing in the nude room. James recognized that he did in fact have some power over Jenny, but because he cared about her, the money was not an issue. She was his fantasy girl, sweet and sexy, who knew about his life and who made him feel 'complete'. Jenny gave him something that he did not get anywhere else – a relational context wherein he was taken care of, and, as his object of fantasy, she fulfilled what he 'never get[s] at home'. Later that same night, I asked Jenny about James and she said, 'Well he's a good regular and he pays me really well. You know the type, he thinks he's in love with me.' She then moved on to other topics and did not mention his name again. The dancers in the clubs where I worked and observed did not share the same feelings as their customers; none spoke of hoping for a real relationship outside the club. This is not to say that this is impossible; I am sure that this has occurred (see Frank, 1998) – however, it was not a phenomenon found among the women with whom I worked, nor did it ever happen for me. Many dancers did express feelings of friendship and caring for regulars, but these feelings were often tested with the repeated demands of intense emotional labor. As one dancer, Trena, put it, 'I care about the guy – he is a nice guy, but I don't think I could ever think of him as anything other than just a customer.'

Jack, one of my regulars, discussed our relationship in this way: 'I love you and one day we will be together. We will have breakfast in the morning and make love all day. It will be amazing. I cannot wait until you quit this place.' Jack had been a regular for three months and professed these feelings after spending an entire shift with me, during which he paid me for several dances and I listened as he discussed the problems he was having at work. He had my undivided attention, and it was this that he sought outside the club. He wanted me to be his girlfriend and could not wait for me to be away from other paying customers – when I left this place (the club) so that he could be outside of a commodified context where he was surrounded by other men paying for women's services. Jack, James and Henry, during various interactions, proclaimed that their relationships 'were different' from those of other customers because their feelings for the women they loved were 'real'; and thus they were in 'relationships' as opposed to commodified exchanges. However, all expressed doubts at one point or another, hoping that they were more than just 'a customer'.

The love Jack, James and Henry proclaimed *was* real. If a person were to read parts of these interviews out of context they might think these were men discussing non-commodified relations – that they were talking about their girlfriends. Verhaeghe (2000) argues that love takes the form of a triangle and that, far from the mirroring effect that takes place when one is in love (where it is both narcissistic and auto-erotic), both parties are allowed differences and mutuality is able to take place. However, if we view Verhaeghe's theory of love in a commodified context as an act of emotional consumption, then the mutuality involved in a non-commodified context is absent. Regulars are in love with their dancers and thus are involved in a circuit of narcissism. As a result, this act of commodification and thus fantasy functions as a loop for the regular who, looking for love, is left unsatisfied as what he is searching for is impossible. Regulars search for surety – they search to be loved by a commodity. Therefore, in this form of love dancers become an object through which recognition is sought – and to this end, the regular receives this as a service. However, because recognition is always an effect of monetary exchange, this service is inherently bound to the context of the club.

The fact that this love is based on recognition and not mutual exchange signals that the dialectic involved mirrors the dialectic of desire, wherein the desiring subject/consumer's position is always fragile as it relies on the recognition of the object of desire/commodity, which can cease at any time. Lacanian psychoanalysis refers to this phenomenon as a result of the master's discourse. The discourse of the master functions as a fantasmatic site wherein the subject believes that he is master of himself and also master of the other (Lacan, 1975). However, this is

never possible, as his attempt at mastery is dependent upon the slave and is therefore always tenuous. In this fantasy, a mode of blindness occurs wherein the subject is blind to his own position of dependence. Therefore, the master is 'impotent in assuming this relation' (Verhaeghe, 1997: 107). Love functions as a metaphor, as a substitution in the search for self-fulfillment and, as such, the object/commodity becomes the intermediary for the regular's position of mastery, a position that seeks autonomy but is always dependent and thus fragile (Lacan, 1977b). She is picked for what she does not have – subjectivity. She is a hazy mirror . . . and thus the man's recognition of his image and his desire to be loved is partial at best. Therefore, the love the regular feels is an attempt at closure, one wherein his phallogocentric masculine position can be reflected back in the sense of both being seen and being loved.

Love, Masochism and Emotional Consumption

H: You know I love her right?

D: Of course.

H: But I just have to see if she really loves me. That's why I have to leave. If she loves me she will want to see me outside the club. I just want to make sure that I am more than a customer. (Henry 3/99)

The regular customer is a masochist with regard to the exotic dancer that he loves. At the beginning, he enters the fantasy-laden, capitalist space of the exotic dance club and it is in this space that the spectacle of her on stage excites him. This could be because of particular corporeal attributes (i.e. big breasts, nice legs or hair length) or because of the persona she enacts on stage (i.e. the innocent in white, a vixen in red or a dominatrix in black leather). Either he will call her over to him or she will go to him because he looks interested. At the beginning, the interaction is charged with eroticism. He desires her and she is wrapped in a pellicle of sexuality and patriarchal objectification. In the interaction she 'hooks him' by making him feel unique, special, attractive and interesting – she offers him the fantasy of sexual arousal and intimacy. This is an important strategy for dancers as regulars offer them a regular source of income and so procuring as many as possible is essential (Frank, 1998). This interaction is also important to the regular because he is able to get more than he bargained for – attachment in 'a place like this'. The club offers a type of utopian oasis where beautiful women treat men like 'real men' and where, as the regulars say, they 'don't have to deal with needy or bitchy women' whom they encounter outside of the club (Egan, 2004, 2005). In this fantasy space, the dancer offers him a woman who will reflect

his masculine position. The dancer, through the performance of her job, is able to provide for him his desire to be found desirable.

Regulars within this context fall in love . . . however, this love is supposed to fail, as it is also a form of masochism. In the following section, I discuss the ways in which this form of love is masochistic. This functions on multiple levels. First, the regular is a masochist because he loves a dancer for what she does not have – complexity and subjectivity. Second, although he seeks to fetishistically occlude the dancer's labor, he is plagued with anxiety that he is nothing more than just a customer. Although the regular knows on some level that he is just a customer, he returns to the club seeking more assurances and continuing to spend more money. The regular always wants to know that he is the dancer's love object and is thus eventually always victim to her rejection, rejection that inevitably happens when his demands become too much for her to handle, or when repeated requests to see her outside the club continually fail. Third, although he thinks he wants the dancer to be his lover outside the club, this too is incorrect because, if she were outside the club, the service – and thus the fantasy she provides – would dissolve and leave him again dissatisfied. For these reasons it is impossible to theorize the regular's love for his dancer without understanding its coupling with masochism.

One regular, Bryan, professed his love for me by stating that I was 'the nicest woman he knew'. He thought that I was 'old-fashioned', 'liked all the same things' he did and 'would make him happy.' For him, all of these things about me were true – I loved the idea of staying at home, enjoyed mountain biking and would make him happy. However, these were in part fantasmatic projections and in part an effect of the ways in which I interacted with, and wove my story for, regulars. There are very material reasons why dancers do not 'tell the whole truth' to customers – safety, to keep the regular coming back and to maintain some level of interpersonal distance (Frank, 1998). In our discussions, I told him that at some point I wanted children in my life and this was true; however, he projected from this information that I was old-fashioned, which is most definitely not the case. Bryan's belief in me making him happy was a process of fantasy – a result of my service in the club as opposed to the more complex dynamics that occur in a mutual relationship outside a commodified context. Bryan wanted an exotic dancer outside the club, one who would listen attentively to his stories, nod in agreement at his assessments of the world and perform eroticism on demand. He certainly did not want a feminist who would challenge his patriarchal views and who would require equal participation in all aspects of a relationship. Regulars were always shocked when, after a particularly offensive comment, I would challenge their views. This challenge was so off-putting to one

customer that his fantasy of me was shattered and he stopped coming to the club to see me.

Many dancers discussed the need to make a regular happy. Jenny said, 'Sometimes I really enjoy the conversations I have with my regulars and sometimes I just shake my head and smile. . . . I mean, what the hell I am going to do, tell them they are assholes?' Marie, another dancer, said, 'Yeah, they think I look like this all the time. If they saw me in the morning before a cigarette and coffee, trust me, things would change.' To keep regulars coming back, dancers often intertwine fact and fiction in their presentation of self (Frank, 1998). These interactions do perpetuate intimacy, however performative it may be. Perception is mediated by the presentation of self, offered by the dancer as well as 'a sort of hallucinatory operation of thought' (André, 1999: 4). This hallucination of perception involves fantasy. When the regular comes into contact with a dancer she is an object. However, in order for him to believe that she has true feelings for him, as opposed to ones structured by commodity exchange, he must engage in a fantasy of authenticity.

The psychic function of fantasy is not essentially problematic. People fantasize all the time – about being a movie star, or having a better job, or finding the perfect partner. Most often these fantasies are harmless, and we see them for what they are, wishes as opposed to actualities. However, when fantasy is bound up with a fetish, the fantasy is perceived as more authentic; as a result regulars are apt to invest more psychic power in the fantasies they project onto a dancer. Fantasies, whether in the form of a daydream or a projection onto another human, are never completely solid. Like a virtual reality game that feels very real, something on the edge of your vision will interrupt its potential and make a totally 'real' experience falter. Given the unstable and transitional quality of fantasies, the stability of the object of fantasy and its ability to maintain its position is always tenuous because of her or his inability to maintain the fantasy, or ultimately via resistance to her or his position as object (André, 1999). In order to protect themselves psychically, regulars engage in strategies to maintain their fantasies as long as possible, one strategy being to seek the reassurance of the dancer with whom they are in relation.

Regulars are caught in a precarious position of wanting to believe that they have found 'the one', while simultaneously being plagued by anxiety because of the site in which these interactions are taking place (an exotic dance club) and hence requiring some form of proof that their interactions are not solely predicated on money. Regulars require assurances that they are desired and loved, and that they are something more than just another customer. One way for a regular to prove that he is something different from the other men in the club is for him

to ask a dancer to see him in a non-commodified context. The most frequent request of a regular is to see a dancer outside the club, to prove that they are actually in a real relationship. In order to maintain that this is something which they desire, dancers engage in strategic avoidance. For example, dancers promise that they will see the regular outside the club at some point, but say they cannot do so right now for various reasons (e.g. school, a second job or problems at home). Another strategy dancers use to maintain a sense of intimacy is to give regulars their cell phone numbers. By talking to regulars when they are away from work they provide another context of relation, one wherein regulars feel that they are more than customers and something closer to a lover. This means that dancers must continue their emotional labor outside the walls of the club, while maintaining a sense of distance; they might have to talk on the phone, but they do not have to see the regular in person. Regulars hold on to these reassurances as a sign that they are something more than the money they give. However, when the promises of tomorrow never materialize, regulars begin to test the authenticity of dancers by threatening to stop coming to the club altogether if dancers do not see them outside the club.

One regular, Henry, tried to force the hand of a dancer by threatening to stop coming to the club. However, after a week of not seeing Helena he said, 'I tried to stay away, but I missed her so badly and when we spoke on the phone I could tell that she missed me too.' Jack, another regular, said 'I love Jenny, and I hope I am more than just a customer – I will see.' Jack did not return to the club and Jenny made no further contact with him, as she did not want to see him outside the club. Jack had been coming to the club for 10 months and Jenny had other regulars who provided her with a steady income. Marcus, one of my regulars, asked every time he came to the club to see me outside so that we could go 'on a real date'. Although I liked Marcus as a person and had general feelings of care, I had no desire to see him outside for a real date. When he threatened to stop coming to see me, I told him it was probably a good idea. Unlike other dancers, I had a more privileged position in the club. I did not have to engage in strategies of avoidance or performances of intimacy to the same extent, because I could leave the club at any time. This is not to say that other dancers did not end relationships with their regulars (this did occur); however, it is to say that other dancers were more dependent on regulars' income and thus had to 'perform' with a regular far longer.

The emotional labor required in interactions with regulars is far greater than with other customers (Frank, 1998). For example, if a dancer can tell that a cursory customer is not going to buy a dance she is less likely to 'waste her time', whereas when regulars get particularly demanding dancers must put up with

more and engage in more challenging forms of emotional labor. For example, dancers often must tell a regular that the money they receive from them is just a marginal quality of their relations; some go as far as to say that ‘the money is not important’. This provides customers with a sense of reassurance – but this feeling never lasts and thus the dancer’s performance always falls short. Reassurance is a ritualized interaction that takes place constantly in the relations between regular and dancer. The dancer needs to reassure the regular or else she will lose him; however, these reassurances are often ‘very tiring’. If regulars feel that their interactions are inauthentic they will move on to another dancer or leave the club altogether. Given the amount of money a regular provides, the emotional service of reassurance is an important part of dancers’ repertoire.

The regular’s fantasy is fraught with cracks, which he tries to seal with reassurance. He wants connection with a dancer. He wants a form of erotic transgression (the merging of the ‘I’ and ‘you’ that love provides), but he also wants to maintain his position of autonomy. As such, the anxiety the regular feels in this context can never be quelled. Returning to her once, twice or more a week this interaction repeats, his desire and her performance; however, no matter how many times she reassures him, he feels no satisfaction. He may feel close, but never close enough. It can never be enough because he seeks her precisely because of what she lacks. He seeks her because she cannot give him what he wants; she is his fantasy object and secures and reifies his position, and is the one that must be paid to acknowledge him and thus love him.

He seeks her because he cannot have her. She attends to his needs, yes, but she also mirrors a lack in him. Baudrillard states, ‘the fascination with strip-tease as a spectacle of castration derives from the immanence of discovering, or rather seeking and never managing to discover, or better still searching with all available means without ever discovering that there is nothing there’ (1993: 110). I would argue that Baudrillard is right – however, only in part. The cursory customer fits into this category, but with regulars this recognition of nothingness exists, and moreover, it is this nothingness to which they cathect and become attached. She could be anyone, because she is no one and she is everyone – this is a synecdochic structure – she is a fantasy object who refuses authentic engagement. A dancer functions synecdochically because she comes to represent all women, any woman, and all women become represented in her. As such, she can never be a subject who loves another subject. Because of her position, she can never satisfy the regular’s need to be loved. This is the source of anxiety. The transferential circuit to the dancer can only ever be transference as opposed to mutuality because the materiality of the situation always interrupts love’s possibilities. As such, this iterative ritual takes on a masochistic function, with regulars

searching for something that is impossible (mutuality) and knowing on some level that this will always be the case. He returns for rejection over and over until finally he cannot take it any more . . . and the discourse of lost love begins to emerge. Jacques Lacan offers theoretical insight into this phenomenon when he states, 'I love you, but, because inexplicably I love in you something more than you – the objet petit a (the object of desire) – I mutilate you' (Lacan, 1977b: 254). In other words, because he only loves an object, he mutilates her position as a subject – thus ensuring his own rejection.

Conclusion

Masochism is not something we would usually equate with love. Love has been theorized as a site wherein transformation, transgression and authority can be broken down (Bauman, 2003; hooks, 2001; Irigaray 2003; Verhaeghe, 2000). However, love, in these theories, has not been explored in a commodified context. Given the ways in which love has been theorized, I argue that when commodification is part of the equation feelings of love become more complicated. The love regulars feel for dancers, in the context of an exotic dance club, is intertwined with and thus inseparable from, masochism. The regular, in the club, is able to secure his masculinity and find a sexual object with whom he emotionally cathects. He engages in the process of wanting to connect and love her (thus being loved himself), while simultaneously trying to maintain his position of authority. Although he seems to want this relationship outside of the club, if she were to see him in a non-commodified context, she would fail him again as she would stop being an object providing a service and would be a subject who makes demands. Thus the regular engages in a form of emotional consumption that produces strong affective connection in both pleasurable and painful ways. Emotional consumption involves a transference circuit between the consumer and commodity. Lacan argues that, 'transference does not refer to any mysterious property of affect, and even when it reveals itself under the appearance of emotion, it only acquires meaning by virtue of the dialectical moment in which it is produced' (1977a: 225). Emotional consumption is a result of fantasy production on the part of the consumer in a dialectical relation with the person providing the emotional labor required in a service industry.

Emotional consumption gives sociologists the tools to examine consumption as a dynamic interaction between a consumer and a service provider. By including the affective aspects of consumption, we can broaden the scope of our analysis of production and consumption in an ever-expanding service economy. Moreover, we can further understand the repetitious or compulsive components

of the consumption of service labor, and the ways in which consumers come to understand, make meaning from, and feel about the process. In order to do so, we must take into account both the ‘dialectical moments’ of interaction that take place and the psychological facets that are projected onto these interactions. To understand the pleasures and dissatisfaction that emerge from consumption we must understand the affective aspects it may or may not produce in the customer. Only then can we more complexly come to understand, for example, why it is that people love their hairdresser or feel so comfortable or uncomfortable, as the case may be, with their professors. More importantly it may provide us a better understanding of why it is, as Žižek says, ‘it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism’ (1999).

Notes

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1. My research specifically deals with female exotic dancers – women who take off their clothes and perform lap dances (which involve sitting on a male customer’s lap either topless or fully nude and erotically grinding on their laps for the length of a song) for male customers for monetary compensation. As more working-class women perform this type of labor than men and have far less access to other, more lucrative forms of labor, I view exotic dance as a site of ‘women’s work’. For more information on male exotic dancers see Liepe-Levinson (2002) and Tewksbury (1993).

2. It is important to note that there are men who frequent exotic dance clubs regularly, but do not form the emotional bonds that the men discussed in this article do. Consumption of exotic dance is a central aspect of their everyday lives; however, they do not necessarily go to the club to see the same dancer. For more on these customers see Erikson and Tewksbury (2000) and Frank (1998, 2002).

3. There are various types of services offered within the club: cabaret dances (a type of mini-lap dance that lasts about a minute to encourage customers to buy a lap dance), lap dances, dancing on stage and spending time in the champagne room (a private room where a customer can buy a dancer’s time so that she does not have to get on stage or interact with any other customer – this is a common service for regulars). Payments for these services are given to dancers directly, but dancers pay around 15–20 percent of these fees to the owners.

4. For more on the rules guiding interactions in exotic dance clubs see Egan (2003), Frank (2002) and Liepe-Levinson (2002).

5. I discuss this theory of love and its relation to other paradigms later in the article.

6. The labor dancers must perform in a dance club is particularly arduous and involves strategies ranging from feigned intimacy to outright lying, which can affect a dancer’s sense of self. The ramifications of a dancer’s labor, while an important site for sociological analysis, are not discussed here, due to space constraints. For more on the emotion work of exotic dance and its effects on women who do this type of work see Barton (2002), Egan (2003), Frank (1998, 2002) and Wood (2000).

7. My theoretical and political commitment to feminism informs the analysis that follows; subsequently, patriarchy and the sexism inherent in its operation are highlighted throughout this work.

8. For more on the complexity of identification, see Fuss (1995).

9. All section epigraphs are from fieldnotes, researcher memos and journals kept during my time in the field.

10. It is important to note that both theorize the differences with regard to gender and love as a result of language and thus culture. As such, we must view this theory as descriptive and not proscriptive. By doing so, it illuminates gender differences, which emerge in a patriarchal context.

11. It is important to state that many dancers employ strategies of resistance to the patriarchal goals the owners set out to create. For more on strategies of resistance see Egan (2004), Liepe-Levinson (2002), Nagle (1997) and Queen (1995).

12. The dynamic involved in these interactions is not new; Berman (1970) and Grimal (1986) have argued that it is at work in the interactions between men and courtesans, and between men and women in harems. Berman insightfully points toward the paradoxical desire found by men in situations where the authenticity of the interaction is under suspicion when he states, 'his wives' lack of spontaneity deprives him of satisfaction and eventually even drains him of desire. Yet if they were to manifest spontaneity, he would be unable to recognize it' (1970: 23). It is the structure of the situation that prevents authentic interactions. Therefore, it is precisely because of the role in which the woman is cast that connection and love become impossible. However, what is missing from the analysis offered by both Berman and Grimal are the social psychoanalytic facets that contribute to these ultimately unsatisfying interactions. I would argue that, unlike men with courtesans and bought wives, male regulars have far less to buy in their interactions with dancers (it is mainly time that they buy) and thus fantasy is far more at work in these interactions. For more on the fantasies of regulars see Egan (2003).

13. Many feminists have criticized Freud specifically, and psychoanalysis in general (see MacKinnon, 1989). Like other feminists (see Clough, 1994; Grosz, 1994; Williams, 1999), I view psychoanalysis as a powerful explanatory framework for feminism. This does not mean a whole-hearted acceptance of its premises; rather, this form of feminism takes seriously the unconscious and its mechanisms, while exploring the limitations of some of the assumptions of psychoanalysis. As such, it is possible to employ Freud while going beyond him.

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