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I'll be Your Fantasy Girl, If You'll be My Money Man: Mapping Desire, Fantasy and Power in Two Exotic Dance Clubs

R. Danielle Egan

INTRODUCTION

Exotic dance is a social scene in which patriarchy, feminine resistance, desire, fantasy and power intersect. In this heterosexual social scene, women dance nude or semi-nude for male customers, and get paid for their work on stage, tables, and in cages; and, in many clubs, for their work on the laps of their customers.¹ Exotic dance, as a site of commodified erotic exchange, is a large and lucrative component of the overall sex industry, and the number of exotic dance clubs in North America has doubled in the last 15 years (Liepe-Levinson 4). With this expansion, the form and function of exotic dance as a social phenomenon has also changed (Egan 17). Exotic dance has shifted from a burlesque site in the 1920s and 1930s wherein dancers mainly strip-teased for men with short and titillating dance numbers where little to no nudity was shone (Allen 281), to the contemporary scene, wherein women provide the full specularity of their breast, vagina, and buttocks and high levels of contact both emotionally and physically (vis-à-vis lap dancing) (Egan 25; Frank 177). Moreover, exotic dance is one of the only forms of erotic labor where legal physical contact (in the form of lap dancing) is permitted in certain states.² Therefore, with the significant changes that have taken place in the scene of exotic dance, it is imperative to understand how these shifts have effected the psycho-social interactions within the parameters of this cultural milieu. The question which guides this article is how do desire, fantasy, and power intersect in the relationships between exotic dancers and their regular customers?

I am particularly interested in the intersubjective relationships between dancers and their regulars because these men consume exotic dance in a vastly different manner than cursory or non-regular customers (Egan 4). Cursory customers frequent exotic dance

clubs for entertainment purposes: "to see the show" and be turned on by women on stage. This is often for "special occasions" such as bachelor parties, birthdays, or a guys' night out (Erikson & Tewksbury 271; Liepe-Levinson 23). Regular customers, in contrast form both emotional and erotic bonds with their dancers, viewing themselves as "more than customers." These men view themselves as "lovers" and/or "boyfriends" of the dancer they come to see on a regular basis and on whom they spend large amounts of money (up to \$50,000) on services and gifts (ranging from roses to breast implant surgery and cars).

Almost all of the regulars in the clubs, where I danced and did my research, were white, middle-class men between the ages of 30 and 65. This socio-economic and racial dimension marked the ways in which they "loved" and made sense of their relations with dancers. This was particularly true when the dancer with whom they were in relation was racially different. Therefore, the intersubjective dynamics at work in the clubs were not only gendered, but also raced and classed.

Exotic dance as a site of research has increased markedly in recent years;³ however, an illumination of this social scene through a psychoanalytic framework and on the relationship between dancers and their regulars has, for the most part, been lacking.⁴ Therefore, this article serves to highlight how the complex psychoanalytic facets of desire, fantasy, and power mark the relationships between dancers and their regulars.

This article is based on four years of ethnographic research in two exotic dance clubs in the New England area between 1996 and 2000, where I was both a full participant and full observer.⁵ The two clubs differed in the labor practices but were very similar in the dynamics that took place between dancers and their regulars. The first site where I did my research as a full

observer is Glitters, a club in an urban setting which allowed full nudity and no physical contact. The second research site where I was a full participant is Flame, a club in a suburban setting, which allows lap dancing and full nudity. Therefore, this theoretical and ethnographic articulation is based on the experiences of the dancers and regulars with whom I spoke and on my experiences as a researcher/dancer. Moreover, this article is theoretically influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, post-Lacanian feminist theory and the poststructuralism of Michel Foucault. In this article, I am concerned with iterative aspects of everyday life (desire, fantasy, and power) and how those aspects crystallize in particular ways in the context of exotic dance. As such, desire, power, and fantasy intersect to iteratively produce a powerful material force, one that marks people outside the club and one that gets played out in specific ways inside the club.

DESIRING SUBJECTS AND FANTASY OBJECTS

Jacque Lacan's figuration of desire is as an iterative force, one of lack, longing, and an ever-illusory fulfillment. Desire, in Lacanian theory, is an unconscious process originating with the subject's entry into language (see Lacan *Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis* 243; Lacan *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* 228; Lacan *Feminine Sexuality* 120). Due to its unconscious nature, desire operates as that which can only be fully known by the other and as such can never be fulfilled (Lacan *Écrits* 275). Moreover, because desire is formed by language, which is a representational figuration and thus partial, there is a component of desire that is left over, or supplemental, and that can never be fully articulated in language. As such, desire is not a relation to an object but functions as a lack. Desire forms with the inculcation of the subject into the symbolic order and the concomitant violent separation from the real (that which is beyond signification and representation). Because subject formation requires entry into the symbolic, all subjects are desiring subjects.⁶

It is "only through a speech that lifted the prohibition that the subject has brought to bear upon himself [sic] by his [sic] own words that he [sic] might obtain the absolution that would give him [sic] back his [sic] desire" (Lacan *Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis*

132). Desire is an effect of the unconscious and language, and is perpetuated as a lack of an object (in representation). "Desire is the reality of the unconscious" (Grosz 66). Desire translates into sexuality in this model through its own operations with relation to the unconscious; that is, it is through desire that subjects can know sexuality. Sexual reality is dependent on "desire, linked to demand and by which the effects of sexuality are made present in experience" (Lacan *Four Fundamentals of Psychoanalysis* 156). As such, sexuality is linked to the symbolic and is locked in the representational structure of language and the signifier. However, desire and the entry into the symbolic are structured by gender; thus, desire functions differently for men and women.

The woman "can be but [sic] excluded by the nature of things, which is the nature of words," and thus, her status within the symbolic is "not whole" (Lacan *Feminine Sexuality* 73). There is no such thing as "woman" in language; she is barred in language and it is through this exclusion that she becomes pacified in the cultural order. This is not a universal positioning within all language for all time; rather, this position is a result of a particular regime of patriarchal culture and language in which the phallus is grafted onto the fleshy penis (André 124). Therefore, women's position as "not whole" means "that when any speaking being whatsoever situates itself under the banner 'women,' it is on the basis of the following—that it grounds itself as being not-whole in situating itself in the phallic function" (Lacan *Feminine Sexuality* 72). Thus, desire and woman's position as synecdochic object informs fantasy and the materiality of projection within vectors of hierarchical gendered relations. Fantasy operates in powerful and material ways, marking both the subject as well as his object (the woman) of fantasy. Fantasmatic projections and the effects of these projections on both men and women are thus crucial for understanding how desire operates in this exotic dance scene.

MALE PROJECTIONS AND THE FANTASY OF THE OBJECT

Woman, as the object of desire and as a figure of synecdoche, through which men seek to fulfill their lack, informs my reading of fantasy. Masculine desire functions as a lack of knowledge regarding the feminine,

and male desire marks the feminine through the signifier; as such, the feminine sinks into abstraction (André 6). Although the object of desire is inherently asexual and there is no feminine signifier per se, object status gets grafted onto women through fantasy and culture.⁷ It is through fantasy, informed by the phallic function of language and culture, that the male subject gives female form to the object. Therefore, fantasy operates in material ways by structuring sexual relations.

Fantasy also operates symbolically to construct the perception of knowability that is inherently unknowable. However, fantasy also operates anacritically, privileging a scopic register, which necessitates the display of the other in the position of lack in order to reassure the masculine ego of its own phallic position (Edelman 46). In order for the woman to be the phallus, she must reflect the power of its position by being its other; her position shores up its boundaries (Butler 57). Women, in this scopic regime, become visual screens through which male fantasy penetrates, inscribing her status as object. However, because of her supplementary position, she is never fully penetrated by his visions and fantasies: although he thinks he knows her, her oscillation haunts him. Although women's sexual status is assigned to her in patriarchy through masculine fantasy, due to its iterative function, the fact that her status as object must be re-signified on a continual basis vis-à-vis scopic and symbolic registers means that resistance is possible: she can contest, challenge, and reject her role as the phallus.⁸

Women's rejection of the phallic function and modes of resistance against the inscriptions of masculine fantasy can involve a type of mimesis wherein the woman excessively takes on the language of the phallus, playing with it in order to show its gaps and the (w)holes in its structure (Irigaray *The Sex Which is Not One* 131). In effect, she can use the phallic tools in order to deconstruct the father's house. Mimesis involves strategies of displacement: by displacing the phallic function, she is able to illuminate phallogocentric language as operating through repetition, as opposed to being a static and universal function (Irigaray *The Sex Which is Not One* 27). She is able to shed light on the ruse of phallogocentric language and her position within it. Like Dorothy, she is able to pull the curtain away from the Wizard, thereby illuminating the

fragility of his power. She traverses the signifier and enacts a penetration in reverse (Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* 144). Through her position in the symbolic, and through strategies of mimesis, the feminine can construct a new discourse of resistance, reveling in her position—not as passive object, but, through the *use of her position* as object, which problematizes her position in relation to masculine fantasy. This is not to say that the female subject is able to find a phallus-free utopian space, because as a speaking subject she is never completely outside the symbolic. However, it is to say that she can try to recover her space in the symbolic and in masculine fantasy without simply being reduced to the phallus (Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* 142). In doing so, she resubmits herself into the symbolic so that she may operate within it, but her resubmission is not about passivity; rather, it is a playful repetition that disrupts the signifier—the phallic signifier which works to cover over its logic. She mimes phallogocentric signification to expose that which has been covered over by the re-duplication of discourse and language, disrupting the seamless repetition of language, desire, and fantasy, producing an alternative discourse and exposing phallogocentric strategies. Women are thus able to resist the violent inscriptions of language, inscriptions that seek to occlude the feminine.

It is the production of alternative discourses, resistance, and the complexity of power and its iterative flow with regard to discourse that led me to Foucault and his theory of power. Although Foucault himself refused to take psychoanalysis seriously in his own work, I believe his work can be used to examine the iterative quality of power and, finally, the iterative quality of both desire and fantasy in order to show the complexity of how power operates within discourse and how resistance to phallogocentric language and fantasy are possible.

Power, according to Foucault, is the multiplicity of force relations immanent in the sphere in which they operate and which constitute their own organization; as the process which, through ceaseless struggles and confrontations, transforms, strengthens or reverses them; as the support which these force relations find in one another, thus forming a chain or a system, or on the contrary, the disjunctions and contradictions which isolate them from one another; and lastly, as the

strategies in which they take effect, whose general design or institutional crystallization is embodied in the state apparatus, in the formulation of law, in the various social hegemonies (Foucault 92).

Power is relational and dynamic. It flows as a multitude of force relations of control, compliance, and resistance with regard to language and with regard to subjects who are constituted by and through language and are its agents.⁹ How then does Foucault's theory of the recursivity of power and its gaps and fissures shed light on the new (re)vision of desire and masculine fantasy? If desire and fantasy are linked to the symbolic order, which is itself a recursive mechanism producing speaking (male) subjects and their longings, then desire and fantasy themselves should be seen as an effect of power. If Lacan is correct in assuming that the phallic function, who comes to have the phallus, and who becomes the phallus are indeterminate, then the process of taking on the phallus should be seen as an effect of power (Butler 93). Male subjects are formed through the symbolic at the expense of those the symbolic occludes—namely, women. Given this, signification and its ensuing desire and fantasy should be seen as regulatory mechanisms that produce certain bodies as desiring (males) and other bodies as desired (females), meaning that men as speaking and desiring subjects are produced against and at the expense of women. It is this intersection of the recursivity of desire, fantasy, and power that I am interested in exploring in relation to exotic dancers and their customers, illuminating the complexities and difficulties of being an object of desire and of fantasy as well as the resistances to those inscriptions. The intersections of desire, fantasy, and power and their markings on the relationships between dancers and their regulars will be the focus of the rest of this article.

REAL, LIVE, NUDE FANTASY OBJECTS

Sex workers in general and exotic dancers in particular occupy a more complex site than do most women in the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power. Like other women, they become objects in the symbolic in order to sustain the male ego and his position within the phallic function. However, exotic dancers also occupy a unique position in that their bodies are sought out in the market as objects of desire and, as such, it is their

job to recognize men and make them feel desired and desirable. Moreover, it is their job to become screens for male fantasy, quelling male anxiety of the unknowability of the feminine. In other cultural contexts, women might problematize their positions vis-à-vis male fantasy and desire through rejection or outright refusal. Women who perform erotic labor, however, are positioned within this matrix of desire, fantasy, and power as commodities, as bodies bought and sold, as objects of desires, and as fulfillers of male fantasy, filling their lack.

Exotic dancers are expected to make men feel good, positioning themselves as their "fantasy girl." Seen as unproblematic and willing screens for male fantasy, a dancer's skin becomes saturated with his signification (Baudrillard 105). Dancers become objects or signs within the registers of phallic exchange. On stage or on their laps, she is open for his inscriptions. Her naked body becomes immersed with his desire and becomes an object of male fantasy, synecdochically functioning as both part and whole, becoming the relational conduit through which they can fantasmatically find what they are looking for—an object who eases their lack. She is the phallus for her male regulars; she is the other whose recognition they have sought out for so long. This position marks dancers in painful ways: as Margarita said, "Sometimes it's so hard always being a piece of meat, you know, always have to be available." Her position as object places her at the margins and her job requires that she ritually take part in its reconstruction.

Exotic dancer as the commodified phallus and object of desire unproblematically reinscribes the phallic function for male customers. Although her position as other and as fantasy girl can promote painful situations for the dancers, the women in the clubs also use their positions strategically. Dancers are not passive objects, nor are they unaware of their positions within the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power. They are able to take on the symbolic in its gaps, understanding the necessity of their place within it and the positions they occupy for the customers. Many of the dancers took on this position purposefully and used the materiality of male desire and fantasy in order to make money—in effect, to both "hook a regular customer" and to "keep him coming back." As many dancers told me, "They

[the customers] believe the fantasy" and "we have to use that to our advantage."¹⁰ They are able to use the fantasy and their position within the symbolic against the customer, making him believe that he has access to what they performatively offer him.

Dancers used strategies of covert mimesis: excessively traversing the symbolic and taking on their positions while problematizing the underlying phallogocentric logic and its violent foreclosures. Unlike other forms of more overt mimesis, such as drag or guerilla theater, dancers use covert forms in order to continue working within this context while simultaneously problematizing their position within it. Covert mimesis enables dancers to penetrate the matrix of desire while excessively resisting its violence. If dancers were to more directly challenge their customers, they would either get fired or lose a large amount, if not all, of their income. Therefore, this is a more subversive strategy in that it allows them to interact with male customers without becoming saturated with their fantasies. It is this strategy of covert mimesis that enables dancers to excessively perform their position as both virgin and whore, to use this position as a site of resistance instead of acquiescing to phallic exchange and phallogocentric fantasy. Dancers are able to use their knowledge of men's desire, fantasy, and power in order to construct a space for themselves that is anything but passive. In doing so, they are able to subvert—albeit in a covert way—the matrix of dancer, fantasy, and power and participate in this context in a more agentic manner. Dancers take on the masquerade of the feminine object in order to get what they need from their relationships with their regular customers. Not unlike other marginalized populations who are located within exploitative relations, dancers use forms of resistance that allow them to negotiate an otherwise oppressive structure.

Hope, when discussing how she felt about her work in relation to desire, fantasy, and power, said:

H: Well...hummm...I think we have all the power. Men come in because they are desperate and lonely. They need us...you know what I mean?

D: Umhummm.

H: And sometimes its like great...you know because once you hook em they are all yours. Like

they believe what you say...they want to believe it and that makes it easy. I mean you have to reassure them, but they don't really know you are not this woman who wants them and that it is just performing. Like they believe you. Sometimes its great and easy, but shit man there are times when I am so tired of being what they want...it's hard to maintain that persona...like sometimes I want to say...shit I don't wear these heels at home! I am a regular girl. I wear flannel pajamas and you are ugly! But I can't do that for many reasons. So for me I have the power because I am what they want me to be and they believe it. You know?

D: Yeah.

H: Yeah.

D: Do you um...do you think they think they have power?

H: Sometimes, but you know...many don't. They say things like you can leave anytime...but then I just reassure them that they are special. Sometimes they try to make power plays by fucking with the money situation. But then I am all like...fine I will find another regular. It is not hard...cause like you know there are a lot of desperate men out there.¹¹

Hope understands her place within the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power. The customers "need" her; she is a relational conduit for lonely and desperate men, giving them what they do not receive in many other contexts. She is a woman who is "willing" and "able" to make him feel as if he is special and that she wants him. This is not always easy. Playing the "persona"—quelling their loneliness and lack¹²—is laborious and difficult, and there are times when Hope wants to tell them the truth about who she is outside the club, that she wears "flannel pajamas" and is "just a regular girl" who doesn't find them particularly attractive. She fantasizes about creating a fissure in their fantasy structure by removing the mask, by bursting their bubble; however, this would not only cause the men pain, but it would cost her money. As such, although at times painful, Hope has an investment in her "persona"; she uses their "needs" to secure her financial position.

Power occupies an interesting place within Hope's discussion of her position. It is addressed in two ways: first, with regard to her agency, and second, with re-

gard to a customer's power. She feels that she "has the power" because she holds the keys to their fantasy. This was not uncommon; many of the dancers felt that, in this way, they wielded power over their customers. After "hooking" them (getting them interested in coming back repeatedly), many dancers felt "in control" because they were the fantasy girls and they could deflate their customers' fantasies at any time. Hope also addresses customers' power and their ability to "fuck with [her] money situation." She negates this power by saying she can always "get another regular." He is easily replaceable; there are many lonely customers whom she can "hook."

However, Hope's disavowal of his monetary power over her is somewhat overstated. Regulars are not always easy to come by, and if a regular spends large amounts of money on "his" dancer (\$300–800), the loss of income can definitely affect a dancer's lifestyle. Dancers can and do make money from non-regular customers, but the ease with which the money can be made is variable. Some non-regulars will not spend any money because they "are only [there] to watch" or will only buy a few lap dances. Whereas others might come in and pay large amounts of money for "a night of fun." As such, it might take a dancer some time to "hook" another customer and make him her regular.¹³ Therefore, Hope and other dancers are in situations wherein their positions with regulars are complex and contradictory. They exist within multiple vectors of power and resistance, both garnering a level of agency within modalities of fantasy and desire as well as being subject to customers' willingness (or lack thereof) to pay.

Margarita also had a similar assessment of her role in the club and her relation to men's fantasies:

M: Like I am their wild Latina...you know the girl they have always wanted to fuck, but they were stuck with their prim and proper white wife. They have all of these weird fantasies about *las mujeres latina...tu entiendes?* [Latina women—you understand?]

D: *Sí.*

M: Like they have always wanted someone like me...an accent, with nice hips and smooth brown skin, but always were ashamed...like I am that

fantasy for them.

D: Um humm.

M: And so I just play it up...you know...I whisper to them in Spanish...the hilarious thing is they don't understand what I am saying...so sometimes I just fuck with them... you know like telling them some lines from the *telenovelas* [Spanish soap operas] or just like what I did that day...it's not always erotic if you know what I mean...[laughing]

D: [laughing]

M: That's how I deal...with them...when I am sick of being that shit that they want...it's the small shit. You know?

D: Yeah. So why do you think they [regular customers] come?

M: Fuck man they are lonely and want somebody to make them feel better...And that's the service we provide...We are better than wives...Because we are sluts too...Or at least that's what they think...They believe the shit though...It's wild.¹⁴

Margarita points to the complexity of desire, fantasy, and power and its various markings on her and her relationships with her regulars. She is their "fantasy," which emerges from their desire of the other as women as well as their desire for the racialized other (hooks 25). She is "*la mujer latina*" (the Latina woman) they have always wanted but were too ashamed to seek out in other contexts. She offers them the "bit of the other" in a multitude of ways (hooks 29). She performs for their desire, donning an accent (even though she was born and raised in the United States), dancing to salsa, speaking to them in Spanish, making them feel special. She "is their fantasy." Margarita is situated in the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power as not merely as a woman but as a Latina woman who taps into their desire to know the unknowable feminine, as well as their desire to possess the fetishized Latina body. She can ease their loneliness because she knows how to make them feel as if they have possessed her, as if they could have all that she has to offer—the wild and untamable Latina woman who, as Margarita said later in the interview, "can spin their tops with the flick of [her] hips."

Margarita's position as a racialized object of desire and screen for their fantasies comes with a cost. Sometimes she is sick "of being what they want" when per-

forming for their desire marks her too much. She uses her position of unknowability as a form of resistance, using her “mother” tongue seductively, listing her errands or the fact that she woke up late in order to weave them into believing that she is theirs while still maintaining her distance. She uses their ignorance against them in a savvy way to claim a space beyond their desire and fantasy, residing in the gaps and using them for her benefit. However, I do not want to conflate resistance with a lack of pain, for inscriptions incurred through desire are painful; it is not, however, her only experience. Due to the recursivity of desire and fantasy, Margarita and other dancers are able to resist men's desire and fantasy by miming it, moving within and beyond their structures of desire and fantasy in order to get what they need, both monetarily and subjectively. Margarita, through her strategies, is able to ensure the continuing monetary support by her customer as well as take a break from her position as object and the violent foreclosure of being the object of his desire. She is able to penetrate his desire and invert it so that she can claim agency within it.

The dancer, through her covert mimesis, recovers her place within phallogentric desire without being simply reduced to it; she plays within it and exposes what is supposed to remain invisible—phallogentric desire itself (Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman* 139). Dancers mime phallogentric fantasy and desire in order to engage with what is covered over in the symbolic, wherein their position is invisible and marginalized. By doing so, dancers disrupt the violent disclosures of phallogentric desire and their place within the symbolic by creating a fissure within its often seamless reproduction. They do not reside passively as the other that phallogentric desire needs to sustain itself; rather, they problematize it by becoming intimately acquainted with its structures and invert it to simultaneously create a place for themselves within it while not only being subject to it. This requires that dancers resubmit themselves to masculine desire and fantasy; they are never able to get completely beyond it, but it gives them a way to resist its violent inscriptions. This is not to say that dancers have all the power in their interactions with customers, nor am I saying that their positions within the matrix of fantasy, desire, and power comes without cost to them. However, I am

saying that dancers do have agency in their interactions with regulars and are able to find sites of resistance within them.

Unlike other forms of commodified eroticism, such as print or videographic pornography, dancers, in their personal interactions, are more than simply screens for men's projections. They invoke resistances and disrupt the recursivity of power within the matrix of fantasy and desire through their actions and reactions. They move within and between subject and object on a regular basis and invoke strategies of covert mimesis within the club. Dancers are neither passive objects nor are they unaware of the complexities of their situations within the club or outside it. Rather, they are cognizant of their positions with relation to their customers and use their positions strategically in order to make money and to find a place within masculine desire and fantasy without simply being reduced to it. As such, women use the materiality of men's fantasy and desire as ways in which they can survive and prosper within a complex and multi-layered context.¹⁵

DESIRING SUBJECTS, PHALLIC FANTASIES, AND MONETARY POWER

The materiality of fantasy, desire, and power marks regular customers in exotic dance clubs. They fall “in love” with their dancer and for them and this love is real. It is in “love” relations with dancers that fantasy, desire, and power function to mark regular customers in the most powerful ways. Regulars feel that she can give them the answer to their desire and fantasy—namely, what does a woman want? She can give them recognition. She can provide them with what is lost in the symbolic—access to the real—that unknowable place the feminine occupies due to her position within the symbolic. That she, in her synecdochic position, can fill their hole; quelling their anxiety and lack, she can fill them with her body. This is the promise of her love. This is not to say that desire and fantasy do not pierce most love relationships; they do. However, the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power operates in a different way within the club. In this context, women are paid to be fantasy objects; the mutuality of other love relationships is absent. Moreover, unlike other contexts in which women may challenge their male partners more overtly and even reject them outright, in the

club, dancers are paid and expected not to challenge the customers directly; if they do, they are fined and can be fired.¹⁶ Thus, dancers must appear to the customer as their fantasy object in an unproblematic way. This reinforces and reconstructs male fantasy and desire so that it gathers force in a way that it may not in other contexts.

Henry, a regular customer, embodied the complexity of regulars' positions within the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power. Henry said:

H: I just love Trena and when I am away I can't take it...I just miss her and want to be with her all of the time...She makes me happy. You know it...She just makes me so happy and I love her and want to be with her forever. And I know I could make her happy. I believe I do already but I mean really happy. I could give her so much, and I know she has been hurt before, but I would never hurt her.

D: Yeah, I know.

H: I could give her everything...She gives me so much. More than I have ever had before...I have never had feelings like this.

D: That's great.

H: I have never been with someone who makes me this passionate and happy...

[Trena joins us] Hi, I was just telling Kayla how happy you make me.

T: Why thank you...You make me very happy too.¹⁷

Henry truly loved Trena. He felt happy and fulfilled with her and wanted to be "with her forever." She made him feel "passionate and happy," and he felt he could protect her and "never hurt her." During our talk, I realized that Henry had been coming to the club for six months at least twice a week to see Trena. He felt "he couldn't stay away." For Trena, Henry was "just a regular" and she "didn't think [she] could ever see him any other way."¹⁸ Trena served as a relational conduit for Henry, a way that he could have something he "had never felt before." He believed that she loved him, too. She offered him the promise of momentary satisfaction. However, this was not enough; he wanted to be with her "forever," to give her "everything," "always." Possession of her was necessary so that she

would cease being his fantasy girl in the club and be his fantasy wife.

Trena was Henry's other, his *objet petit a*, that which could substitute for the Other that evaded him in the symbolic order—the synthesis with the real that promises all-encompassing ecstatic connection beyond representation. Trena, like other dancers, functions as a fantasy object, registering as a powerful connection and relational conduit; however, because a dancer's status as object is predicated upon phallogentric signification and phallic exchange, it is always tied to the symbolic and thus always lacking. She is saturated with his sign system and, as a commodity, can only offer illusory connection. As such, she is a commodity and Henry and other regulars will only find momentary fulfillment, which will leave them lacking and needing to return in hopes of finding a longer-lasting connection. Fulfillment, in this context, will never be mutual, and any hopes for transgressing the symbolic are futile.

Customers find momentary satisfaction in their relationships with their "girlfriends"; however, this does not last forever. They look toward a future where they can have her outside the club and when they can stop paying her for her time. They do not want a commodified fantasy girl; they want a girlfriend who will treat them in the same manner everywhere, who will listen to their lives as emotional nurturers, and who will want to sleep with them at any time. Men come to the clubs seeking what they cannot get in other contexts—women who will occupy the site of virgin and whore unproblematically (which is another fantasy), giving them what they "need" and want. Their desire and fantasy operate recursively and intersect with commodification. As with any commodity, although satiation might happen in the moment, they are left unsatisfied after consumption—once is never enough for regulars. They must return on a regular basis. However, because their relationship with their fantasy girl is just that—a fantasy—they are ultimately left unsatisfied and must refocus their desire in another way or try to find strategies that will aid them in their possession of the object.

Jack, a regular of mine for several months, professed his "love" for me regularly, e-mailed me daily, and asked to see me outside the club every time he came to see me. However, upon my continual refusal

to see him, he decided that he would try to force my hand by refusing to buy dances, and by not paying me for my time. He stated that he would come back to the club after I met him for dinner. The withholding of money was a strategy regulars used when they felt that their anxiety surrounding their fantasy girl became too much and they had to have her outside the club. Several dancers told me about this happening with their regulars, and when they refused to meet customers outside the club, customers either continued to come for awhile in hopes of changing the dancer's mind or left the club altogether. Tom, a regular at Glitters, put it this way: "Well, if she really loves me then she will meet me outside the club and then I will know it's not about the money."¹⁹ Tom wanted Keri outside the club and invoked a form of power over her that he felt would work to his advantage. In the end, however, Keri would not meet him outside the club and he decided to stop seeing her. Henry tried the same strategy with Trena: "I just can't come here anymore. I have to see her some place else and then I will come back. I just, you know, want to know if it's real."²⁰ Unlike Tom, who left the club, Henry returned to see Trena; he just "couldn't stand not seeing her."

Regulars tried to use the power of their money in order to control their fantasy girls, trying to prove to themselves that their dancer loved them and wanted to be with them. The relationship became a site of struggle where customers tried to get dancers outside the club to prove their love and dancers continued to try and persuade the customers with promises of the future in order to ensure their monetary stability. Ultimately, the relationship between the dancer and customer would crumble because the customers' strategies were unsuccessful, and they realized that their fantasy girl would never be theirs. In the face of painful cracks in their fantasmatic structures, the customers could no longer continue coming to see their "fantasy girl" and would move onto another dancer or leave the club altogether. Without the fantasy, their lack became too painful and severe and they could not sustain their relationships with the dancers when their relationality was predicated solely upon monetary exchange.

Vinny, a regular at Flame, told me, "I feel like I am going through a divorce, I feel so bad," after Margo told him that they could not see each other anymore.

The loss of their illusory connection and the fissures in their fantasies are painful for customers and invoke both grief and rage. One regular, after a "break-up," went to the manager of Flame and told him that Gina, his "girlfriend," did drugs and prostituted herself for money in the hopes of getting her fired. Another started yelling at a dancer and was banned from coming back to the club. A couple dancers told me they had regulars who cried after they realized they would never "have them." The materiality of regulars' fantasies operate in powerful ways, evoking both immense pleasure as well as intense grief and rage.

The force with which the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power registered for regulars and their resultant loss is tied to illusory connection, one that offers to ease their lack. As synecdochic objects, dancers offer the illusion of recognition and fulfillment, a synthesis that will transcend the symbolic, giving customers a pathway to what the feminine has due to her position within the symbolic. However, with her rejection and the loss of this perceived connection, men are relegated back into their position in relation to desire and their ignorance regarding the feminine, the space of anxiety within which the feminine as the unknowable is both subject to his language while simultaneously beyond it. He is dependent on her because he desires her recognition and needs it in order to sustain his own position, and yet she is in part beyond his control. As such, he seeks to control her, but due to her position, she will never truly be his, and for this he fears her (Brennan 115). It is this fear that promotes both grief and rage, propagating a paranoid return wherein he needs her and her submissive position and yet fears that she will harm him (Brennan 116). In his paranoia, he seeks to disavow her completely so that she may never harm him—in effect, re-establishing his phallic position of dominance and cutting off any possibility of mutuality beyond the phallus.

It is her position as the commodified phallus that offers a safe relation. His fantasies construct her as knowable and thus controllable. She is the virgin/whore he has always wanted; she is saturated by his signs so that he may be fulfilled and transcend lack, but only on his terms. As a commodity, she brings him pleasure and control. She offers him a form of relationality that is difficult to receive in other contexts, a per-

formative relationality steeped in the unproblematic reproduction of his fantasy. Although he seeks to possess her away from the club, it is her position *within* the club that offers him control. He seeks to sustain his position as knower outside the club, without realizing that, due to his fantasies, away from the space of the club she will never be the same. She will challenge him, will not be his fantasy girl, and will refuse his requests. When she resists him in the club, the fantasy is broken and she again occupies a site of anxiety for him, a site that necessitates his disavowal. This is the structure of phallogentric language and patriarchy wherein, due to his necessity of possessing his fantasy object and controlling her, she will always be beyond his grasp. He knows on an energetic level that what he is asking for is unreasonable and exploitative, but the materiality of his fantasies and his desire for fulfillment make him believe that she wants to be his. Mutuality and interconnection become impossible as long as the relationship resides in this space and relies on the phallic function. He will never be fulfilled and he will always need to control that which is unknowable. Moreover, as long as his fulfillment is predicated upon an other that must reside on the margins against which he solidifies his own position, he will always be left unsatisfied. She is never simply a passive object; she resists, and thus slips beyond his grasping. Due to this, the possibility of phallic ecstasy will always reside in the symbolic, leaving him lacking and paranoid. Fearing her, seeking to control her and thereby disavowing her, he perpetuates his position as a desiring subject in search of an object.

CONCLUSION

The matrix of desire, fantasy, and power marks the relationships between dancers and their regular customers, promoting pleasure, painful inscriptions, and resistance. The entry into the symbolic and the recursive formation of desire and fantasy function to construct desiring male subjects and desired female objects. It is the recursive formation of the matrix that both reinstates the repetitive force of the symbolic as well as allows for its resistances. Desire, fantasy, and power mark the club in particular ways because of women's positions as commodified fantasy objects and men's positions as seeking fulfillment in a commodi-

fied scene that reifies his fantasies and control. Vectors of desire, fantasy, and power pierce both dancers and customers in the club.

Dancers, as objects of desire, become screens for male fantasy and are supposed to perpetuate their positions as objects in order to fulfill men's desire for the right price. The dancers' labor becomes fetishistically occluded and intersects with male fantasy, operating such that male regulars come to believe that the dancers really do care about and want to have a relationship with them. This provides the male customer something that is difficult to obtain elsewhere: a fantasy girl who embodies the virgin and the whore and who offers both emotional recognition and sexual stimulation.

Dancers function as objects of desire and thus become saturated with phallogentric signifiers; they are pierced by the materiality of male fantasy. Her job involves the performance of his desire and fantasy in order to "satisfy the customer" and make money. However, unlike the passive feminine object of Lacanian thought, dancers understand their positions within the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power and use them strategically to make money in the club. Dancers use their marginal positions, and the gaps created vis-à-vis the recursive quality of desire and fantasy in order to resist these inscriptions, invoking strategies of covert mimesis in order to move within and between the phallogentrism and phallic exchange and find a place within it. Through their resistance, dancers were able to operate in savvy ways in relation to their jobs and the customers with whom they interacted. They were able to not only find a place for themselves within the matrix of desire, fantasy, and power, but also to prosper financially while doing so. A dancer, in her relation with her regular, can challenge him so that she is never simply a celluloid representation, like other forms of erotic fantasy, but can return his gaze and problematize his projections.

Mutuality and fulfillment evade the regular because these relationships are steeped in phallic exchange and based upon fantasies involving the possession of an object. He wants recognition and connection, but on his terms, where he is in control. He recognizes his interdependence but must deny it because he fears loss of control and dominance; be-

cause she resists him and is not a passive object, he must disavow her, as her position invokes anxiety and paranoia. Therefore, although he seeks fulfillment and the continuation of his fantasy outside the club, it is impossible because it is only via commodified relation that she offers herself and that he can conceive of the illusion of unproblematic connection. When that illusion is broken by her resistance, he cannot maintain his position because of the realization of its reliance on monetary exchange. He wants something he can never have: fulfillment, control, and possession—for free. She, however, is not his object, an object to be had, but rather is unknowable and just beyond his grasp. With this knowledge, he leaves the relationship unsatisfied, searching for new objects.

NOTES

¹For more on non-heterosexual contexts of exotic dance see Liepe-Levinson *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire*.

²It is important to note that exotic dance has, in the last 10 years, come under serious legal scrutiny. In two Supreme Court cases: *Barnes vs. Glenn Theater, Inc* in 1991 and *Erie vs. Pap's AM* in 2000 the justices in both cases ruled that due to potential harmful effects strip clubs have on neighborhoods that each individual state had the right to either ban or control exotic dance. For more on the legal battles surrounding exotic dance in the last decade see Liepe-Levinson *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire*.

³For more on current research see Liepe-Levinson *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire*; Tewksbury & Erikson "The 'Gentlemen' in the Club: A Typology of Strip Club Patrons"; Rambo-Ronai "The Reflexive Self Through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher"; Forsyth & Deshotels "The Occupation Milieu of the Nude Dancer."

⁴For an exception on regulars see Frank "The Production of Identity and the Negotiation of Intimacy in a Gentleman's Club."

⁵All names in this article, other than my own, are pseudonyms to protect the identities of the clubs and of the women and men who participated in this ethnography.

⁶In this article, I am dealing with how desire functions for regular customers. Due to the context of how the exotic dance is produced and consumed (men buying and women selling) I am specifically looking at how men are desiring subjects, and women function as objects of desire.

⁷Because I am dealing with masculine fantasy and women's position within that fantasy, I am not dealing with other forms of fantasy nor am I dealing with women's fantasies in general. This is not to deny the importance of women and fantasy, but because I am dealing with fantasy in relation to customers and dancers, I strategically grapple with men's fantasies of women.

⁸The hysteric is one figuration of Woman, one who resists the status inscribed to her through masculine fantasy. She challenges the

power of the phallus through her discourse, which illuminates the misconstructions and hallucinatory aspects of phallogocentric logic with regard to women. Many feminists have debated about the hysteric and her resistive possibilities (see Cixous *The Newly Born Woman*; Irigaray *Speculum of the Other Woman*). Although the hysteric provides an important resistance to phallogocentric logic and fantasy, I do not want to deny or romanticize the pain of her mental illness and the loneliness of her situation. I will also discuss other forms of resistance with regard to masculine fantasy later in the article.

⁹For a prolonged discussion of Foucault's notions of language and discourse, see *Archeology of Knowledge*.

¹⁰Field notes, 9/98, 12/98, 2/99.

¹¹Interview: Hope, 12/98.

¹²Although none of the women or men I worked with used the term "lack" in relation to desire, I am interpreting loneliness to signify lack because the term loneliness is thought of by the dancers as the draw that brings men to the club, as that aspect of their lives that mobilizes them to seek their services. Moreover, I believe that men's desire is to quell their loneliness and to have access to that which they do not have access to in other contexts—women who are willing to be both the slut and the virgin—is the way that desire registers for the customers and marks the dancers in the club. Desire manifests itself in multiple ways. Women become the objects in this context to fulfill what they desire; as such, it fits with the way that I have dealt with this concept.

¹³I will address the complexity around money and power at more length at the end of this section.

¹⁴Interview: Margarita, 10/98.

¹⁵Dancers' resistance opens possibilities for challenging phallogocentric desire in broader socio-cultural contexts. Many dancers told me that after dancing for awhile, they "stopped taking shit" from partners, meaning that they were beginning to problematize their position as phallus in other relationships; however, the extent to which this happened is beyond the scope of my analysis since I did not ask dancers about these issues. Therefore, the extent to which their contestation of their role as the phallus moves into their other relations is a direction I would like to move in future research on this topic. However, dancing did provide many women newfound knowledges they used to problematize other interactions (i.e., with doctors).

¹⁶For more on the operations and expectations of the club and the dancer's place within it, see Egan "Eyeing the Scene: The Uses and (RE)uses of Surveillance Cameras in an Exotic Dance Club."

¹⁷Field notes, 2/99.

¹⁸Field notes 2/99

¹⁹Fieldnotes, 9/98.

²⁰Field note, 4/99.

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