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His Reputation Precedes Him: Examining the Construction and Management of the Pimp in Strip Clubs

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ABSTRACT

Narratives of dancers and managerial individuals working in strip clubs in Ontario, Canada, reveal that even within the sex industry the dominant image of the pimp—as an exploitative, racialized, underclass villain— informs the perception of certain men, characteristics, and relationships. To make sense of this phenomenon, this article applies Baudrillard's concept of simulacrum to examine the circulation of the pimp trope amongst strip club workers. In so doing it argues the pimp stereotype deviantizes dancers' relationships, and black men, as the same time as its narrow focus diverts attention away from various personal and professional challenges dancers may face.

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Introduction

From sadistic villain of film and newsmedia, to hip hop persona, to Halloween costume, to emblem of excess (e.g., flashy cars, gold chains), the pimp is evoked across a wide array of cultural sites. These diverse images recall Baudrillard's (1994) procession of simulacra insofar as they are hallmarks of spectacularity—whether referencing extreme exploitation or sartorial bombast—characterizations that supersede the characteristics of that which they describe. The most heinous of these models, the pimp as abuser/exploiter of women, appears to shape the design and interpretation of studies depicting the sex industry as a site of violence (e.g., Holsopple 1998; Raphael and Myers-Powell 2010) to such an extent that critical scholars who contend that sex work and its management are work struggle to find evidence of its totalizing domination (see Bruckert and Law 2013; Bruckert and Parent 2018). There is also disagreement amongst people who work in the sex industry as to whether this figure is real or illusory, and what pimps really do, suggesting the sex industry is another site through which dominant tropes circulate.

This article sheds light on the circulation of the pimp trope amongst strip club workers using interview data from a study of third parties—people who organize, supervise, facilitate, or coordinate the labour of sex workers—in the erotic dance sector in Ontario, Canada. It examines managerial roles and relationships and perceptions thereof, drawing on Baudrillard (1994) to argue that the image of the pimp is not a reflection of any reality but a simulacrum. To this end, this article understands and frames *pimp* as a label that powerfully reiterates intersecting racial, class, and gender stereotypes, rather than as an empirical category. This is not to deny the existence of exploitative relationships in the sex industry, but to ask the reader to engage critically with the usage of the term pimp. In so doing, this article does not seek to “restore the truth beneath the simulacrum”—indeed Baudrillard insists this is “always a false problem” (Baudrillard 1994: 27). Rather, it examines the pimp as a gendered, classed, and racialized construct that deviantizes work and relationships in the sex industry, obscuring various personal and professional challenges dancers may face.

Literature review

While much of the existing literature on pimping links it to, or focuses on, street-based sex work (see Armstrong 1983; Marcus et al. 2014; May, Harocopos, and Hough 2000; Norton-Hawk 2004; Raphael and Myers-Powell 2010; Shannon et al. 2008; Weinkauff 2010), some studies suggest connections between strip clubs, prostitution, underage women, and gangs or organized crime (see Claude, LaViolette, and Poulin 2009; Dorais 2009; Dorais and Corriveau 2009; Poulin 2007). However, networks like the prostitution ring operated by managers (among other third parties) in Eastern Canadian strip clubs, as described by Morselli and Savoie-Gargiso (2014), are virtually absent from the erotic dance literature, which suggests they are not the norm in this sector. Exceptionally, Holsopple (1998: 12) claims dancers are “constantly propositioned” by pimps at work; similarly, some dancers in a Toronto study mentioned the presence of pimps in strip clubs, while others worried about third parties (such as bouncers) having ties to organized crime (MLS 2012). Although there is no way of verifying the accuracy of these concerns, self-identified pimps in a US study by Dank et al. (2014) confirmed that they recruited women at strip clubs. Moreover, there is disagreement amongst scholars about the presence of pimps altogether: those who regard prostitution as violence argue they are an integral part of the industry (see Barry 1995; Hughes 2009; Poulin 2007; Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002)—and in turn that pimping, prostitution, and trafficking are one and the same (Farley 2004)—while those who understand sex work as labour suggest that pimps are disappearing (Gillies 2013; Miller 1995), or are not or were never numerous (Canada 2006; Marcus et al. 2014; May, Harocopos, and Hough 2000). Of course as Shaver (2005) points out, criminalization and stigma make it impossible to determine precise numbers.

Although a significant portion of the above-noted studies pivot on a definition of pimping as violence/exploitation (see Barry 1995; Claude, LaViolette, and Poulin 2009; Dorais 2009; Høigård and Finstad 1992; Holsopple 1998; Hughes 2009; Poulin 2007; Williamson and Cluse-Tolar 2002), critical studies challenge stigmatic, gendered assumptions that third parties exert absolute control over sex workers. Bruckert and Law (2013) found that third parties in the incall/outcall sector, who share some qualities with the stereotypical pimp insofar as they facilitate business transactions and/or offer protection, also offer a range of services to sex workers, with whom their relationships are not necessarily exploitative. Weinkauff (2010) describes (albeit patriarchal) family-like arrangements, while Marcus et al. (2014) found that sex workers “who self-identified as having a pimp typically described relationships that were more mutual and easier to leave than the stereotypes suggest” (242), and further, that some pimps exaggerate the extent of their control over sex workers to bolster their alpha male reputation. Academics also point out that women may be reluctant to admit they have a pimp or do not feel this term characterizes their relationship (Høigård and Finstad 1992; Smith and Christou 2009; Weinkauff 2010), while Bradley-Engen and Hobbs (2010) categorically distinguish erotic dancers’ romantic partners from pimps. Taken together these studies suggest that the pimp stereotype does not accurately describe sex workers’ seemingly diverse relationships, and further, may be alienating to all parties involved (see also Hannem and Bruckert 2017).

Theoretical framework

As Quinn (2000: 118) explains, in cultural domains ranging from gangsta rap to ethnographic scholarship, characterizations of the pimp emanate from trickster figures in nineteenth century African-American folklore, which can be traced further back to African folkloric characters. Notably, these characters use their wit and verbal skill, rather than physical force, to master their opponents and express sexual dominance, in “racial fable[s] in which the dominant white character is outdone by the superior guile of the black protagonist” (Quinn 2000: 119). The subversive nature of these narratives, Quinn (2000) continues, evolved through gangsta rap into a constellation of “stylized signs of group identity” embraced by young, working class, black men as spectacular resistance to dominant race/power relations (123–124). This subversion is, however, read over in the use of pimp

as a verb or adjective indicating extravagance and, simultaneously, tackiness (e.g., ‘pimped’ sneakers or cars), instead becoming emblematic of class transgression. It is further obscured in the pimp noun and stereotype proliferated across cultural spheres (e.g., television and film, Halloween costumes, law enforcement practices) as a trope through which the dominant culture constructs black men as dangerous, underclass, and misogynist (Benson 2012)—“the image of the brute” (Hooks 2004: x). Comprised of mutually reinforcing racial, classed, and gendered elements this construct can be understood as intersectional and produced by and reproducing interlocking systems of oppression (Hill Collins 1991, 2015), notably capitalist labour relations, and gender and racial hierarchies.

As a gendered, racial, and classed trope that was never, in Baudrillard’s (1994) words, “a reflection of a profound reality” (6), the pimp can be characterized as a simulacrum—a model without any relation to any reality. Baudrillard (1994) argues the danger of simulation is that in contrast to representation (a reflection of the world) or pretending (which, as in children’s games, is patently false), simulation threatens and obscures the difference between the real and the imaginary (3, 6). This lens allows us to see the pimp as a model of black masculinity masquerading as truth and accepted through its circulation as such. Foucault (1980) similarly problematizes the notion of truth, arguing it is constituted through power relations that manifest and are sustained through the dominance of certain discourses circulated in and through political and economic apparatuses (in this instance, especially the media [Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit 2006] and the criminal justice system [Bruckert and Hannem 2013a]) as “truths.” Recalling Foucault’s (1980) assertion that discourses are not merely groups of signs or statements, but vehicles through which knowledge is produced and meaning is ascribed to social practices and personal conduct, the model of the pimp can be seen as part of a broader discourse framing the sex industry as a site of violence and exploitation, as the necessary opposite of the abused and exploited (always female, and often under-aged) “prostituted woman” (e.g., Holsopple 1998; Hughes 1999).

Such truths, or simulacra, also circulate amongst social actors in their everyday activities and domains, including the workplace. In the sex industry, as with other occupations perceived as distasteful or “dirty,” these norms also compete with beliefs held by workers—even about their own occupations (Hudson and Okhuysen 2009). In this context, workers must contend with stigma, as they attempt to negotiate the perception of an occupational attribute (e.g., offering, or profiting from the provision of, sexual services) as deeply discrediting (Goffman 1963) even as it is central to the recognition and success of their performance (Goffman 1959). This contention turns our attention to the ways in which dancers and third parties reproduce and resist—through their readings of people in the club including each other—the pimp trope.

Methodology

As is arguably imperative to any nuanced exploration of managerial practices in the sex industry, which would otherwise be simplistically (and erroneously) equated to violence, this article begins from an understanding of erotic dance (and sex work) as work. It draws from individual, semi-structured interviews with 15 third parties—operationalized in the research as people who organize, supervise, facilitate, or coordinate the labour of (adult) sex workers—as well as focus groups with 8 dancers and semi-structured individual interviews with 7 dancers. In interviews conducted between 2011 and 2014, participants were asked about their experience working in (or about) strip clubs featuring female erotic performers in Toronto and Ottawa, Ontario between the years 2000 and 2014. This data was collected as part of the author’s doctoral dissertation on the organization of labour in the erotic dance sector (see Law 2016), as well as a larger research project on management in the sex industry in Eastern Canada (see Bruckert and Law 2013); both projects were funded by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Amidst conjecture that pimps have disappeared or moved to indoor locations, community advisors (including sex worker activists and advocacy organization representatives) and informal key informants of the research wanted to know more about the role played, if any, by these figures in strip clubs. Upon

examining the data I realized I did not have the empirical evidence to answer this question. Indeed, of the 30 participants, none reported direct experience working for or as a pimp. However, participants offered no shortage of theories, apprehensions, and stories about pimps. This article, then, draws on participants' narratives to contrast third parties affiliated to (i.e., employed by) strip clubs to those operating in their peripheries, in order to tease out and reflect on the discourses constructing the pimp, and the organizational and individual practices to manage his (presumed) presence, in strip clubs. To facilitate participants' identification for the reader while also protecting their anonymity, third parties' self-identified job description follows their names in this article, while dancers are simply labelled as such; the cities where participants worked (i.e., Ottawa and Toronto) are not specified; and their names are pseudonyms that (for the most part) participants chose themselves.

Findings

Affiliation and legitimacy

Mirroring the (albeit tenuous) distinction in popular culture between strip club managers and pimps, this research identified two varieties of third parties: those who are affiliated with, in other words employees of, the strip club—managers, disc jockeys (DJs), bouncers, and bartenders—and those who operate in its peripheries, who are instrumentally, informally or not at all affiliated with the club. Among the latter group, participants named agents, drivers, and pimps. Bruckert and Law (2013) describe agents as individuals who work alongside sex workers (i.e., associates) to organize or facilitate transactions with clients in the incall/outcall sector. These can be contrasted to drivers, contractors who operate on a fee-for-service basis as unlicensed taxis and sometimes also security providers, identified by participants in this study and in other research (Bruckert 2002; Bruckert and Law 2013). In the erotic dance sector, agent-type arrangements comprise individuals or services facilitating relationships between dancers and clubs, for example negotiating contracts in exchange for a percent of dancers' earnings (Althorp 2013). Based on anecdotes offered by participants, their services largely comprise “find[ing] you good clubs or get[ing] you into a club you're trying to get into” (Bobby, dancer), however agents are no longer commonplace in Ontario; in comparison agents in the United States appear to provide more expansive services, including training, booking, lodging and transportation (Price-Glynn 2010).

However, two participants in this study offered services including driving and security. The first was Marcus, a white man who “sometimes arranged stag parties” as an informal offshoot of his job as a strip club bouncer. Since Marcus only offered this service when it was requested (either by customers or dancers at the club), perhaps the best way to describe him is as an ad-hoc erotic dance agent. Marcus would pay himself and the other security personnel 50 dollars per hour each, charged directly to the client, leaving the dancers to establish their own hourly rate—“They'd usually get 300 an hour”—which he would collect in advance. In his security capacity Marcus enforced the following rules: “if [the dancers] want to touch you, they will touch you, but you do not initiate it. [...] If anyone touches the girls inappropriately, you get one warning, you do it again, the show's over and you lose your money.” That said he accommodated dancers who wanted to provide sexual services, which he insisted take place out of view of other guests, and for which he employed particular security measures: he inspected the room for cameras and made sure there was only one client, and would stand guard at the door. For these private parties, Marcus drove the dancers to the venue (usually a private home).

The only participant in the research not affiliated with a strip club, Eric, identified himself as a driver and security provider. Although Eric drove dancers to, and picked them up from, work, he also provided supplementary services, including emotional support. He explained how this role developed through a relationship with one particular dancer:

I was actually minding my own business and a young lady approached me. [...] And then it just ensued from there that anytime she wanted to go to work, that I would drive her, and I would look out for her. And I would

sit in the club and I would watch certain things; she'd always ask me to like, not let certain guys go talk to her, or to show certain guys that I am there so that they wouldn't.

As part of his protection work in the club, Eric would “make sure that I'm very, very good with the bouncers. They understand that, ‘See those girls over there? They are mine. [...] Take care of them, watch out for my girls bro.’” In some ways, Eric's narrative evokes aspects of the pimp imagined in dominant perceptions of the sex industry: he used possessive language and talked about having to “invest in your commodity, so her gear; her clothes, her heels, her nails, her hair, her skin.” At the same time however, he emphasized the importance of:

Basically trying to treat her right is the key of all because basically once you put too much stress on the woman it shows, it shows in her appearance, it shows in her desire to get up and walk to work. I don't think dudes understand that, more than they need to beat the shit out of her [...] No, your money, treat your money like you love your money, so I'm gonna love my money, I'm going to love my girl.

Eric had an informal financial arrangement with this dancer: “She'd make like, five, six bills [\$500-\$600] certain nights, and I wouldn't ask her for anything but at the end of the night she'd give me two bills.” This is a much larger portion of dancers' pay than that demanded by the club and its third parties (via the house fee and tips), or drivers (whose fares dancers insisted were similar to or cheaper than taxis), but not outcall agencies, which take 30 to 50 percent of sex workers' hourly rates (Bruckert and Law 2013). Eric eventually came to be responsible for managing the dancer's money: “she kind of noticed that the money she gave me, I didn't spend; I put it to one side, until it came to the point where she wanted me to control the money, all of the money.”

As a black man who drives dancers, sits in the club to watch over them, and manages and/or is given a significant portion of their money, Eric resembles the descriptions of the pimp given by other participants. Moreover when dancers in focus group B demanded to know more about the driver/protection provider the researchers mentioned as an example of a third party operating outside of the organizational structure of the club, several categorically defined Eric as a pimp. Eric himself said: “I would more or less not want to be titled as a pimp; ‘That's my man,’ or ‘that's my n---,’ or whatever have you, works for me.” Given that Marcus and Eric both described themselves as providing security and driving services to dancers in an informal arrangement in which dancers govern their own labour and set their own rates and services, we see that institutional affiliation lends legitimacy to driver- or agent-type relationships, while a lack thereof is discrediting—especially when the individual is a racialized man.

Locating the pimp in organizational discourse and practices

Club affiliated third parties suspected they had identified pimps, and offered various theories and opinions about them and their relationships with dancers, but (to an extent) acknowledged that this was “just speculation” (Studley, DJ/supervisor). As Adam (manager and DJ) confessed, “I only heard four stories. Two of them were good and two of them were bad.” Kelly's (bartender) comment perhaps best sums up the entanglement of observation, social profiling and stigma informing participants' accounts:

There's some [pimps] that I know, like I know they've got girls working in there, and some that I just know [of] because dancers tell me, and I'm—I don't exactly know a lot about the relationship, and I think it varies from different girl-and-pimp [situations], so I don't think it's all the same, but I'm just against it.

As such, rather than treating speculation about the presence or intentions of pimps as fact, the following pages unpack the (simulated) *image* of the pimp and reflect on the extent and consequences of its circulation as truth.

The pimp model. Benson (2012: 430; see also Quinn 2000) describes the stereotypical image of the pimp as “a heterosexual, hypersexual, patriarchal powerbroker, brilliantly manipulative at the art of

controlling women and accumulating wealth.” Looking at news media imagery, Van Brunschot, Sydie, and Krull (1999) add evil and exploiter to this list. Echoing aspects of these images, pimps emerged in participants’ narratives as: 1) black or otherwise “other” men¹; 2) who in some way manage the finances of dancers; 3) in a relationship involving manipulation and/or exploitation; and, 4), “extras” (dancer vernacular for additional sexual services offered in the club) or prostitution (i.e., occurring outside of the club). Although it includes racial profiling, which is triggered by skin colour (CDPDJ 2009), this collection of characteristics accompanying stigmatized attributes together construct a social profile for “the type of person who fits into this stigmatized category” (Bruckert and Hannem 2013b: 298)—the pimp.

As with racialized and gendered media portrayals of pimps (Jeffrey and Gayle 2006; Tyree, Byerly, and Hamilton 2011), most participants predominantly associated pimping with black men; indeed several third parties assumed *any* black man driving a dancer to be a pimp. Some participants connected other racial identities to pimping, albeit to a lesser extent. For example, Fuzzy (DJ) suggested that in addition to “black male[s]” he was increasingly seeing “Arabs” whom he perceived in this way and “very rarely, I see a white guy doing it.” Although the men she suspected were pimps were “all medium attractive, or very attractive, charming, black guys,” Kelly (bartender) acknowledged the role of racial profiling in her identification of these men, noting: “I could know many white pimps, I just don’t know that I know them.”

Other images circulating in connection with the pimp include foreign traffickers—imagined as “Eastern” (Berman 2003; see also Dank et al. 2014) or “dark, omnipotent criminals” (Pajnik 2010: 52)—as well as organized crime and gangs (see also MLS (Municipal Licensing and Standards) 2012). Participants engaged with these stereotypes more or less critically. While Marcus (doorman/bouncer) suggested he had seen “some white males taking care of the Eastern European undocumented people, which would probably be in the same category as the pimp” he did not perceive them as necessarily dangerous or their relationships as categorically exploitative. By contrast Jill (dancer) appeared to be aware of the stereotypical trope of the foreign trafficker, but still reproduced it (albeit uncertainly) in her interpretations of men in the club: “I could be wrong, [but] I feel like I’ve identified European pimps in the club, and they’re way scarier.” For some participants, criminal affiliation figured more significantly in their understanding of the pimp than race. This was especially true for Dalton (manager and DJ)—the only other black participant besides Eric (driver/protection)—for whom bikers and “that abusive kind of pimp thing” were one and the same. Here we see that race and gender intersect in different ways in strip club workers’ ascriptions of dangerousness.

Perhaps because the services that dancers provide are regulated (to an extent) by club-affiliated third parties, prostitution figures less prominently in the pimp image circulated in strip clubs as compared to how pimping is talked about on a broader societal level—for example, in media coverage of abusive relationships between street-based sex workers and pimps (Bovenkerk and Marion 2011; Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips, and Benoit 2006; Jeffrey and Gayle 2006). However, Jill and Donna (dancers) understood pimping as necessarily including the provision of “extras” such as manual stimulation, oral sex, and intercourse. This suggests that dancers subscribe to dominant associations between prostitution, risk and exploitation. Participants disagreed, however, on how these factors are interrelated. In particular, their opinions diverged on whether the protection that pimps reportedly claim to provide is helpful or illusory. Kristen (dancer) took the former position, associating pimps with dancers who provide sexual services: “if you’re a prostitute, I guess it’s better to have protection.” Conversely Sal (manager) framed appeals to protection as manipulation:

¹Another (albeit relatively marginal) figure described by dancers, but not third parties, was the female pimp. Most dancers (except Carrie) in focus group B had “seen girls pimping other girls” (Leigh) meaning they “[t]urned them out and took their money” (Brigitte). As a new dancer, Ashley had been approached by a woman whom she framed as “as much of a pimp as anyone else” because “she made it seem like [escorting] was easy and glamorous and I’d be like raking in the cash.”

I remember a girl had said something about like being protected or something and I was like, “Protected from what?” I’m like, “You’re safe here,” and she’s like, “No, no, no – if you don’t have a man, then other pimps will come after you and try to get you, so like he protects me from like, the other guys or whatever.” [...] but anyone knows that there’s like, tons and tons of girls that work there and have no worries at all and they’re like, on their own.

Intriguingly, in Sal’s narrative, even pimps rely on stigmatic assumptions constructing men who frequent strip clubs as risky and dangerous to justify the need for their services.

Participants’ engagement with the manipulation aspect of pimping ranged from echoing popular images of the pimp as an evil, manipulative, extorter (Van Brunschot, Sydie, and Krull 1999), to presuming him to be an unemployed romantic partner. For example Tony (manager/DJ) interpreted a relationship as pimping if: “the guy that drops a dancer off and lets her work, and then she’s on the cell phone in the change room [...] and all I can hear her saying is ‘Well I’ve only made \$400. Do I have to stay another two hours?’” Several dancers reported overhearing similar conversations, leading them to assume a coercive pimp to be on the other end of the line. If some dancers are involved with men who exploit them financially, (re)framing these relationships as domestic financial abuse, to which women who earn more money than their male partners are more vulnerable (Zavala and Spohn 2010), may lead to less stigmatizing perceptions and more helpful interventions.

Of course, unequal financial contribution is not necessarily tantamount to abuse. In this respect Sal (manager) equated a pimp to an unemployed romantic partner. In Sal’s esteem, men who aspire to being pimps are modeling themselves on popular culture simulacra (see also Benson 2012; Hooks 2004; Quinn 2000):

Back in the day when I would hear about dancers’ boyfriends and stuff, like oh yeah this guy’s a fuckin’ deadbeat, he doesn’t have a job, he just lives off her and whatever. [...] And now, it’s—I guess it’s sort of the same thing except like now they’re like you know, black dudes with grills and Jordans and stuff, who still are deadbeats and still don’t have jobs and are still living off of these girls, but they call themselves pimps. [...] A lot of these guys, they’re just—they’re wannabes.

Other participants allowed that some financial arrangements between pimps and sex workers may be beneficial. Comparing dancers to men who work for him in his construction business, who “hand their cheque right over to their wives [...] because they know that, if the money stays in their pocket, it’s not going to be there tomorrow,” Adam (DJ and manager) suggested some relationships may be akin to financial stewardship. Indeed this arguably describes the money management that Eric (driver/protection provider) undertook for the dancer with whom he primarily worked. Kristen (dancer) similarly speculated that, for some of her colleagues, it may be “easier to just get an allowance and have everything taken care of.” These narratives highlight the mutual interdependence of each of the elements of the pimp stereotype; without manipulation, money management appears rather banal.

In the absence of manipulation, an unaffiliated third party relationship resembles an agent or a personal assistant in the incall/outcall sector (see Bruckert and Law 2013). Scott (bouncer and manager) described one such acquaintance:

He booked the hotels [...] And then, the two girls, at the end of their weekend of working, they gave him—he didn’t ask for it [...] They gave him money and they asked could they do this on a regular basis. [...] And that’s all he did. He didn’t even go the club where they worked.

After momentarily doubting that this description fit the pimp model, contrasting this man to “others who take the dancer as their personal property,” Scott conceded, “technically, yes, he was a pimp.” Here we see the influence of the simulacrum in action: Scott’s adherence to the pimp as truth shapes his perception of his acquaintance.

Identifying the pimp. Like Scott, participants identified certain men in the club as pimps by reading their apparent relationship with dancers through the stereotypical characteristics enumerated above.

For example, Marcus (doorman/bouncer) came to the conclusion that one particular black man was a pimp after seeing him interact with “four or five of the dancers [...] he would pick them all up, and they would all just hand their money over to him.” Reverend (manager and head doorman) and Jimmy (DJ) had the impression that men who had confronted them on behalf of dancers they had disciplined were pimps. While the latter two third parties appear to have interpreted these relationships as exploitative, Marcus rejected this stereotypical presumption, instead recalling: “he was nice to me and he seemed nice to them.”

Bolstering the use of social profiling to draw conclusions about pimps was a belief that such men do not talk about their work. Similarly, dancers insisted that, “in terms of having a girl self-identify and say ‘I’m being pimped,’ it’s almost impossible to get that information” (Jill, dancer). Because of this, some dancers read (notably, somewhat inconsistently) certain language used by others as code: “your man generally means pimp” (Donna [contra. Miller 1987]); “they [dancers] call them their boyfriend or their man” (Monica). However Jill (dancer) began to doubt this indicator of pimping after:

[...] being in a change room and hearing like, 70% of the girls referring to their man, but then also, knowing that a lot of these girls don’t do extras [...] so after being there for a while, you realize ok, these girls call their man their man, who’s their boyfriend, not someone who’s a pimp.

With little else to identify pimps than observation informed by racial and social profiling, participants often (but not always) circulated, and therefore reiterated and validated, the simulated image of the pimp.

Managing the pimp. Regardless of whether or not they were certain who was a pimp or who was in a relationship with one, it was important for dancers to protect themselves from men in the club whom they perceived as suspicious. However, suspected pimps gave rise to a different sort of apprehension than more generic customer behaviours or traits (e.g., intoxication, rudeness, cruel intentions) against which dancers routinely exercise careful vigilance. For example, Donna, Charlene and Leigh (dancers) had all been approached by men offering to help them with their finances or their “lifestyle.” Brigitte (dancer) had declined a similar offer: “He was like, you know, ‘I’ll elevate you, and we’ll save money.’” In response to such tactics, Carrie, Jen, Charlene and Leigh (dancers) began watching out for, and avoiding, men in the club who offered to coach them in how to improve their financial wellbeing. According to Jenna (dancer), men who “bother you to attempt to take your money” are often “black guys between 20 and 40” who “dress kind of like, very urban thug”—notably not men who embrace a middle class aesthetic (e.g., a suit). Noting that some dancers manage these apprehensions by avoiding men who fit the former description, Kristen (dancer) refused to discriminate: “I’ve had some customers who were African American who I totally would have missed out on if I followed that prejudiced perception.” Similarly, Jill (dancer) suspected her colleagues’ belief that black men in strip clubs are pimps to be unsubstantiated racial and social profiling.

Club-affiliated third parties also enumerated multiple strategies and policies designed to discourage the presence of pimps. As a bouncer, Marcus “was instructed by management to keep an eye mostly on black males.” At the club where Studley (DJ) worked, profiling was less overt; nonetheless management was particularly attentive to certain attributes (“black guys”) and behaviours (“none of them want a drink, none of them want to pay cover, ‘Oh, I’m just waiting to talk to so-and-so,’ or whatever, then every girl that walks by, they’re calling them over”). Reflecting Koskela’s (2012) insistence that racialized young men are often targets of suspicion, here we see race intersecting with class to construct black men as undesirable, as both potential security risks and unprofitable customers. This can compound the marginalization of black women, who are subject to racial quotas (i.e., limitations) in strip clubs across Toronto and Ottawa; in addition to adhering to and reproducing Western beauty norms privileging slim, white, young women (see also Bouclin 2006; Bruckert 2002), racial limitations on hiring also, according to Fuzzy (DJ) whose club imposed a

quota of “five black girls,” aim to “limit the amount of pimps they let into the club, and, I guess, the thought is that black girls will bring in the black guys” who are presumed to be pimps.

Additionally, as Scott (bouncer and manager) suggested, such screening strategies are difficult to apply: “we at our club did our best to keep the pimps out. The problem was we had to be able to prove they were a pimp. ‘No, no, I’m her boyfriend, I’m a regular customer, I just know her.’ It became difficult.” At Tony’s (manager/DJ) club, this problem was addressed through a blanket ban: “we don’t allow girls’ uh, their pimp, boyfriend, whatever you want to call him. They can drop her off and pick her up but they cannot be in the club while they’re working. It just makes for bad business for them, for us, and for the customer.” Like some of the other club-affiliated third parties, as a manager Dalton had instituted a “No [gang] colours” policy to discourage the presence of bikers, whom he associated with pimping. Screening, then, can be seen as a process through which men who visit the club are sorted through racial and class scripts into risky outsiders or desirable clientele; third parties almost invariably described the latter as middle class, middle aged, white men.

In spite of the above screening practices, participants framed pimps as a looming presence inside strip clubs. In response, they approached suspect men directly and indirectly. Along with the bouncers at her club, Kelly’s (bartender) strategy was informal: “we just sort of try to make it not fun for them to come in, so that they don’t.” When dancers alerted third parties to the presence of pimps in Studley’s (DJ/supervisor) club, “we let them know right away, like, ‘You’ve got about 30 seconds to get out of this club or we’re calling the cops,’ essentially, you know. It’s something we don’t abide by in the club.”

The pimp and othering amongst workers

The spectre of the pimp also impacts upon workplace relationships in strip clubs. Just as scholars have noted (some) dancers’ uneasiness about erotic dance being associated with, or categorized as, sex work (Bouclin 2006, 2009; Bruckert 2002), many third party participants insisted that stripping and prostitution “should be different” (Scott, bouncer and manager). This discomfort injects elements of the pimp model into dancers’ and third parties’ perception of some of their colleagues.² As we will see, in these instances of “defensive othering,” workers seek to normalize their own occupations by disdaining their colleagues, thereby perpetuating stigma (Schwalbe et al. 2000). At the same time as they articulated the pimp as a standard of bad character or a contrast to good management however, third parties also engaged in self-reflection and critiqued regulation based on stigmatic assumptions.

Mismanagement and the pimp. While some dancers framed third parties as “ineffectual” (Monica), others saw them as agents of exploitation comparable to pimps. Dancers described a number of situations in which they felt they had to tip bouncers or DJs to ensure their cooperation and/or assistance, for example with difficult customers or if they wanted to change the time of their stage show. Instances such as these informed Jill’s (dancer) perception of bouncers: “basically, they’re kind of doing, like, what pimps do [...] they’re not necessarily making as much money as an actual pimp would make, but they’re definitely receiving a benefit off of another girl doing work.” Such perceptions reinforce the stigma against third parties, which in turn can lead to counterproductive workplace relationships. This is visible in George’s (doorman/bouncer) reaction to what he feels is an unfair characterization of third parties: “The dancers, they all just think we’re assholes until we do something for them [...] When you do go out of your way to get the money [from a client], they don’t care. So it’s hard to go out of your way the next time.”

The moral judgment implicit in the pimp model also fosters disrespect amongst third parties. For example Sal (manager) confessed that, “I’d rather get, like, a cool cabby that I trust,” framing drivers

²In turn, third parties’ discomfort with prostitution influences how they perceive dancers—as “girls” rather than workers (see Law 2016).

who focus solely on dancers as “kind of creepy.” A bartender who had worked in several strip clubs, Kelly insisted: “Every manager I’ve ever known was *not* a good person. [...] Except for the one. [...] if you want to do a job like that, you’re probably a dirtbag.” Although he himself had worked as a manager, Adam described a manager who had employed him as a DJ in no uncertain terms: “I don’t think he sees them [dancers] as people at all. I think [to him] they’re just meat that allows him to have a job and make money.” Such perceptions reflect Willmott’s (1997) assertion that managers (in this case, third parties below the ownership level) mitigate their feelings of precarity as employees by deriving a sense of importance and accomplishment from the perceived failings of other employees. That these ascribed failings often dovetail with the pimp model means that third parties reinforce stereotypes while endeavouring to dissociate from them.

Even as they engaged in defensive othering, some third parties were critical of the prohibitive approaches to sex work taken by the state. Not only are strip clubs subject to federal laws prohibiting aspects of prostitution in Canada (see PCEPA 2014), but municipalities such as Toronto and Ottawa prohibit “sexual” touching between dancers and customers (see Ottawa 2004; Toronto 2012). While these regulations prohibit “extras” and lap dancing, respectively, these practices are commonly offered—particularly lap dancing, which forms an essential part of the economy of Ontario’s erotic dance sector as it is both the service customers expect and virtually the sole source of income dancers earn as independent contractors, a status that allows clubs to eschew providing wages and benefits (Bouclin 2009). In this context third parties often informally allow or overtly ignore these activities through willful blindness, which can entail increased risks for dancers and little or no help in managing them (see also Lewis 2000; Maticka-Tyndale et al. 2000). Kelly (bartender) framed this prohibitive regulatory context as opening up opportunities for abuse of power:

The doormen [...] demand tips if they see things, and I feel like that’s just about what a pimp does. I feel very disgusted by it when I see it [...] And if it [lap dancing/prostitution] was like, more legal or less illegal or whatever, they [dancers] wouldn’t have to give anyone else their money [...] They tip the doormen to stay on their good side, but [...] nowhere at the club has anyone said, like, the girls can’t do extras.

In suggesting that criminalization exacerbates exploitation by third parties, Kelly echoes arguments made by academics, who additionally link criminalization to a lack of recognition of work in the sex industry as labour (Bruckert and Hannem 2013a; Jeffrey and Sullivan 2009; Van der Meulen and Durisin 2008). Thus as both a characterization of an individual third party or a byproduct of the regulatory approach taken by the state, the pimp is an emblem of improper management.

The pimp as foil? Distinguishing themselves from pimps was also important to third parties’ construction of their job as work. As Gilles (manager) put it,

I provide fantasy; I don’t provide sex. I provide, like, an environment where you have a good time—one that’s fair, that’s legal. We respect all the law and regulation, and we operate a good business. We can’t compare us to pimp or massage parlour; that’s not what we provide at all.

Here we see Gilles bolstering the state-sanctioned (albeit tenuous) legitimacy of erotic dance to shield his workplace from the stigma of prostitution and differentiate himself from the discredited pimp. Similarly Tony (manager/DJ) insisted: “It’s an honest living. I’m not pimping.” Complementary to dancers differentiating themselves from dancers who had pimps, this distinction often pivoted on the notion of choice as antithetical to exploitation: “I’m not forcing anybody to do this job. They’re coming to me looking for the work” (Studley, DJ/supervisor). As such it is not only an act of distancing (cf. Snow and Anderson 1987), but one that reflects club-affiliated third parties’ desire to be considered morally superior to and, through appeals to professionalism, “higher class” than other occupations in or sectors of the sex industry. In short it is an act of “defensive othering” that, in “accepting the legitimacy of a devalued identity imposed by the dominant group” (Schwalbe et al. 2000: 425), effectively constructs a “straw pimp” (Bruckert 2002; Hannem and Bruckert 2017).

Other third parties only narrowly differentiated themselves from pimps. Dalton (manager and DJ) admitted that both pimping and managing involve manipulation, albeit on a different scale. Jimmy (DJ) was troubled by the misogyny of customers and his colleagues, and the role he played in reproducing an environment he saw as facilitating it:

There isn't much [difference], really, when you think about it. I mean my job was to try and—I wouldn't say manipulate, but try to kind of get a read on people and handle certain people a certain way. [...] And I essentially made money off what these girls did upstairs [in VIP], except I didn't have any power over them. Everything that they did for me [i.e., tipping] was out of the kindness of their own heart. [...] But yeah, there are quite a lot of parallels [...] Probably another part of the reason why I didn't like doing what I did, and why I had to get out.

In Jimmy's narrative, we see that the pimp is not necessarily an effective foil; as with the damning comparisons above, the reiteration of this model reproduces the stigma that undermines third parties' work altogether (see also Hannem and Bruckert 2012).

Discussion

Although the pimp model is sometimes questioned or rejected by club-affiliated third parties and dancers, it appears many more readily assume that pimps are present and prevalent in strip clubs than not. Indeed, that even people working in the erotic dance sector who are, in principle, more informed about its workings and constituents, would label, separate, negatively stereotype, and thus stigmatize (Link and Phelan 2001) certain men and relationship configurations suggests that the pimp simulacrum is accepted and circulated as true nearly as much in the strip club as outside of it. Although the pimp remains a racialized and classed construct across both of these contexts, there are some important differences in the way the pimp trope is reproduced and deployed in strip clubs.

While the strategies participants enumerated for identifying and managing the pimp may contribute to dancers' sense of security at work, it is important to point out that dancers articulated this figure as a risk to their financial wellbeing and entrepreneurial autonomy, rather than a threat to their physical safety. Similarly, third parties distinguished him from, and described him as potentially disruptive to, their preferred customer demographic (white, middle class, middle aged men). In this respect, the pimp is constructed amongst strip club workers as a nuisance rather than a danger, marking a significant departure from dominant associations with violence. That said, the dominant discourse of violence informs participants' perceptions of foreign traffickers and gang affiliation (of course given that gang colours [e.g., badges, symbols] are, in effect, self-labeling, managers and bouncers are able to screen for the latter but merely suspiciously observe the former). Thus in spite of being more of a nuisance than a danger, the pimp both fuels and justifies intersecting institutionalized racism and classism in strip clubs, manifesting in practices including hiring and scheduling restrictions on black women; disproportionate (negative) attention paid to, and exclusion of, black men; and preferential treatment of white, middle class men.

The pimp model also appears to reflect and exacerbate structural and interpersonal workplace tensions. Because dancers are independent contractors, their earnings are separate from the club's profits, making dancers' safety a secondary concern to the maintenance of a pleasant atmosphere for customers. In this context third parties provide limited surveillance of dancers' private interactions with customers, leading some dancers to tip third parties (usually bouncers) for the security services that are in principle a part of their job description. This may encourage dancers to ascribe the pimp label to club-affiliated third parties; in response the latter may be less likely to be proactive in their provision of services to dancers—namely resolving disputes with customers—and in turn more likely to expect or demand tips to support dancers' safety and financial wellbeing. In short, the pimp label contributes to a cycle of negative personal and professional relations. The pimp is also invoked by third parties in relation to their own labour—ironically, at the same time as they themselves perform various iterations of tough masculinity, and are perceived by outsiders as risky and/or exploiters—to

better themselves by comparison or denigrate their colleagues. As Schwalbe et al. (2000) argue, while such acts of defensive othering may aid individuals in constructing a creditable identity, and in turn protect their self-worth (Hannem and Bruckert 2012; Snow and Anderson 1987), it ultimately reproduces existing stereotypes, inequality, and the subordination of the group as a whole. Moreover as a standard of bad behaviour, the pimp sets a low bar for third parties which, accompanied by a dearth of labour oversight, industry standards and best practices (see also Bruckert and Parent 2018), may engender poor(er) working conditions for dancers.

Finally, we have seen that participants critically engaged with some aspects of the pimp model while unquestioningly accepting others. Whereas some participants conceded that some arrangements may be romantic relationships in which a sex worker's partner manages her money or she supports him financially, or working relationships featuring business-like exchanges (e.g., of drugs and/or services) that are not necessarily harmful, others assumed that pimps compel dancers to work long hours and/or provide "extras." Furthermore, while some dancers interpreted certain language as indicative of a pimp, others made no such assumptions and simply took their colleagues (e.g., talking about their "man") at their word. These discrepancies suggest that the pimp simulacrum significantly narrows our view of what may be a spectrum of relationships ranging from beneficial to harmful, romantic to strictly professional. Just as some scholars have insisted that women may not feel this term characterizes their relationship (Høigård and Finstad 1992; Smith and Christou 2009; Weinkauff 2010), labeling women who are involved in harmful relationships as being pimped may merely insult and alienate them. In this respect, asking women about their relationships without relying on the pimp model may facilitate (non-stigmatizing) distinctions between, for example, cases of domestic financial abuse and benign business associate relationships, and in turn more effective assessment of whether and how to offer support (e.g., civil, criminal, social, or no intervention at all).

Conclusion

This article has applied Baudrillard's warning about the dangers of simulation to the perception and management of the pimp in strip clubs. Just as simulation threatens the difference between the "real" and the "imaginary" (Baudrillard 1994: 3), the simulacrum of the pimp distorts relationships and practices in the erotic dance sector. This distortion deviantizes dancers' relationships and third parties' labour, decreasing solidarity amongst sex industry workers at the same time as it reinforces stigma and justifies moral judgment against them. In conflating labour exploitation with intimate partner violence, the pimp simulacrum also obscures problematic workplace practices and specific personal struggles, preventing the development and application of appropriate solutions to what may be an array of discrete challenges. Although the pimp powerfully reiterates historically dominant notions of legitimacy through the policing of racial, class, and gender norms, the hesitation amongst strip club workers about whether it fits the diverse relationships, practices, and characteristics they see at the club indicates an openness to see beyond the simulated image. Critical scholars could further contribute to a nuanced understanding of third party-sex worker relationships by unpacking dominant appearances such as the pimp and similarly misunderstood parties and arrangements in other sectors in the sex industry.

Notes on contributor

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