

“Just Trying to Relax”: Masculinity, Masculinizing Practices, and Strip Club Regulars

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This article explores customers' understandings of their visits to heterosexual strip clubs and the ways in which those visits become meaningful to them in relation to cultural discourses around masculinity, sexuality, leisure, and consumption, as well as in relation to their everyday lives and relationships. Not every man finds strip clubs pleasurable, yet understanding why some men frequent these venues can inform us more generally about the links between sexuality, gender, and the marketplace. This article focuses on regular male customers' stated motives for visiting strip clubs and examines those visits as touristic and masculinizing practices. It also explores gender, sexuality, and power in the men's performances of desire in the clubs, taking up issues of visibility, virility, youthfulness, and commodification.

Strip clubs are a visible, profitable, and growing form of entertainment in the contemporary United States and are primarily, though not exclusively, marketed to and visited by heterosexual men. Not all American men, of course, enjoy visiting strip clubs. The focus here is on those regular male customers who visit strip clubs often enough to consider this a significant personal practice, returning again and again to venues where contact and sexual release are prohibited and for whom voyeurism and conversation are the eroticized practices. What exactly is the appeal of modern strip clubs in this particular voyeuristic form for certain groups of late 20th-century heterosexually identified American men?

One assumption in the literature has been that men are motivated to use the sex industry out of a desire to maintain sexual mastery and power over women (Edwards, 1993). Granted, strip clubs as they now exist are indeed intertwined with male privilege. Although euphemistically called “adult entertainment,” most commodified sexual productions, from strip clubs to pornography to erotic massages, are still aimed at male consumers. Most strip clubs are owned and operated by men, and many also have rules prohibiting women from entering unless escorted by a male, precluding some women from becoming customers even if they so desire. Men may do business in strip clubs on corporate expense, something for which there is no comparable practice for women. Further, despite the fact that men experience some stigma

as a result of being customers, this stigma is relatively small when compared with that experienced by the women who work in the clubs. Customers also often have particular advantages over dancers in terms of educational and social capital. And finally, there are also often large discrepancies between the earning power of male customers and female dancers (even though dancers may do quite well compared with women working in other service industry jobs).

Yet the idea that strip clubs, or the sex industry more generally, inherently exist to reproduce male privilege has been challenged by texts that highlight the agency of sex workers and the “sex negative” cultural context in which such transactions take place (Bell, 1994; Chapkis, 1997; McElroy, 1995; Nagle, 1997). Further, many men declare that sex workers have the upper hand in commodified sexual transactions, and very few men understand their visits to strip clubs or their use of other venues in terms of an exercise of personal power or a desire for dominance. Although it is a mistake to assert that transactions in strip clubs are unrelated to social structures of inequality, it is clearly necessary to explore the experiences and subjectivity of men in relation to power and commodified sexualized services in more detail (Cornwall & Lindisfarne, 1994; Segal, 1990).

My primary argument is that the customers' understandings of their visits to strip clubs are deeply intertwined with cultural discourses about masculinity, sexuality, leisure, and consumption, and that these visits become meaningful in relation to their everyday lives and relationships and their own personal and emotional experiences of gender and sexuality. Rather than fulfilling a universal masculine need for domination or a biological male need for sexual release, strip clubs provide a kind of intermediate space (not work and not home, although related to both) in which men can experience their bodies and identities in particular pleasurable ways. Although customers' motivations are

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indeed related to existing power structures and inequalities, their visits are not necessarily experienced as exercises in acquiring or wielding power. Understanding the customers' subjective interpretations of these practices can inform us more generally about the links among sexuality, gender, and the marketplace.

METHODS

My ethnographic material is drawn from over 7 years of research on the adult entertainment industry in the contemporary United States. The data for this paper were gathered through participant observation, a traditional anthropological fieldwork technique, and through a series of multiple, in-depth interviews with 30 male customers of strip clubs in a large Southern city, which I refer to as "Laurelton." As a participant observer, I worked at five Laurelton strip clubs intermittently over a period of 14 months as a nude entertainer. Because contemporary strip clubs are highly stratified in terms of "classiness," field sites were selected that represented different positions on this social hierarchy: from the highest ranked clubs in the city to more stereotypical "dive" bars. Each venue offered stage performances by the dancers, along with the opportunity to purchase "private" table dances. Table dances were offered to the customers at their seats, on a raised platform or table or while standing on the ground between the men's knees. These private dances involved a more individualized interaction between the dancers and their customers, but although dancers could disrobe completely and place their hands on the customers' shoulders, other forms of bodily contact were prohibited. Dancers were also required to keep at least 1 foot of space between themselves and the customers during dances. Customers were not allowed to touch either the dancers or their own genitals. As the dancers circulated among the customers to sell table dances, the individualized interactions that took place became an important part of the experience. Dancers also sat with customers between their sets and their table dances, and thus conversation became a (public) service in and of itself. There are adult entertainment clubs in the United States that offer lap dancing (or "friction" dancing), a practice that involves varying amounts of contact between the dancer and the patron and can lead to sexual release for the customer, who may even wear a condom underneath his clothes. For the purposes of this research, however, lap dancing was considered a different form of entertainment. (The interviewees also considered it a different form of entertainment; there were a few topless clubs in town that did not serve alcohol and permitted lap dancing, but these served a different customer base.) Though Laurelton was a Southern city, and there were laws and attitudes reflective of the Bible Belt that influenced regulations surrounding the clubs and the meanings of the customers' visits, I have also worked in, observed in, and interviewed customers frequenting clubs in other parts of the U.S. Laurelton's population was also diverse in terms of geographical background, and the interviewees

and customers in the clubs were just as often from other parts of the country as native to the city or region; thus, I do not think that the customer concerns, beliefs, and practices discussed here are essentially Southern.

In addition to conducting participant observation, I collected qualitative interview data. Except for two men who were employees of the strip clubs, all of the men that I interviewed were customers of the strip clubs in which I worked. While working in Laurelton, I spoke with hundreds of male customers about my research and almost always approached those customers as potential interviewees. That is, I was immediately forthcoming about my research purposes whenever possible and provided the customers with my real name (in addition to my stage name) and information about how to contact me for an interview. Many men declined to do formal interviews but commented on my research, telling me their reasons for visiting the clubs and discussing their opinions about adult entertainment, commodification, masculinity, and sexuality. The taped interview sessions with the interviewees were conducted at their workplaces or at restaurants or coffee shops. Interviews usually lasted from 2 to 4 hours, with follow-up interviews several weeks later. Some follow-up interviews were conducted over e-mail or by telephone if the respondents were not native to the city. The interviews were structured with open-ended questions and often became conversational as I responded to the men's questions about dancing as well. The interviewees have been given pseudonyms, and their quotes have been edited for repetitive verbal tics and for length. Short pauses in their answers have not been indicated here.

The interviewees ranged in age from 28 to 57. All identified as heterosexual and as somewhere in the middle socioeconomic class and had at least some college education. Twenty-seven were White Americans, two were African Americans, and one was a White British citizen who frequently traveled to the United States on business. Men who did interviews differed from other customers by, for example, placing more value on higher education and research or having the free time and interest to participate. Further, given that there were far too many customers in the clubs for me to approach every one, my sample is somewhat biased in favor of those men who chose to interact with me. On the other hand, many customers are drawn to the idea of variety and are willing to interact with any dancer they find friendly and attractive. Also, as customers were one of the main topics of conversation among dancers in the dressing rooms, I can also be reasonably certain that my customers and these interviewees were not unique.

As an ethnographic research method, participant observation has a long history in anthropology and other fields, and there is an expansive literature that discusses the benefits and limitations of the method, interpretation of findings, and understanding of the complex interactions between researchers and the communities they study (e.g., Bourgois, 1995; Brown, 1991; Devereux, 1967; Myerhoff,

1978; Prus, 1996; Spradley, 1980). Prus (1996) argued that participant observation affords researchers "with invaluable vantage points for appreciating certain aspects of particular life-worlds" (p. 19). Participant observation offered me the opportunity to interact continually with a variety of male customers in the actual setting that I was studying. Interactions between dancers and their customers are semi-private; the noise of the club and the physical proximity of the participants are such that their conversations would not be accessible to a mere observer. In this respect, working as a dancer and recording my own interactions was essential. Being personally involved in multiple interactions in the clubs with both customers and other employees gave me insight into the context and meaning of customer behaviors. Though recognizing me as a researcher might have led some individuals to change their behavior or monitor their responses to my questions, I was also involved in transactions in Laurelton where I was seen as only a dancer (situations where the customer did not want conversation or did not believe that I was a researcher, or where I did not have time to reveal this information for one reason or another). Further, in addition to my research in Laurelton, I worked off and on for about 6 years as a topless entertainer in an upscale club in the Midwest. This was not an official field site, but my experiences there inform my interpretations and analysis.

My methodology presented several unique opportunities as well as certain limitations. First, the men I interviewed were regular customers of the clubs; that is, they returned to the same clubs several times a week. Thus, I often had the chance to interact with them in multiple ways and on multiple occasions: as both a dancer and a researcher, before and after the interviews. Second, whether men visit strip clubs in groups or alone influences both the conversation and the physical dynamics of the interaction. Because I could never interview an entire group of men at once (and I could never recreate the club setting and interpersonal dynamic elsewhere), I had to observe the interaction of men in groups and interview them singly. Because their personal narrative accounts often differed from the group interactions that I observed, both of these methodologies were valuable. Men in groups, for example, were much more likely to speak in demeaning ways about a dancer's body or to act as if the dancers did not exist as individuals. These same men, however, were respectful in individual interaction. Further, as many group occasions were bachelor parties, men in groups often spoke derogatorily about marriage and relationships. Singly, however, these same men professed love for their wives and a great deal of satisfaction with their outside intimate lives. Though neither of these interactions should be taken as more authentic than the other, the contrast was significant.

Because I was studying educated, middle-class men, I was often interviewing from an inferior position in terms of gender, age, and resources as well as from a socially stigmatized position, and this was something that many of

the interviewees were aware of and commented upon. The fact that I was a woman may have influenced interactions with the male interviewees, and the men might have interacted differently with a male interviewer. They also may have highlighted the cerebral rather than the sexual aspects of their visits because of how they wanted to represent themselves to me. Yet it is important to remember that I was involved in interactions with each of the interviewees before our formal interviews and that I was perceived by them as a dancer as well as a researcher. Many of the men made comments like, "I can tell you this because you're a dancer," and claimed that they could be more honest with someone who understood the interactions in the clubs and for whom they did not need to censor their beliefs. Given that the interviewees also often said they had difficulty discussing personal issues with other men, their conversations with a male interviewer may not have been more truthful or authentic. Further, although it can certainly be argued that the interviewees and other customers were reluctant to tell me the whole truth about their motivations and desires in our conversations—indeed, it would have been impossible for them to do so if one accepts the possibility of unconscious motivation—I can say with confidence that I do know what men were willing to *pay for* each night. Other limitations were related to the specificity of the field sites. The clubs selected were all no-contact strip clubs, and in my experience, the customers differ somewhat in clubs that allow lap dancing and sexual release. Further, the interviews focused on regular customers, for whom the visits were a significant personal practice, rather than on infrequent visitors or bachelor party-goers.

WHY MEN BECOME AND REMAIN CUSTOMERS

So why are some men loyal customers of strip clubs while others find them boring or are contemptuous of their very existence? Significantly, not one man that I interviewed said that he went to the clubs specifically for sexual release, even in the form of masturbation at a later time. This may be because the Laurelton sex industry was large and varied, and men who wanted sexual contact or release had many other venues to choose from in the area. Most men that I spoke with, especially the regulars, realized that sexual activity was available in other venues of the industry and were explicit about their knowledge of this fact. As Joe said, "It's not a place to go find somebody if you're trying to get sex! You might as well go someplace where you can get sex. There's plenty of them around." Similarly, Steven said, "The bottom line is if you want to get laid, I know where and how and when to get laid." Those few men who did enter the Laurelton clubs expecting sexual release usually were from out of the country or were unfamiliar with the various sectors of the sex industry. Regular customers laughed at young, inexperienced, or foreign men who thought that sex was part of the deal being struck between dancers and customers. This does not mean that sexual acts never occurred in the clubs, however, or that

some men did not desire to purchase sexual intimacies from dancers outside of the clubs. This is also not to say that interactions with dancers were not sexual in certain respects; some men did describe table dances as “sexual” experiences and found their fantasizing to be exciting and sometimes quite transgressive. Some men pointed out that the fantasy was sometimes more powerful than a physical encounter: As Jack put it, “Ninety-nine percent of sexuality is in your head . . . a mind fuck can be better than an actual one.”

Instead, by far the most prevalent (and usually the first given) *spoken* motivation of the interviewees for visiting strip clubs was a desire to “relax.” Nearly every man that I spoke with gave this response in some form or another: “I go there to relax and have a good time, get my mind off of work. It does all those things” (Tim); “It’s a business. Where people can just come in and let their hair down, so to speak, and relax” (Herb); “It’s definitely more of a relaxing thing than anything” (William). I heard this off-hand response so many times that I began to focus on why the men thought that going to a strip club was relaxing. The reasons fell into several categories: a strip club provided (a) an escape from both work and home, (b) a relative degree of “safety” as well as “excitement,” (c) an opportunity for both personal and sexual acceptance from women, and (d) the pleasure of a sexualized encounter without the pressure of physical performance. Although these categories overlap and are not exhaustive, they also highlight particular themes that ran through the interviews. In the following sections, these themes are explored as they relate to several prominent discourses of masculinity, as well as to understandings of leisure practice more generally.

Searching for Escape From Work and Home

Initially, men tended to explain that strip clubs were relaxing because they were entertainment complexes and leisure spaces: sites that by definition connote relaxation and escape as opposed to responsibility. Several men pointed to entertainment as their main motive for visiting the clubs. Mick said, for example,

they’re like going to a game arcade . . . you know, it’s public . . . go out and have fun in a big bar kind of thing, as opposed to the lingerie [parlors] and the prostitution. That’s pure sex whereas the other’s like a little bit of sex tease with . . . real entertainment. So there’s a difference there. My sex life’s always been good so it’s the entertainment that’s more exciting to me.

Yet why visit a strip club rather than some other entertainment venue? As strip clubs have come under fire in conservative communities across the country, the claim that strip clubs are a form of entertainment is often one that is used to maintain that leisure is being sold rather than sexual contact. In fact, what is often being sold is a gendered combination of leisure, entertainment, and service. After all, visiting a strip club is significantly different from attending a play or going to the cinema. In the clubs, the male customers will be attended to by women who are young, accepting, usually attractive, and friendly and

whose services (in the form of conversation or dancing) can be purchased for an agreed-upon price. It is also a kind of entertainment that men overwhelmingly pursue alone or with other men, not in mixed sex groups. Further, despite the fact that some dancers’ appearances, physiques, or on-stage sexual displays (public nudity, direct gazes, simulations of sexual thrusting, etc.) may challenge mainstream middle-class definitions of femininity, one will rarely encounter a performer in a conventional strip club that caters to heterosexual male customers who does not have female genitals. This may seem obvious; it is, however, important to customers seeking a place where, as Jay Bildstein (1996), creator of the famous *Scores* strip club in New York City, put it, “a man could be a man” (p. 22).

Going to strip clubs obviously presents the opportunity to look at women, and it is this focus on looking in a *public* atmosphere that differentiates the strip club from many other forms of adult entertainment. Some men initially explained their visits to strip clubs by claiming a desire to see women’s bodies:

I’m drawn by the attraction of sexuality. You know, sex sells. Sex and beautiful women are very appealing. And they’re very appealing to able-bodied men. And what can I say? You know . . . It’s just a fact. (Jim)

Strip clubs attract me because I love the feminine form. I have a weakness for beautiful women. (Brian)

Ross claimed that he was “an appreciator of female beauty in all forms.” “Who wouldn’t like to drink beer and watch naked women running around?” Alex asked. Some of these men believed that the desire to look at women’s bodies is an expression of natural male biology. Whether or not they understood their desire to look at women in this format as a result of biological influences, however, there were always elements other than the visual that were important to customers.

After all, the desire to visit strip clubs is more than just a desire to see women’s bodies, even for the most scopophilic of customers. There are many ways to potentially view naked women: peeping, viewing pornography, reading medical texts, or developing intimate relationships with them, for example. These visits, then, must also be seen as a desire to have a particular kind of experience rooted in the complex web of relationships among home, work, and “away.” Touristic practices, according to Urry (1990), “involve the notion of ‘departure,’ of a limited breaking with established routines and practices of everyday life and allowing one’s senses to engage with a set of stimuli that contrasts with the everyday and the mundane” (p. 2). The sights gazed upon are chosen because they offer “distinctive contrasts” with work and home and because “there is an anticipation, especially through daydreaming and fantasy, of intense pleasures, either on a different scale or involving different senses from those customarily encountered” (Urry, 1990, p. 3).

My interviewees corroborated that these sites/sights are “out of the ordinary,” at least initially. Even when a cus-

tomers pays a woman to sit with him and asks her to remain fully clothed, for example, he is doing so in an atmosphere in which he simultaneously has the privilege of asking her to remove her dress, and the significance of this possibility cannot be underestimated. For regulars, of course, the experience of just looking at undressed women eventually becomes almost ordinary ("almost" ordinary because even for the regulars the fact that women were displaying their bodies meant that this was a very different environment from work and home). Matthew and Steven, for example, spoke about how this display became "boring" and "routine" after time and how they began to desire other types of interactions, such as intriguing conversations and even ongoing friendships with the dancers. Several other regulars also discussed this process. In all of these cases, what kept the regulars returning to the various clubs was the opportunity to interact with women whom they would not generally meet in their everyday lives and to cultivate the relationships that they developed with particular dancers and club employees.

There are other ways that strip clubs offer a distinctive space, whether they are seen as transgressive because of the exhibition of nude bodies or experienced as but one more destination on a man's daily geographic trajectories, "a good place to stop for a beer." The behavioral structures of everyday life are inverted for many customers inside the clubs. Women do the approaching rather than men and thus face the possibility of rejection; women ask to be looked at naked; and usually private performances of sexual desire or sexual display are suddenly made public. Further, although intimate relationships between individuals may be covertly facilitated with money in everyday realms, inside the clubs this facilitation is blatant, immediate, and far less apologetic. Thus, although the significance of the dancers' nudity was often minimized by the men and was described by the regulars as something that eventually became "routine," it was still an essential part of the encounters in the clubs, serving as a visual reminder of these social inversions.

Strip clubs also provide an environment where men, singularly or in groups, can engage in traditionally "masculine" activities and forms of consumption often frowned upon in other spheres, such as drinking, smoking cigars, and even being "rowdy," vulgar, or aggressive. Phillip said that in the strip clubs he "sometimes acted like an asshole because I could," a form of release for him. Herb was married to a "very conservative" woman who did not smoke or drink, pleasures that he could thus not indulge in at home. At the club, however, "You got your cold beer, you got your shooters, you got your good-looking girls, you got your music, you got your smokes. You can smoke a cigar if you want. And when you're ready to go, you leave it all behind and that stays there and you go home." Herb usually came to the club on his way home from work, sometimes with friends from the office and other times alone. Either way, his time in the club was described as "personal" time that was pleasurable because it allowed him to

engage in activities that were inappropriate in the other spheres of his life.

Another reason that the distinctiveness from work and home was experienced as relaxing was related to the kinds of relationships that could be developed with women in the clubs. For these customers, everyday relationships with women were often seen as a source of pressure and expectations. Indeed, many men that I spoke with described relations between women and men in general as being "strained," "confused," or "tense." Beck, for example, thought that there was a "chasm" between contemporary men and women in terms of understanding and expectations, and Kenneth referred to the "war between the sexes." Over half of the men that I interviewed specifically said that they found the clubs relaxing because they provided an escape from the rules of conduct and the social games involved in entering into interactions with other women in an unregulated setting. If "dating is the institutionalization of romantic encounters without the goal of commitment" (Illouz, 1997, p. 289), relationships formed in strip clubs take this institutionalization a step further; there is no longer need for pretenses, specific social niceties, elaborate plans, or mutual exchanges of personal information. Romantic props can be used to set a scene or to individualize an interaction but are not necessary to move the encounter to a sexualized level (involving nudity, erotic conversation, the sharing of fantasies, etc.). At the same time, the encounters were to some extent "predictable." Phillip called his interactions with dancers "relationships of convenience," explaining that he worked so much he could never find the time to meet women outside of the clubs and move through the expected steps of courtship. In the clubs, he knew exactly how to proceed to obtain the kind of encounter that he desired.

Even a simple conversation with a woman in a singles bar or at another location had its own set of rules and expectations that were sometimes experienced by these men as stressful:

I don't go to a strip club to pick up a woman. This is a way to go be with women, talk to women, even see them naked and not have to worry about playing the social game that is involved if you are trying to pick somebody up. (Matthew)

I want to have fun and be relaxed and cut up and laugh and, you know, have a good time. It's a big stress reliever for me. . . . You know, if I just went out to a singles bar, say, then I would know that those girls there are looking to have some kind of relationship beyond what's going to go on just at the bar. But if you go to [the club] you're going there and y'all are entertainers. . . . (Roger)

For me the club situation is almost a way to relax from the tension of a sexual relationship with a woman. You leave when you want. You don't have to stay. You don't have to get to know the person. (Jim)

Although Ross claimed that he did not enjoy the impersonal aspect of the encounters in the clubs himself, he thought that this was important to many men:

What do the men get out of it? Actually, the advantage of being able to walk away. No mess, no fuss, no big deal. You can make as much or as little emotional involvement as you want. You can go in there and shop for a piece of meat, quote unquote, so to speak. I mean, you want to see a girl, you can see a girl run around naked. Have her come over, pay her to do a dance or two or three and walk away and not even ask her her name. Total distancing. Boy . . . I hate to even think of being able to think like that but you know, I see a lot of people that way.

Soon after he made the above statement, however, he said that he enjoyed the "female presence without pressure" himself.

Interactions with women in the workplace were also often thought to be constraining. One interviewee pointed out that in the workplace he felt nervous about giving compliments to women for fear that they would accuse him of sexual harassment. Phillip said that club visits "let frustration out": "With all of this sexual harassment stuff going around these days, men need somewhere to go where they can say and act like they want." Roger said that in the clubs, "everybody knows what the rules are." This implies that there are other spaces where the rules are not so transparent, where men do not understand exactly what is going to get them into trouble. Some men, like Gary, explicitly stated a desire to interact with women who were not "feminist," and who still wanted to interact with men in "more traditional" ways. This sentiment was frequently corroborated by other customers that I interacted with in the clubs who said that men had to continually "be on guard" against offending women. Here I do not wish to defend male inability to respect women's demands for comfortable working environments. Indeed, several of the above comments could be analyzed as part of a backlash against feminism. Rather, I am highlighting the fact that these men experienced their visits to the clubs (and also, in part, justified them) within a framework of confusion and frustration rather than simply one of privilege or domination. The rapid increase in the number of strip clubs across the United States in the mid-1980s, after all, was concurrent with a massive increase of women into the workforce and an upsurge of attention paid to issues of sexual harassment, date rape, and the condemnation of the sex industry. Although this is not a case of simple cause and effect, such developments and the discourses surrounding them shape some of the ways that the men's visits to the clubs were spoken about and understood.

Many of the men that I spoke with discussed their confusion as to what was expected of them as men in relationships with women. Tim said that he thought that men were under a good deal of "strain" because their wives were also working nowadays, bringing in their own income and insisting that they be allowed to take an active part in planning the couple's future. "She's not taking a back seat to decisions about careers and moves, and I think that a lot of men have a hard time dealing with that," he said. Other men complained that they were expected to be strong and assertive, both at home and in their workplaces, but their female partners were at the same time interested

in greater communication and emotional expression. Joe summarized this succinctly:

My wife expects me to be strong emotionally, physically, and I expect spiritually too. . . . But emotionally, she wants me to be strong but she doesn't want me to be overbearing. She wants me to cry and be sensitive, to be the leader and the rock. . . . I'm confused as hell. I wouldn't say that openly in public but I'm definitely confused about what it is to be a man.

Zachary, Eric, Kenneth, and Jason made nearly identical comments. Strip clubs offered a temporary respite from both changing definitions of masculinity and requests from women for either instrumental support or reciprocal emotional communication.

The home, then, was seen as a different sphere with its own set of obligations, commitments, and conflicts. Certainly, the men received a great deal of enjoyment from their families, and almost all were adamant that they did not want to change the structure of their private lives. The home, however, among these interviewees and for many other men that I interacted with, was not necessarily a "haven" from the workplace (Lasch, 1977) where the men could simply relax and be themselves. This is not to say that somehow a more authentic self was being expressed in the strip club than in the workplace or at home. Rather, a man might have multiple selves, or self-representations, that are experienced in different contexts. Certain self-representations, for example, are expressed in work and marriage, and for many men it is these self-representations that are first invoked to identify themselves. These selves, however, were also often premised on responsibilities and commitments. Because the interactions in a strip club (through the gendered performances of both parties) spoke to a male self-representation that was not involved with family or work responsibilities and commitments, the club became an ideal space for some men to access a fantasy of freedom, independence, and idealized masculinity. In addition, confusion about gender roles ("what it is to be a man") may be disturbing to some men because such confusion, change, or deviation may still be taken as evidence of a nonheterosexual orientation (despite the existence of masculinities such as those discussed by Halberstam, 1998, or Levine, 1998). Changing expectations about male economic providership and emotional communication in committed relationships may have contributed to some men's experiences of stress and confusion about their gender identities and roles (Levant & Brooks, 1997). Arguably, these changes and sentiments may be most intense in the middle classes; however, nearly all of the men I interviewed identified as middle class. In a context of contradictory or changing expectations, a man might find it relaxing to be in an environment such as a strip club, where he does not necessarily have any role to perform except for that of a desiring male (though other roles are available). These issues are discussed in more depth in the next section.

The transactions that occur in strip clubs should not

merely be seen as providing an escape *from* responsibilities and commitments. As I have argued elsewhere (Frank, 1998) and as discussed in the next sections, some men were also actively seeking an escape *to* a kind of interaction with women that was not available to them in their everyday lives. It would also be a mistake to assert that such interactions are only compensatory, whether for the men's alienation as producers or because of an inability to develop intimate relationships with other women. Visits to strip clubs can usefully be seen as *masculinizing practices* as well as touristic practices. Connell (2000) defined masculinizing practices as practices that are governed by a gender regime, are embedded in social relations, and work to produce masculinities in particular settings and by certain institutions (p. 155). Masculinizing practices may be readily apparent, as in the case of fraternity initiations or boot camp drills that emphasize toughness and physical hierarchy, or much more subtle, involving comportment, dress, sexuality, sport, work, and other everyday or ritualistic practices. "Masculinities," Connell argued, "do not exist prior to social interaction, but come into existence as people act" (p. 218). People's acts, as they become meaningful, link them to larger-scale structures of the gendered order—structures of power relations, production relations (or divisions of labor), relations of cathexis (or emotional relations), and symbolism (p. 59). To say that a practice is "masculinizing" does not mean that it always or unproblematically constructs a particular stable kind of male subjectivity. Yet, although "men's bodies do not fix patterns of masculinity" (p. 218), their experiences, pleasures, and vulnerabilities are still significant in the constructions and expressions of masculinities. Masculinity, like social class, can thus be seen as a process rather than an achievement or a state of being. Consumption, especially the gendered combination of leisure, entertainment, and service available in strip clubs, can be seen as an important part of that process.

Safety and Excitement

Strip clubs are appealing, in part, because they are both safe and exciting, and when the tension between these boundaries disappears for a customer, he may cease to be a regular. A touristic practice might be understood as part of a larger process that makes "the habitual desirable as well as making escape from the habits of labor seem possible through everyday practices of consumptive pleasure" (Allison, 1996, p. xv). Strip clubs exist because they are profitable, not as a challenge to the existing social order. Despite recognizing this fact, however, customers often talked about their visits in terms of freedoms—from work, from the demands of women, from the restrictions of marriage, from social mores. Yet at the same time as it promises escape or freedom, the image constructed out of tourist gazes also "serves to validate and legitimize routine experience, domestic and working life, and the social structure within which they are located" (Manderson, 1995, p. 307). The temporary nature of the customers' excursions was highly significant to them, for example, and the desire to

return to work and home were unquestioned elements of the men's visits, reflected in the balance between risk and safety that was often being sought. Though some customers expressed the desire for an affair with a dancer or for more "excitement" in their sexual relationships outside of the clubs, few of them seemed prepared to give up their positions in these other realms to pursue such desires. Most of the married customers claimed that they were not interested in leaving their wives, and even the men who described their jobs as "boring," "unfulfilling," or even "intolerable" seemed to have no intention of changing these circumstances. Further, though customers sometimes tried to find out information about a dancer's life or ask a dancer out on a date, for example, the *possibility* of an outside relationship was often more desirable than a real encounter (Frank, 1998).

One customer, for example, spent an entire afternoon telling me his fantasies about visiting a legal brothel in Nevada. He had never used any aspect of the sex industry except for looking at a few pornographic magazines and visiting strip clubs. "I just want to do it once," he said, "and then I want to go home to Mama" (his wife of 30 years). However, he explained, she would never condone it, and it was not worth the risk. His hours in the strip club provided him with a transgressive and exciting experience—indeed, provided him an opportunity to share this even more transgressive fantasy and develop it further through our interaction—yet still allowed him to return home. Because most of the men kept their activities in the clubs a secret from their coworkers, wives, or partners, they were careful to remove traces of these visits before returning to the office or home: checking for lipstick on their cheeks (remnants of a thank you peck on the cheek) or perfume on their clothes, for example. Such illicit remains were clearly inappropriate in these other spheres, even more literally marking the separateness of the clubs as well as the desire to maintain that separateness.

Many of the interviewees discussed their experiences in the language of "variety," "travel," "fun," "escape," and "adventure." One man consistently described himself as a "pioneer," pointing out that he always visited new clubs in Laurelton on their opening night and sought out strip clubs whenever he passed through a new city. Many of the men enjoyed sharing tales of their travels to strip clubs in other cities and states: "I could tell stories about the places I've been to for hours," one man told me. Other men described themselves as "hunters," "adventurers," or "explorers." Nick said that strip clubs provided "adventure" and "excitement" to balance out the more mundane "compartments" of his life such as work and home and that such sexualized ventures "make life worth living." Alex also spoke of his visits to strip clubs in terms of extreme masculinized adventure. When I asked him why he went to strip clubs, he answered,

I like to do bizarre things, you know. . . . Wild, crazy stuff. It's like . . . I guess kind of like rock climbing. You know, you've got guys that'll rappel, and you've got guys that'll go off the mountain

head first . . . you know, there was a lot of extreme desperation and a lot of loneliness and sadness there. It's just wild, I guess. I don't know if it would be a very good analogy to just call it, you know, getting on the back of a Harley Davidson, you know . . . with a shotgun in your hand . . . because there's not any rules, you know?

Though compared to lower tier clubs, upscale clubs were not as often described as sinister spaces, the customers still fantasized about the dangerous, glamorous, or exciting individuals or the vice that might be encountered in them, despite their lack of proof that such things occurred: rich New York gangsters laundering money or dealing cocaine, beautiful women who could lure a man into a private room and out of his monthly income, or famous athletes buying oral sex from ex-*Playboy* bunnies.

Despite descriptions of strip clubs as places with "no rules" and as "outside the law," and although customers experience and express feelings of freedom, adventure, or excitement during their excursions to strip clubs, they are actually passing over ground that has been tightly regulated to produce this particular kind of experience. The city has delineated where such clubs can be located and (for the most part) what types of interactions can be had inside. Bouncers physically monitor and control the men's behavior inside the clubs. Other kinds of behaviors—such as proper etiquette in regard to watching table dances, tipping procedures, and customer-to-customer interactions—are policed by both the dancers and the other customers. The men also police their own behavior; few bachelors really need their hands to be tied behind a chair during a table dance, and even men who claim to be wild with desire or testosterone are usually found sitting docilely in their chairs. Some of the men's talk about safety, then, can be seen as a derivative both of restrictive interventions on the part of the law, the club, and the employees and of their own expectations and boundaries. Men's talk about danger and adventure, on the other hand, is connected to historical discourses about masculinity, travel, and encounters with various categories of Others that must be further explored.

Public spaces have long been occupied by men in the cultural imagination, and although this is changing, the gendered split between public and private realms is important in thinking about how discourses of travel have been masculinized over time. Indeed, the sociological figures of the tourist, the stranger, the adventurer, and the *flâneur* are also implicitly masculine metaphors for particular kinds of subjectivities (Jokinen & Veijola, 1997). The 19th-century flâneur, or stroller, is the "forerunner of the twentieth century tourist," the strolling pedestrian who "poetically confronts the 'dark corners' of a town or city, occupied by the dispossessed and the marginal, and experiences supposedly real authentic life" (Jokinen & Veijola, 1997, p. 26). These spaces in the fast-growing cities were assumed to be dangerous as well as authentic because of their connection with promiscuity, contagion, and contamination, and those who sought them out were said to be "slumming."

Underprivileged and disreputable areas "came to be redefined as tourist sights" (Rojek & Urry, 1997, p. 7). The connection of slumming to privilege means that the figure of the flâneur is also often racialized and classed as well as gendered.

For many customers, especially (but not exclusively) those who preferred the lower tier clubs, the fact that visits to strip clubs often implied a journey into "bad" areas of town was seen as risky and dangerous but also exciting, a form of erotic slumming. Alex said that strip clubs were appealing because they "had that sinister type feel," "you know, the whole place is just kind of like dark and there's an underground there." He said that he thought I was "very brave" for conducting interviews with the customers and admitted that he had fantasized that by meeting me, the "worst case scenario" could be that "she drugs me and steals all my money." Saul preferred visiting "dive" bars that were located in "seedy areas of town." At the same time, however, he also worried about crime and "getting rolled in the parking lot." For Saul this danger (often fantasized, given the high security of most Laurelton clubs) was an important part of his excursions. Even though we met for our initial interview in a coffee shop, for example, he also said that he had been worried about showing up for our meeting. "Who knows?" he said. "I've heard of men being robbed and killed this way." ("At Starbucks?" I was tempted to ask.) He continued, "You never know by looking at somebody . . . I mean, I would never know if you were like, a crack dealer, you know? Or like living day to day? Or somebody that's going to school for your future." Yet despite his spoken fears, he showed up on time and participated enthusiastically in the interviews. Further, I continued to see him around town at the various clubs in which I worked. Significantly, then, whereas strip clubs were relatively safe, they were also dangerous enough to be alluring, a bit "less civilized" than the places these middle class men would ordinarily enter. Race was also important in structuring such fantasies. White customers expressed concerns about visiting the primarily Black clubs in Laurelton, for example, because of the "aggressive" nature of Black dancers, the "rough crowds," and the more "graphic displays" that were supposedly found there (though few of the men who expressed such hesitations had actually visited the clubs in question).

The customers often imagined the dancers as living outside of normative social constraints, enjoying immense "sexual freedoms" and a kind of "wild sexuality." The men's ideas about just what it would take to dance naked seemed to bolster this belief that dancers enjoyed an uninhibited sexuality. Dancers were also described as brave and adventurous. Jim said, "I think, from the dancer's perspective, it's just like an existence on the edge." (Yet, although Jim several times discussed the "dancer's perspective" during our interviews, he admitted that I was the only dancer he had ever even spoken with more than once.) There was constant speculation about the dancers' sex lives and orientations: How many of the dancers are

lesbians? Do they sleep with customers? Are they wild in bed? Despite the dancers' assertions to the contrary, many of the men wanted to believe that they led exciting and varied sex lives and that their choice of workplace simply continued this trend.

Excursions into the sex industry are not only related to the allure of supposedly bad or dangerous areas of town or of the individuals who populate those "dark corners," but also to the adventure of sexual discovery. Sexual experiences (not necessarily heterosexual, of course) coupled with travel away from the safety of home have often been portrayed as a form of masculinized adventure; one only needs to think of Henry Miller, the adventures of Don Juan, or stories about Charles Bukowski or Jack Kerouac. Many of the men with whom I spoke agreed with this idea, even though they were not pursuing sexual contact or release. Steven said that "what a guy gets in a men's club, he doesn't get at home any more." He continued,

My experience was, the first 3 to 6 months of every relationship was just outrageous . . . the quest of meeting and building that trust and building that rapport, to the point where you could bond enough to have sex and whether that happened in one night or it took 3 months, it's all that excitement leading up and then the exploring and getting to know what you like and what I like. . . . So what's happening out there at the men's clubs, as I sit and watch these guys, they're trying to recapture what's not there in their marriage anymore. . . . In the back of their minds there's that hope of hopes that maybe I'm gonna ignite another spark again in my life.

At the same time as they offered adventure in the form of sexual discovery, however, many men also explicitly claimed that strip clubs provided safety in relation to marriages or long-term partnerships. For many of my interviewees, "looking" was the final limit with which they felt comfortable. As legal venues in which no overt sexual acts were supposed to take place, the clubs were seen by many of these men as supportive of heterosexual monogamy (though pushing at its borders). Although visiting a prostitute, a massage parlor, or a "jack shack" is relaxing for *some* men, it caused conflicts for these *particular* men. For example, although some of the interviewees admitted to periodically reading *Playboy* or renting pornographic videos, such practices were not as significant or enjoyable to them as their experiences in strip clubs. None of the interviewees or other customers admitted to regularly using escort services, prostitutes, or massage parlors. Several interviewees discussed occasional experiences with prostitutes, describing them as riddled with much more ambiguity, distaste, or guilt than their visits to strips clubs, and none considered this a practice they were likely to take up again.

The strip club, then, was relaxing because it provided a safe space in which to be both married or committed and sexually aroused (or at least, interacting with women in a sexualized setting). A variety of ideas about the requirement of sexual exclusivity in marriage and intimate relationships exist among individuals in the United States. However, regardless of any individual's personal views or

practices, the predominant representation of commitment is that of lifetime (or increasingly, serial) monogamy, and one must usually position oneself in relation to this representation. Men draw their lines in different places as to how far they can explore their desire for others without being unfaithful to their wives or partners. As Beck said, "there's a certain point you just don't want to go past if you want to maintain a marriage." Jim said that he often felt guilty because of the influence of his wife's Roman Catholic beliefs on his own conscience. At the same time, however, the fact that he had to "sneak" around to visit the clubs gave him a thrill. "Stolen watermelons taste better than the ones you buy," he said. He did not believe that his "thoughts and fantasies about breaking a covenant" were the same thing as doing so, however, and Jim considered himself "faithful" in his 23 year marriage. Similarly, another man commented,

when I'm on the road I know that when I go into a men's club that it's a safe place—from the standpoint of, let's call it, the marriage vows! The temptations are not there for me. They're zero in a men's club . . . I am able to understand that it's entertainment and social interaction. (Steven)

If you go to a strip club it's safe. Okay? I know why you're there. You know why I'm there, for the most part . . . I have reality at home so I'm going back to that. (Herb)

William said that he got "in more trouble in singles bars than in strip clubs." This trouble was not only with his partners, but also with himself.

Of course, as strip clubs vary around the country, customers cannot always be certain of the kinds of interactions in which they will be involved. My experience in the industry has led me to believe that although men do become accustomed to the services that are offered in their own locales (men who frequented lap-dancing clubs in Tampa or San Francisco, for example, often expressed disappointment in the limited interactions available in the Laurelton clubs), there are also many men who set limits on the kinds of commodified sexual contacts that they find acceptable. Though the customers' spoken reasons for discomfort with other kinds of sexualized service varied—from commitments to worries about sexually transmitted diseases, ambivalence about commercialized sexual activities, and legal concerns—the point is that this kind of no-contact strip club offered the customers a "safe" space in which this discomfort was eased.

Personal and Sexual Acceptance

All of the men I interviewed noted that the conversations they had in strip clubs were a significant and pleasurable part of the experience. This claim could be dismissed as the men's attempt to justify a sometimes inflammatory practice or defray masturbatory guilt (as when men say they read *Playboy* "for the articles"). However, I believe that the conversations were indeed significant to a large number of customers beyond being a way to legitimate their visits; after all, I was a participant in thousands of

these transactions. The men's enjoyment may or may not have been influenced by the content of the conversations; for some men, just talking to a beautiful woman about anything was considered to be a luxury. As Beck said, the moment that he had some free time, "the first place I'd be interested in going to would be someplace where I could talk to a beautiful woman." Jim said that he went to the clubs to have "an idealized social interaction with gorgeous women." Dancers offered an opportunity to talk to women with whom these men would not generally be able to interact, for any number of reasons: a lack of attractiveness, age differences, class differences (in either direction), proximity, and the women's willingness to interact outside of the clubs, for example.

Sometimes, the conversation was valued because it was a kind of interaction that the men felt they had difficulty finding elsewhere, especially in male-dominated workplaces. As Joe said,

sometimes I go there just to talk because I feel like I can talk to somebody there without any rules. There's no boundaries. I don't necessarily have to talk about sex, but I can go there and just talk about anything and sometimes that's kind of nice. You know? It's almost like therapy. You're not there to judge me.

Roger said that his male friends were good to talk to about "sports, women, or work" but that he felt more engaged with women in conversation about other things. Brett said that though "men can open up to women," men "don't know what their emotions are" and have difficulty communicating with each other because their egos are "too big" and "too fragile." Stoic masculinity may be idealized in the workplace, and eventually may come to pervade other areas of men's lives, preventing emotional sharing in male friendships. Olicker (1989) suggested a possible nonsexual motive for male infidelity: Because men seldom develop intimate friendships with other men, sexual affairs with women may be the only route to intimacy that they think they have (p. 57). Indeed, strip clubs can be seen as offering similar kinds of releases and connections, without the entanglements, obligations, or repercussions of an affair.

Though the men may have valued the conversation, this is not to say that this conversation was always or necessarily based on mutual disclosure or engagement. As long as they paid for the dancer's time, customers could still maintain a sense of control over the situation by dictating how long the conversation would last, what would be discussed, and whether or not the dancer took off her clothes during the interaction. There was an unspoken understanding that if a dancer was not pleasing, she would not be paid. Granted, any dancer could walk away from a customer or group if she did not want to engage in a given interaction or found it offensive, yet there was usually someone else willing to take her place, if only for the money.

Some men noted that the interactions they purchased in strip clubs were an ego boost because they provided safe opportunities for close interactions with women without the risk of rejection. Sexuality and sexual conquest, after all, can be experienced by men as humiliating and stressful as

well as thrilling. Men with physical disabilities are frequent visitors of such clubs and appreciate the female companionship that is available to them there (e.g., Reed, 1997; Shuttleworth, 2000). Even men who are not impotent, disabled, or unattractive, however, may feel insecure in interactions with women. The desire for an ego boost was almost never the first motivation that men mentioned, but eventually arose in many interviews and conversations:

I guess it is kind of an ego thing too . . . if I haven't been feeling that great about myself and I go in there it doesn't matter if it's real or not but after a while, it gets in your head, in your memory. (Jason)

You're massaging the man's ego . . . that's what it boils down to. It makes the man feel good about himself. It's an ego massage . . . giving him the drinks he wants, the food he wants, the massage he wants, you know, whatever it takes. (Ross)

There's no way you're going to go in [the strip club] and get the cold shoulder, that's for sure. It's just absolutely an ego trip because you go in there, and if you're a warthog, bald, and got a pot belly, some good looking girl's gonna come up and go, "Hey, do you want me to dance for you?" Seducing women is something all men wish they were better at, you know? And this seems like you're doing it, and it's easy! (Roger)

David described his visits to a strip club during a failing marriage as "good for my ego to build me up, to make me feel like I was a man again." Many sex workers joked about really being "therapists" and understood their jobs to be about boosting a man's ego by convincing him that he is desirable, masculine, and successful. Thus customers were at times seeking an otherness within themselves, a sense of escape from those aspects of the self that felt oppressive in other spheres, such as old age, ugliness, insecurity, a lack of social skills, or intimate failures.

Bordo (1999) discussed male anxiety about female attractiveness and argued that "just as the beautiful bodies [in cultural representations] subject us women to (generally) unrealizable models of the kind of female we must *become* in order to be worthy of attention and love, they also subject men and boys to (generally) unrealizable models of the kind of female they must *win*—with equally destructive consequences" (p. 285). Though most heterosexual boys settle for "inferior fixes," women who may be attractive but do not quite succeed in approximating the ideal, many men still "remain haunted by the beauties." Images of female perfection thus "not only shape perception, they also shape sexual desire," she argued, and "straight male sexuality is honed on the images, even fixated on them" (p. 287). Bordo argued that the male perception of female beauty as powerful—able to "invade male consciousness and arouse desire and then to reject that desire, leaving the man humiliated, shamed, frustrated" (p. 290)—may lead some men to seek both solace and excitement in pornography. In strip clubs, the "beauties" are there as a live fantasy, young, available, interested, and accepting.

These customers were keenly aware of the fact that, in addition to male bonding, competition between men also

often centered on the struggle to gain attention from women and many welcomed the opportunity to avoid this competition. In strip clubs, Gary said, "the pressure's off. I have to be accepted." Similarly, David said,

I don't get excited about going to your local bars and you know, just trying to pick up chicks and be the cool suave dude at the bar. I don't like using the lines, and I think the competitive nature of that is just sort of silly to me. The girls at the strip joints might be there not only to talk to; they're there because they're working. They have a reason to be there. There's financial considerations pushing that, and they'll talk to you whether you're Black, you're big, you're fat, you're small, you're 46, or you're 24.

Good and Sherrod (1997) argued that men frequently seek to "maintain grandiose self-images" as part of their gender identity. These authors discuss the heightened importance of these images in middle age:

They want to perceive themselves as powerful and in charge. However, occasionally men glimpse their very mortal (and unacceptably deflated) real selves. During such times, men may attempt to restore their self-image through redoubling their efforts to gain power over others. These efforts may include familiar coping strategies that already had deleterious aspects to them such as displays of power over others at work or workaholicism, purchasing a sports car (displays of financial/physical power), and having affairs or dating younger women (displays of sexual potency). (p. 194)

Good and Sherrod also pointed out that during midlife, men may sometimes reengage in the kind of nonrelational sex, or sex that does not necessarily require the context of an intimate relationship to be desirable, that they had in their adolescent years in order to reclaim a fading sense of strength and influence (p. 198). Although these authors' reliance on the notion of the "real" self is potentially problematic, the idea that such behaviors take on intensified importance in middle age is potentially illuminating in regard to strip clubs. Some men may not have experienced a sense of strength and influence in their everyday lives even during their adolescent years, yet may think that they should have. For men who are willing and able to pay for it, the discovery of the type of female attention available in a contemporary strip club can be a monumental experience.

Customers also sometimes wanted to be accepted as objects of desire. I was constantly asked questions about how it felt to be a dancer by the customers, both on the job and during the interviews, for instance, and they were fascinated with the details of performing. Often the men said things like "It must be nice to have everybody want you"; "How does it feel to be perfect?"; "Is it fun to be the one up on the pedestal?"; or "I'd trade places with you if I could." The cross-identificatory wishes being expressed in such statements are rooted in complex fantasies of power, exposure, degradation, and idealization (see Frank, 2002).

Some men were searching for acceptance of their sexual desires. In addition to the customers who enjoyed the everyday conversation about work, current events, their families, or any number of other topics, I also interacted with a number of men who seemed thrilled by the thought

of talking about sex with a woman. Because such conversations are often inappropriate between strangers in the everyday world (and even sometimes between lovers), the fact that we could engage in such talk with impunity was relaxing and enjoyable to some customers. Customers also told dancers things that they claimed they had never told their wives or lovers, usually specific fantasies or experiences that they thought the other women in their lives would not understand. At times, the desires the customers expressed were simply to look at female anatomy without shame or apology, and many told stories about not being allowed to look at their wives' or partners' bodies. Paul, Gary, and Saul all mentioned that they had been made to feel like "perverts" numerous times because of their "voyeuristic" desires to look at women, both at home and on the streets.

Other men wanted to express their desires verbally but not necessarily to act on them. One regular customer was an older married man who considered himself and his wife to be "very Catholic." He enjoyed telling me his sexual fantasies, which he thought that he could not share with his wife. His fantasies were fairly standard pornographic fare that I personally did not find upsetting or surprising. Still, he experienced these fantasies as deviant and was relieved to find a nonjudgmental ear. Other times, customers had fantasies they wanted to share that had caused extreme reactions from the other women in their lives. Another customer, for example, begged me to anally penetrate him with my high-heeled shoes. When I refused, he became distraught and told me his wife had left him because she thought that he was a "pervert" because this was what he wanted. Another married man came to the same club several nights in a row, each night offering more money in an attempt to find someone who would have sex with him after work while wearing a strap-on dildo. He told me that he was certain his wife would leave him if he asked her to do so, yet he still found this fantasy compelling. Although the dancers may not have accepted his actual offer, and to my knowledge none did, the expression of his fantasy did not lead to rejection within the confines of the club, and he was provided with information about anal sex in addition to a forum for aural fantasizing.

Many of the customers were also concerned with seeking women's approval and even enjoyment of the sexual practices that they found appealing. Certainly, in some cases the idea that dancers would be more accepting of their sexual fantasies was based on the men's ideas about the ethical inadequacies of women who would dance nude. Joe, for example, said that dancers were less likely to pass judgment than other women because of their stigmatized position: "They're not gonna tell you what's right or wrong because here they are, *dancers!*" Gary made several references to dancers as "sluts," the kind of girls that he could "get" when other women rejected him. Other times, however, men who were involved in alternative lifestyles or who had risqué fantasies seemed to genuinely appreciate women who could talk openly about sex and sexual

desire. Swingers sometimes visited the clubs, with or without their partners, as did other individuals whose ideas about monogamy and relationships differed from the norm, and they seemed to enjoy discussing their experiences and desires with the dancers as well.

Performing Desire and the Fantasy of the "Perfect Penis"

It is essential to recognize that the dancers are not the only performers in these venues; the customers, sometimes consciously and sometimes not, are also part of the scene, intricately involved in performances of identity, sexuality, and desire that generate meaning and pleasure out of their interactions. Though the regulars, in my experience, rarely took advantage of the on-stage performance opportunities that were available for men in the clubs, the fact that they engaged in sexualized encounters with the dancers in a public place, and in the presence of a live audience, was significant to the meanings of the experiences. In such encounters heterosexuality could be comfortably secured, at least temporarily or in fantasy, through a public performance of desire for a woman. Men could observe themselves desiring, both literally, in the mirrored walls of the clubs, and figuratively, in the sense of self-reflection and fantasy. Further, the experience or performance of sexual desire could in turn serve as an affirmation of gender identity both to oneself and to others (although sexual desire can feel different from or independent of gender, it can also serve to reinforce ideas of oneself as masculine or feminine).

This is not to say that all of the participants in the exchanges that occur in heterosexual strip clubs are "straight," for they definitely are not. Many bisexual and lesbian women work as dancers or visit clubs as customers, and many heterosexual women enjoy looking at other women's bodies and visit the clubs as customers if they are allowed. Not all of the male customers are straight either, and some men enjoy watching other men in the clubs. At times, customers visited the clubs seeking gratification of certain fetishes such as the desire to interact with a dominant woman or to experience public humiliation or pain. On the other hand, although strip shows may construct heterosexual desire as problematic in some ways through their geographies and choreographies—as dirty, illegitimate, or artificial, for example (see Liepe-Levinson, 2002)—and although the desires of the customers were not always straightforward or stereotypical, the transactions did not overtly question the connection of heterosexuality to normative patterns of masculinity.

The customers' interactions with the dancers provided not just proof of heterosexual identity, but also a fantasy of sexual potency. A strip club offers a certain protection from vulnerability that other arenas, including the bedroom at home, may not. Significantly, the men remain clothed during the interactions and are never physically exposed or expected to perform (and, indeed, are prohibited from doing so). Ejaculation, after all, is not really necessary in order to enhance a man's feelings of masculinity,

especially in a commodified encounter. As Allison (1993) wrote of male patrons of hostess clubs in Japan, when a man desires to feel good about himself as a man, "it is less sex as an act of penetration and release than a talk about sex" (p. 12) that is effective in these settings: specifically, talk about sex with a woman who indulges him and does not counter his assertions. In a strip club, a customer can fantasize about a sexual encounter with a woman, yet is not responsible for physically performing or providing pleasure to her. He is also prohibited from revealing his naked body to the dancers, which can provide another form of refuge from judgment. Some of the talk about the relaxing aspects of strip clubs must be understood in this context, as interconnected with the vulnerabilities of the body as well as with the pleasures.

The clubs provided some customers with a space in which a disjunction between desire and bodily performance could be negotiated. Some interviewees and other customers described difficulties with sexual performance in their relationships, for example. During our second interview, Ross explained that his marriage had become "asexual" in recent years because of his inability to get erections due to a disastrous surgical error. Yet he had slept with a number of women before marriage and said, "My work and my sexual identity are the lynchpins of who I am." He linked this to the fact that no matter what he did as a youth, his physically and emotionally abusive father repeatedly called him a "faggot" and told him that he would amount to nothing. In strip clubs, Ross could interact with the dancers, express his desire for them verbally, and be seen doing so by others. In this way, visits to the clubs allowed him to access the body that he remembered from his youth, a fantasy body that could respond and perform when bidden to, that did not need to be explained in a sexual encounter, along with a chance to express his "real" identity (or, to put it differently, a self-representation that was already experienced as real or original).

Of course, I do not want to reify stereotypes about the sexual inadequacies of men who might use the sex industry. There are, after all, many men who visit strip clubs whose bodies are agreeable to them and for whom sexual functioning is not an issue. Rather, my argument is that part of what strip clubs provide for their customers is the fantasy of the "perfect penis" (Tiefer, 1995) without the need to prove it either visually or through sexual performance. The fantasy of the perfect penis is, of course, linked to hegemonic ideologies of an aggressive or uncontrollable male sexuality, with the penis as a "power tool" (Bordo, 1999). Yet, it has some of its roots in feelings of vulnerability as well. After all, as Tiefer (1995) argued, "sexual competence is part—some would say the central part—of contemporary masculinity" (p. 142), despite the variety of ways masculinity is understood and expressed by individual men. Although increasingly there are ways to be masculine without relying on physical validation, she argued, the increasing importance of sexuality in contemporary relationships has meant that "there seems to be no

apparent reduction in the male sexual focus on physical performance" (p. 152).

Youthfulness was an issue that emerged frequently in conversations and interactions that I had in the clubs, as the majority of the regular customers were men middle-aged or older. The clubs, in some ways, provide an interesting and complicated return to a site of adolescent fantasy. A DJ I interviewed spoke about how he tried to match the music he played to the average age of the crowd to facilitate this fantasy of youthfulness:

When I play Lynyrd Skynyrd's "Sweet Home Alabama," they're remembering driving around in the back roads, smoking dope and having fun drinking whisky. "This is the first time I drank Jack Daniels! Oh my god, we went to a hog race afterward! I must have thrown up for two hours! Oh god, it was so much fun!" . . . Well, the man's changed, but in his mind's eye he can go back.

Another DJ that I interviewed stated that if the music was right, "you become that girl he wanted in high school and didn't get, or that one he let get away."

Youthfulness was something that the men desired for themselves and not simply in the bodies that they chose to view in the clubs, though the youthfulness of the dancers helped facilitate this fantasy. "These places keep me young," a customer told me during a table dance, "because you're so young." For some customers, effortless sexual response was something that was associated with youth. Some of the older men, for example, expressed difficulties becoming aroused by their wives or long-term partners, yet claimed that they wanted to be able to be excited by them. As Joe said,

when a man is 20 years old . . . he's a walking erection. Any port in a storm. I think as you get older, though, you need to be excited a little bit more. It takes a little bit more stimulation. And the variety is what actually does that. At least, from my perspective. The same thing over and over, you kind of get desensitized to it . . . I love my wife's body. I get turned on by my wife. . . . But I find that the older I get, I can be turned on but still not have an erection. . . . I can certainly try and give her pleasure. That turns me on but I don't necessarily have to have an orgasm from it. . . . I think I've finally got my wife to understand that . . . but yet there's this stigma that women think that if a man doesn't have an orgasm he didn't have a good time.

Other customers also discussed the stigma associated with an inability to maintain an erection.

Customers discussed the difficulties that their wives and partners had with "losing beauty and youth" and with "not wanting to be reminded that it was still out there" by their husbands' visits to strip clubs. They also cautiously discussed the importance of their wives' losses of youth and beauty to themselves, sometimes explicitly comparing the bodies of the dancers to those of their wives. This reference to women's bodies was not simply an exercise in male privilege or misogyny, however. Although these men's visits could possibly have contributed to their wives' or partners' insecurities about aging or sexual attractiveness (and several interviewees explicitly stated that they believed there were connections), and although the ability to purchase the attentions of others to make one-

self feel younger and more desirable is a privileged position (and one their wives might not be able to occupy, for a variety of reasons), the visits were also intertwined with the men's own insecurities about losing a youthful body, an attractive body, a body that would and could perform sexually when the opportunity or need arose, especially in the context of an ongoing intimate relationship. The relationship between the dancers' bodies, the men's partners' bodies, and their own bodies and sexual performances was thus complex and multifaceted.

Not every regular claimed that interactions in the clubs improved his sexual relationship at home or were related to his ideas about sexual performance, however. Some men claimed to compartmentalize their fantasy encounters in the clubs and their outside intimacies. As Steven said, "It's not like I'm making love to my wife and fantasizing about a dancer or something." Herb, Kenneth, Brett, Roger, and Tim spoke similarly, as did many other customers with whom I spoke informally in the clubs. In addition to arguing that their encounters in the clubs did not affect their sexual relationships, other men also argued that their commodified interactions did not affect their *bodies*. In fact, the number of times that I heard men say, "This doesn't affect me physically," exceeded the number of times that the interviewees explicitly claimed a physical response or even a desire for a response. "I don't get hard-ons while I'm watching dancers or anything," Carl said when I asked him about how he responded to table dances, for example. Men's anxieties about out-of-control bodily responses or a lack of responses influenced their interpretations of their sexualized encounters in strip clubs and elsewhere.

ANXIETIES ABOUT BEING A STRIP CLUB CUSTOMER

Although the men expressed numerous motivations for their visits to strip clubs, they also experienced a degree of ambivalence about these motivations and about their practices, some of which have been alluded to above. Many men were ambivalent toward sexual arousal in the clubs; whereas *performances* of desire were encouraged in some situations, especially by male friends, actual evidence of desire (an erection, a dependence on a particular dancer, or an inability to control one's spending) was often seen as humiliating. There are many reasons for this: the cultural shame that often arises for individuals around issues of sex, especially around materials and experiences associated with masturbation (even if masturbation does not actually take place); the social stigma that surrounds the sex industry and its users; moral discomfort, depending on one's religious background and one's other relationships with women; and political discomfort, given the prominence of certain strands of feminism and ideas about "political correctness" in popular discourse, as well as one's own beliefs about how relationships should be conducted. Some men find their desire for commercialized sexual experiences or materials to be an unpleasant compulsion (Brooks, 1995; Stock, 1997). Conflicting concep-

tions of masculinity also interact with ideas of clienthood to create anxiety for some male customers. There are times, for example, when availing oneself of commodified sexual services is seen as a deficit in one's masculinity. That is, having to "pay for it" is demeaning if other men can (presumably) get the same female attention for free. There is still a forceful stereotype that "sex workers provide sexual relief to society's 'wretched': the old, the unattractive, the unpartnered" instead of to men in a variety of positions and with varying privileges (Queen, 1997, p. 130). Some of the interviewees went out of their way to point out to me that their sex life was enjoyable, possibly anticipating and trying to deflect this stigma.

Certainly, there are some men who, on some occasions, talk openly and with pride about their visits to strip clubs, perhaps even in a way calculated to make others around them (especially women) uncomfortable. Some visits, such as bachelor parties, are seen as socially legitimate and even as normal male behavior. On the other hand, men who visit too often or who talk about using any sector of the sex industry too openly risk censure, rejection, and ostracism from friends, families, employers, and lovers, especially if they visit alone. Most of the men discussed the need for their visits to be "private entertainment," and Alex termed his desire not to be seen at the clubs when he visited alone a "healthy paranoia." Further, although talk about women's bodies is often a means of bonding with other men and may reflect misogynistic attitudes, such behavior may be laden with conflicting personal emotional meaning. Many men claimed to feel guilty, for example, because they knew their wives or girlfriends would disapprove of their visits to strip clubs, even at the same time as they enjoyed the male camaraderie and the sexualized nature of the encounters. Others felt guilty spending "family money" on private entertainment and tried to find ways to justify their visits to themselves.

Finally, visits to strip clubs were usually premised on the ability to spend significant amounts of money on tips, private dances, conversations with dancers, drinks, and cover charges. Although some men might visit a club and spend only a few dollars on tips, men who desired longer or more personal interactions were expected to pay (sometimes highly) for a dancer's time. Visits to strip clubs, then, could serve both to enhance a man's feelings of financial power and status—and thus, for some men, feelings of masculinity—and to function as reminders of his need for continued or future monetary success. Increasing commodification and concerns about authenticity are progressively more in conflict in consumer cultures more generally as well, intensifying the potential for uneasiness with such transactions. Becoming and remaining a customer, then, is a complicated process that is rife with ambivalence. There are indeed privileges associated with being able to avail oneself of the services offered in strip clubs, but recognizing the subjective feelings of vulnerability that infuse such practices with meaning is essential in trying to assess their place in social life more generally.

CONCLUSION

Men have many different motivations for visiting strip clubs that, although related to male social power, complicate this connection as well. Men's consumption practices in these kinds of strip clubs are premised on a range of possible desires: a desire to publicly display a particular masculine self free of obligations and commitments, a touristic desire for adventure through mingling with Others who are seen as "wild" or visiting spaces believed to be "dangerous," a desire to feel desirable (at least in fantasy), or a desire to have a sexualized interaction with a woman that does not involve the vulnerability of actual sexual activity. As part of each customer's repertoire of masculinizing practices, visits to strip clubs offered the men opportunities to think of their bodies not as "prison houses" (Ross, 1989) or working machines, but as sources of desire, pleasure, and freedom. The visits also offered the men an opportunity to experience their *selves* in pleasurable ways: as young, virile, attractive, independent, sometimes as powerful, and other times as vulnerable.

Some of the services and consolations that a man may seek in strip clubs are necessary *because* of his privileged position. When stoic masculinity is idealized in the workplace, for example, it may come to pervade other areas of men's lives and prevent emotional sharing in male friendships. When a man needs someone to turn to for emotional support, it may often be a woman. Many dancers spend time with regulars discussing the men's wives and families and the difficulties and joys related to them. As mentioned earlier, simply talking to a beautiful woman who appears to be genuinely interested can boost a man's ego and restore his security in his masculinity. Such a systematic appropriation of women's emotional labor by men can indirectly support male dominance at a societal level (Bartky, 1990).

Customers tended to make sense of their visits by drawing on particular masculine traditions and on dominant cultural ideologies of sex and gender. Though they may visit spaces that pose challenges to dominant ideas—places that display public nudity, for example, or places in which female sexuality can be expressed almost aggressively—they also move through these spaces with unquestionable privilege. Further, male practices of consumption in strip clubs, or in the sex industry more generally, can also serve to maintain imbalanced power dynamics in personal relationships with women, especially when visits are used to shame or anger wives or partners. Negative gender, racial, and class stereotypes may underlie some of the erotic charge of the men's exchanges. Customers are seldom asked to challenge their views; even if a dancer shuns a customer because of his sexist or racist opinions, for example, there will almost always be another woman who will tolerate his views simply for the financial gain. If men do end up questioning their sexuality or their desires, they may look for other forms of entertainment or develop other sexual practices. This is not to say that commodified sexual exchanges are inherently about the preservation and

reproduction of male power, however. Rather, it is to point out that structural inequalities between men and women, as well as cultural beliefs and expectations and personal understandings of gender, influence the conditions under which such transactions are carried out.

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