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## "If I'm gonna hack capitalism": Racialized and Indigenous Canadian sex workers' experiences within the Neo-liberal market economy



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### Introduction

On December 2014, Canada criminalized the purchase of sexual services. This law reform was in response to the famous 2013 case of Canada (Attorney General) v. Bedford.<sup>1</sup> In Bedford, three applicants (current and former sex workers), constitutionally challenged three Criminal Code prohibitions on sex-work-related activities – keeping a bawdy-house,<sup>2</sup> living on the avails of prostitution<sup>3</sup> and communicating in public for the purpose of prostitution.<sup>4</sup> In a unanimous judgment, The Supreme Court of Canada struck down all three provisions, and suspended the declaration of invalidity for one year, thus giving time for the Parliament of Canada to respond legislatively.<sup>5</sup> During this law reform process, conventional understanding and stereotypical tropes of those who engage in the sex industry took centre stage with lawmakers invoking raced, classed and gendered identities to classify the people engaged in the Canadian sex industry. Bruckert (2015) argues that Bill C-36, *Protection of Communities and Exploited Person's Act*,<sup>6</sup> the end product of the law reform process, also made the dubious assertion that sex work is inherently violent and exploitative.

Judging from the contents of Bill C-36 we can infer that pimps/third parties and Johns/clients are exclusively males, and are inherently violent and abusive. From the wording of the document, we can also deduce that all those who sell sexual services are females and are inherently victims. They are framed as victims who are so disadvantaged that they have no other choice in life, and who are manipulated or forced into the sex industry under duress. Furthermore, Bill C-36 emphasizes that its objectives are to save the disproportionate number of marginalized, Indigenous women and girls who are involved in the sex industry, minimize the opportunity for human trafficking, and prevent the sexual exploitation of these vulnerable populations. From this,

we can conclude that the new laws attribute the normative version of "victim" to a racialized woman.

The narrative of the female sex worker as the inherent victim is not only prevalent in Bill C-36 but is the dominant discourse among anti-sex work feminists and activists (Farley, 2003, 2004; Holsopple, 1999; Raphael, Reichert, & Powers, 2010). Razack (1998) specifically condemns the Canadian sex industry for the victimization of racialized and Indigenous women.<sup>7</sup> Scholars in the field have argued that representations of sex workers as essential victims are not only problematic, but also inaccurate as it does not leave room to address the complexity of sex workers identities and often irrelevant, as it aims to control some women's sexuality (Brewis & Linstead, 2000; Jeffrey & Macdonald, 2006a, 2006b; Kesler, 2002.). Drawing from Moscovici (2001) I identify three problems with the essential representations of sex works as inherent victims that affect racialized and Indigenous sex workers. First, such normative representations, despite being false, present a definite form and a specific category of racialized and Indigenous women who choose to sell sexual services. Second, the trope of sex workers as victims is then used to establish racialized and Indigenous sex workers as a model of a certain type of victim, even when some racialized women do not conform precisely to that model. Finally, imposing such a prescriptive representation of 'victim' upon all racialized and Indigenous women who decide to sell sexual services with irrepressible force is intended to influence the minds of the general public in such way that the victim narrative is not contested or questioned, rather it is recited and reproduced without any thought (see Weitzer, 2011).

Drawing on the lived experiences of racialized and Indigenous sex workers, in this paper, I contest the normative representations used to categorize racialized and Indigenous sex workers as all victims. I present an empirically informed discussion that draws on multiple, interrelated conceptual frameworks to provide insight into how racialized sex workers locate their identities within the neoliberal market economy. Since Carol Leigh (1997), coining the term "sex work" in the 1970's, many scholars in the field have challenged the victim narrative by drawing attention to sex workers' positions as workers and entrepreneurs. Canadian scholars have examined the many aspects of sex workers' experiences in life and at work, including transitioning out of sex work (Bowen, 2015; Brock, 1998; Bruckert, 2002; Bruckert & Chabot, 2010; Bruckert & Parent, 2006; Jeffrey & Macdonald, 2006a, 2006b; Law,

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<sup>1</sup> Herein referred to as *Bedford*.

<sup>2</sup> A bawdy-house is defined in s. 197(1) of the Criminal Code as a place "Kept or Occupied, or resorted to... for the purpose of prostitution or the practice of acts of indecency". Section 210 lays out offences for keeping, being an inmate of, or being found without lawful excuse in a common bawdy-house.

<sup>3</sup> The indictable offence of living "wholly or in part on the avails of prostitution of another person" is laid out in s.212 (1)(j).

<sup>4</sup> Section 213(1)(c) defines the offences of communicating for the purpose of prostitution, which includes stopping or attempting to stop anyone or communicating or attempting to communicate with anyone in a public place for the purpose of engaging in prostitution or hiring a prostitute.

<sup>5</sup> Canada has two primary sources of criminal law: legislation and judicial decisions.

<sup>6</sup> Herein will be referred to as *Bill C-36*, which received royal assent and became law on December 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Razack (1998) claims that "...patriarchy is the culprit and white supremacy and capitalism are merely the accomplices" in "the most socially disadvantaged women occupy[ing] the lowest rungs of the prostitution hierarchy and encounter[ing] more violence" (p339).

2013). However, no Canadian studies have exclusively focused on racialized and Indigenous women's experiences within the neo-liberal market place. This study is the first of its kind.

In this paper drawing on Brighenti's (2010) visibility theory, I start from the position that racialized and Indigenous sex workers' "(in)visibility composition" has a profound effect on their economic subjectivity. According to A. Brighenti (2007), visibility as a single field is composed of three key features: visibility as relational, visibility as strategic and visibility as a process. Secondly, drawing on Goffman's (1963) notion of passing, I explore racialized and Indigenous sex workers' entrepreneurial activities that allow them to compete for economic rewards in the marketplace. Here I link racialized and Indigenous sex workers' (in-)visibility compositions to their passing and performing subjectivity in order to articulate the fluidity, ambiguity, and instability of their raced, classed and gendered identity categories. In doing so, I establish that sex workers carry out a cost-benefit analysis of their relationships, interactions, and behaviours to maximize not only their economic worthiness in the marketplace but also, by extension their political and social capital.

### Research participants and method

I interviewed a total of 40 individuals between August 2014 and April 2015. Of these 40 participants, 38 individuals self-identified as women, and 2 identified as women for the purpose of sex work; these two individuals otherwise self-identified as gender non-binary.<sup>8</sup> Among the 40 participants, 2 self-identified as Arabs, 4 as East/Southeast Asians, 3 as Indigenous, 6 as South Asians, 13 as black and 12 as mixed race.<sup>9</sup> Only two identified as former sex workers. The remaining 38 participants are currently engaged in various indoor sectors of the sex industry, such as escort agencies, massage parlours, independent in-call and out-call service providers, and webcamming.

I interviewed participants through in-depth, open-ended, and face-to-face interviews in Vancouver, Niagara Falls, Toronto, Kingston, and Ottawa. I also interviewed participants by telephone and Skype. Interviews ranged in duration from 40 to 150 min. Interview questions for this study primarily focused on each individual's lived experiences as a person of colour who is engaged in sex work. A scripted interview guide, approved by Carleton University's Research Ethics Board was used to interview research participants. In addition to relying on the sequential probes to pursue leads provided by respondents, I also posed follow-up questions to narratives offered by respondents. Interview sessions were very conversational, such that the dialogue between the two of us sometimes veered off the scope of this study, but not off the larger topic of racism, oppression, and marginalization.<sup>10</sup> Hence the length of the interview depended on the extent to which respondents were willing to expand on their stories. On average, interviews were about 90 min long. In this paper, names and other details that could be used to identify research participants have been altered to protect their anonymity.

### The contemporary sex industry and sex worker

The contemporary adult commercial sex industry is complex. This complexity originates from the plurality of services offered, and the range of settings (from saunas, escort agencies, and streets, to private

apartments) in which sex workers operate. The structuring practices within the sites of this particular industry are not static, linear or ordered, but are rather flexible, fluid and uncertain. In other words, the adult commercial sex industry has evolved with the popularity of the Internet, and it is also shaped by globalization and a consumer-driven, service-based economy (Bernstein, 2007; Brents & Hausbeck, 2010; Gall, 2006). The evolution of the adult commercial sex industry is so significant that Brents and Hausbeck (2010) argue that mainstream culture and the adult commercial sex industry are converging in many important ways.<sup>11</sup> With the convergence of sex industry and square marketplace, it is important for us to learn about the different kinds of labours in the current global cultural and economic context (Brents & Hausbeck, 2010). Under these economic conditions, the narrow, victim narratives advanced by dominant conservative discourse are nonsensical and therefore irrelevant.

While the sex industry itself carries a very low status, some women in the industry are perceived as "unrespectable" and "immoral," yet others, depending on their race, class, and stratum, are deemed "respectable." For example, street-based sex workers with drug problems and extreme poverty are deemed unrespectable and upscale escorts and call-girls are perceived to be respectable. This relational process of subjectification and objectification prevalent in dominant discourses reinforces sex workers' degraded legal subjectivity. Sex workers are first subjected to social condemnation. Their low social reputation then makes it easy to justify sex workers' subordinate position, and undermine their right to societal membership and active citizenship. Denying sex workers their right to articulate a public and political identity prevents them from integrating into the social and political world, rendering them economically and politically unworthy and passive citizens (Pratt, 2005). Under these circumstances, it is necessary to develop an understanding of how racialized sex workers operate within the current global cultural and economic context of the adult commercial sex industry.

Sex workers interviewed for this study overwhelmingly reported that in the Canadian sex industry, especially the 'upscale' sectors, in order to meet the demands and desires of the middle-class and upper-class clients, who are often white, owners and managers of escort agencies, massage parlours, and exotic dance clubs employ a quota system. In their work with third parties in Canadian sex industry, Bruckert and Law (2013) also found a quota system. Based on my observations the quota system varies by city and sector, but in general, establishes a limit on the number of women of colour who can work in one location. For instance, there is a cap of about five women of colour working at any one given time in an establishment managed by third parties. I want to point out that there are no governing bodies that enforce this system. It is a self-enforced, business maneuver on the part of owners and managers to ensure that they meet the needs of upscale clients, and by extension, the business establishment is also profiting (see Brents & Hausbeck, 2010; Bruckert & Law, 2013).

It is also important to note that not all massage parlours in Canada are subject to this limitation, in that massage parlours owned/managed by Asian third parties often only hire Asian women. A few white passing women in this study reported working for Asian-owned/managed massage parlours. According to these women, they were the only non-Asian worker who is on the roster of service providers for that particular establishment. Indigenous women who self-identify as such pointed out that in 'upscale' Canadian sex industry establishments, third parties hesitate to include them on the roster of service providers. However, if owners and managers felt that these women could convincingly pass

<sup>8</sup> I fully acknowledge that the term "woman" is neither a static category, nor does it have internal homogeneity. I use the term "women" to refer to all 40 participants of this study as an everyday, speaking term.

<sup>9</sup> Mixed race women had parents who were of two or more different races, such as black and white, black and Asian, Asian and white, East Indian and white.

<sup>10</sup> Often these conversations were related to the respondent's life in that it involved stories of their family members or friends. Even though it was not within the scope of this study, these conversations helped me to contextualize each individual's story and the effects of cultural/racial backgrounds. As such, parts of interviews were excluded from the transcript.

<sup>11</sup> According to Brents and Hausbeck (2010) "the more formal and upscale parts of the sex industry are increasingly organized and operated more like mainstream business" (p.9) and "Non-pornographic advertising, fashion, art, education, comedy, movies and television and their celebrities are all experimenting with representations and parody of porn" (p.11).

as white or as a different ethnicity, then they will include them in their roster.

### (In)visibility, passing and racialized sex workers

Sex workers in Canada have long been seeking recognition and validation as human beings and as equal participants in the labour force. Drawing from A. M. Brighenti (2010), I suggest that sex workers need visual attention to get the social recognition that they seek. A. M. Brighenti (2010) points out that “contemporary struggles for recognition often take the form of struggles for visibility... the desire for recognition is of a particular type. What is at stake in the process is ...the fact of being ratified by others as human beings endowed with equal power (dignity) – or even more (honor)” (p.40). Therefore, from a social point of view, what matters is the process of visibility in which racialized and Indigenous sex workers enhance their invisibility and marginalization. In this sense, A. Brighenti (2007) would argue that failure to find convincing ways to visibilize racialized women who decide to engage in the sex industry only leads to further social marginalization. A. M. Brighenti (2010) notes, “visibility as a phenomenon ... is inherently ambiguous, highly dependent upon contexts and complex social, technical and political arrangements...” (p. 3).

However, recognition through visibility is a contentious issue for racialized and Indigenous sex workers. That is, their struggles for recognition and visibility are at odds with their efforts to manage the stigma attached to their race and sex work. Therefore to have a fair chance at competing in the sex industry marketplace, workers I interviewed used passing as a strategy to manage their stigma and their (in)visibility compositions. Goffman (1963) defines passing as “the management of undisclosed discrediting information about [the] self” (p.42). Drawing from Goffman (1963) I will show how racialized and Indigenous sex workers in this study conceal information about their self-identity to receive and accept treatment based on their alternate identity that is accepted as true by their visibility.

Women in this study are intent passers whereby they make a concerted and well-organized effort to pass (Goffman, 1963). To minimize their stigmatization, racialized and Indigenous sex workers opt for possibilities that fall between the extremes of complete secrecy on the one hand and complete information on the other. In other words, to avoid the impact of the stigma attached to sex work, workers I spoke with kept their “sex worker” identity a secret in their social and personal life. In this way, their stigma was invisible and known only to them. On the other hand, workers systematically expose themselves to clients as “sex workers.” But, to avoid the stigmatization of their racialized identity and to make a profit, some workers kept their race a secret. Given the stereotypical assumptions and essential view that all racialized women are victims of human trafficking, and Indigenous women are poor street workers, invisibilizing their race has a profound effect on sex workers capacity to make a profit. Furthermore, for many workers in this study, their race is always apparent and therefore they are not in a position of passing. Sex workers who were in this position hypervisibilized their race and gender to compete in the market and make a profit.

Racialized sex workers in Canada are often invisible in public sphere. Their invisibility at demonstrations or street protests and parliamentary debates are often misconstrued, resulting in certain cultural imaginations and conclusions. The resulting assumptions and perceptions are that all racialized women are being pushed to the margins of the street-based sex industry, where they become targets of racial and gender violence (see Razack, 1998). Such stereotyping leads to the belief that racialized sex workers are not eloquent educated or sober enough to represent the image of an autonomous, responsible worker in the marketplace.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the common assumptions that all racialized and

Indigenous women in the sex industry are victims of exploitation and abuse. I suggest that such dubious discourse leads to the erasure of the passing subjects, and their ability to transform and mute their authentic identity to maximize their economic capitals. More importantly, it undermines racialized and Indigenous sex workers' entrepreneurial capacity that allows them to compete in the marketplace successfully.

### The double life

Throughout this research, I was struck by racialized and Indigenous sex workers' distinctly systemic and organized efforts to manage and avoid the stigma associated with sex work and their race. Their strategies are intentional, thoughtfully calculated and at times even contradictory. That is, to manage stigma racialized and Indigenous women's decision to live a double life is intentional, strategic and thoughtfully calculated. However, on the other hand for some workers living a double life included passing as a non-sex worker. Passing as a non-sex worker contradicts their political quest for recognition as human beings and as equal participants in the labour force through visibility. In addition to avoiding stigma, workers in this study cited other reasons for living a double life that has direct benefits for them as individuals. These benefits are associated with the value that workers place on their personal privacy and on protecting their family's reputation. In the following account, Tasia explains how her urge to publicly out herself as a sex worker is at odds with her desire for her personal privacy.

*For sure, for sure, like I've thought long and hard about like if I should come out as a sex worker and be like, this is my experience, this is who I am, and you know, this is how it doesn't agree with all the things that you're saying, but yeah there are really real cost to that, and you know I, I value my privacy, I value being able to do some of the things that I do without, you know, the public knowing and also like my clients knowing my personal identity, but yeah, it is frustrating because it means that the reality isn't being talked about in real terms.*

[[Tasia]]

Here we see that Tasia's decision to choose privacy over her public representation is an informed, calculated effort that has a profound effect on the ways in which she manages the stigma associated with sex work and race.

In addition to valuing personal privacy, workers I interviewed also talked about the importance of maintaining a healthy relationship with their family and community members. According to these women, their closeted position as sex worker also meant that they were protecting their family's integrity from stigma. Tala's testimony represents the voices of other research participants who expressed similar concerns.

*[W]hen I was asked to participate [in a public event] I have my qualms about it because like my parents even don't know I am a sex worker. They knew in the past that I did some sort of sketch, sketchy in their terms, quotation marks. For me to be able to speak at [a public event] on my experiences with the possible threat of being outed, to like everybody that I want to be close with, that's a serious problem. I think women of colour have always been constructed and continue to be constructed as like as Andrea Smith calls inherently rapeable, inherently dirty, inherently diseased, and when you combine that with the sex trade, then you know it's like the huge stigma that makes you not want to, you know to be exposed to the world. Even though you know you are not inherently dirty, you are not inherently diseased, and you are doing the same thing a white woman is doing, just across you know the street [laughing].*

[[Tala]]

Some women feared alienation and even expulsion from their families and communities. Therefore these women made a calculated decision to remain invisible by keeping their socially discredited identity a secret from everyone:

<sup>12</sup> See Jeffrey and Macdonald (2006a, 2006b) for discussion on white sex workers' experiences with stigmatization where these workers are represented as backward, victims, uneducated, addicted and whores.

*Yeah. I think it mostly has to do with not wanting to out myself, and really it's the stigma that comes along with it, and like I already kind of have this fraught relationship with [laughing] like Middle Eastern community [laughing] and yeah like and fear of you know violence and [pause] yeah, I mean, I'm sure that's like all regular stuff [laughing] yeah. It would probably like, totally cement my exclusion from the Middle Eastern community [laughing] like forever and always, like absolutely.*

[[Nasira]]

Tasia, Nasira and Tala's testimonies highlight that these women have made an informed decision to value their privacy and relationships with family and friends over a collective identity of "sex worker." These women's accounts clearly indicate that they want to avoid the impact of negative stigma by any means.

Goffman (1963) notes that "[t]he phenomenon of passing has always raised issues regarding the psychic state of the passer" (p87). Scholars in the field of sex work have engaged with and critiqued the assumption that sex workers must necessarily pay a great psychological price, a very high level of anxiety, in living a life that can be collapsed at any moment (Ross & Greenwell, 2005; Trautner & Collett, 2010; Wharton, 2009). "It is also assumed that the passer will feel torn between to attachments" (Goffman, 1963, p. 87) – she will feel some alienation by sex workers for not identifying fully with their attitude and a sense of disloyalty towards their family. While workers I spoke with indicated experiencing such challenges living a double life, they also reported that there were many advantages to keeping their "sex worker" identity a secret. For the women in this study then, the benefits of their double life outweighed the challenges.

Several women of colour in this study pointed out that being invisible as a "sex worker" was an asset to their cultural, religious and even conservative communities. Many of the women I spoke with are 2nd or 3rd generation Canadians; this means their parents and extended family members immigrated to Canada as adults. According to these women, it is difficult to be individualistic when immigrant parents are raising you and growing up among a close-knit immigrant community whose values are drastically different from Western values. While different ethnic groups and cultural practices may have different values, it is safe to assume that the sex industry and women's involvement in it are highly stigmatized in many cultures; Western and Eastern alike, such that it carries a very low status and heavy moral judgment (see Manopaiboon et al., 2003). In my study, according to women of colour, invisibility as a sex worker within such communities is strategic. These women can use their closeted and invisible composition as a sex worker to advocate for sex workers' rights within their communities. This involves educating and presenting alternate ways of understanding sex work and women's participation in it, to shatter assumptions and dispel popular myths. Nasira further explains her position for choosing to be invisible and her invisibility is evidently strategic and political:

*So I actually don't really know if I would be making headway in increasing understanding in that community [Middle Eastern] by like outing myself because they would just like never ever speak to me again [emphasis added by participant], I would just not be you know, like a part of it for the rest of my life. So it almost feels like I can actually do more good by staying in the community, and then when people say terrible, bigoted things like from totally non- knowledgeable perspective, I can then be like, "ha, have you considered it this other way instead" and then maybe I can be like taken a tiny little bit seriously you know because I still have some sense of veneer respectability [laughing] yeah. So I mean even just like as a strategy of like how to get these words across, I mean like being totally excluded isn't doing anyone any good.*

[[Nasira]]

For Indigenous women, their circumstances were similar to those of women of colour, in that all Indigenous women who participated in this

study noted that they are closeted and invisible as a sex worker. For Indigenous women, in addition to maintaining their privacy, avoiding negative stereotypes was important. All Indigenous participants pointed out that it was important to avoid the colonial script that all Indigenous women are sex workers (Barman, 2005; Henderson, 2003). Some of the Indigenous women I spoke with had transcended great barriers to shatter popular assumptions framing Indigenous people as drunks and lazy and as prostitutes; they held professional jobs in public institutions or were working their way through highly reputed professional degrees.<sup>13</sup>

Carina and Hanya, two Indigenous women, reflected on their reasons for choosing to remain invisible:

*And I think for Aboriginal people in the sex trade, there's often this invisible aspect to them because the family [clan] thing is so strong, and if word gets out back in the reserves that they're whoring in Vancouver, there's so much stigma and shame attached to that.*

[[Carina]]

*I have another job actually, part time with the government, that I'm hoping it's going to turn into something full time. Actually got into sex work more actively because this job remained part-time; it's a great job in my field, and I love it, but the hours aren't enough, there's a lot of unpaid downtimes, and I needed something to fill in the gap, and this works perfectly.*

[[Hanya]]

### Racialized and indigenous sex workers in the Neo-liberal marketplace

Racialized and Indigenous sex workers' visibility within the marketplace is as ambiguous as it is in their personal life. I argue that this ambiguity is intentional, calculated and strategic. For racialized and Indigenous sex workers, their (in)visibility composition within the marketplace has profound effects on how they manage the stigmatization of their race, and how they navigate the commerce – competing for economic rewards and ensuring profitability. In this sense racialized and Indigenous sex workers' decisions to make visible or invisibilize aspects of their multifaceted identities are not linear. Rather, they are highly dependent upon the economic context, the sites from which they are operating and their business relationships. A careful examination of racialized and Indigenous workers' entrepreneurial activities allows me to bring to the forefront of this discussion the ways in which their identity categories intersect with, overlap, construct and deconstruct one another. In doing so, sex workers in this study are first, disrupting the carefully marked lines of race, class, and gender that are legitimated as accepted systems of social recognition and cultural intelligibility; secondly they are casting a shadow on the notion of inherent "minoritized" identities.

The entrepreneurial activity that I focus on here is racialized and Indigenous sex workers' marketing and advertising strategies. Here I emphasize on the intersections of business enterprise and stigma management, in that I suggest marketing and advertising, as crucial element of any successful business venture, allows us to fully understand stigma management strategies and the ambiguity of (in)visibility compositions. It also allows us to unpack the autonomy, rationalities and self-interest of racialized sex workers who attempt to maximize utility as a consumer and profit as a producer.

<sup>13</sup> Given that the Indigenous population in the off-street and indoor sectors of sex industry is very small, to maintain confidentiality and privacy, I am unable to reveal more details about these participants' jobs and education.

### Third party<sup>14</sup> marketing

Workers I interviewed made a distinction between the ways in which they advertise and the ways in which third parties advertised their services. According to workers, owners and managers of in call locations very seldom devoted their time or money to market/advertise the services of racialized women. However, on the rare occasions when owners and managers devoted time/money to marketing racialized women or invisibilize them, they often mute the actual racial identities of certain ethnic groups and play up the actual racial identities of certain other groups. In this ambiguous visibilization process, Indigenous women are often invisibilized and marketed as mixed race. Mixed-race women, particularly those with one white parent, are marketed as white by playing up their lighter skin tones. Women of colour are visibilized as exotic by playing up their authentic racial identity. Misclassification of certain ethnic groups and the social demarcation of other ethnic groups, intentionally and/or inadvertently, generate very different economic outcomes. Owners/managers market the services of white and light skin women at a higher hourly rate than the hourly rate for women of colour. The economic worthiness assigned by third parties places light skinned women and the women who can convincingly pass as white at the top of the internal hierarchy of each establishment.

Within this consumer-driven economy, women of African heritage and visibly black or brown women were hyper-visualized and hyper-sexualized in third party advertisements. That is, when marketing these individuals, third parties played up their race and ethnicity to conform to negative stereotypes. Escort agencies and massage parlours used racialized marketing strategies that hyper-visibilized racial features and beauty. For example, advertisements for black women focus on features such as big breasts and big 'booties.' black women were photographed in animal print clothing for their profile photos with their ads reading: "are you up for a wild night out?" black women's skin tones were referenced to various foods such as burnt almond, caramel, hot fudge and brown sugar (see Bruckert & Law, 2013). If you compare this to the third party marketing strategies of white escorts and masseuses, those ads focused on things like intelligence, personality traits, and presentability. Lidia shares her frustration with the way in which the third party market white women. *But like, you know, the white women they all have a vast, different like personalities and like education backgrounds and like "oh this one likes to travel and she's really into like surfing and yoga." Like everyone else is like "Oh, well, she's black and she's like a Nubian Queen." Like that's it, that's your tell, like that's all you get [Lidia]*

Advertisements for services by white women also read: "date with a blonde Canadian sweetheart" or "gorgeous French Canadian angel." In third-party advertisements for white women, I also frequently saw words like a fun loving, upscale beauty, charismatic, intelligent, witty, etc. (see Bruckert & Law, 2013). The following accounts by Jazzra and Usha represent the majority of participants' experiences. In these accounts, Jazzra and Usha reflect on third parties' marketing practices of racialized women. Here the two women share their frustration about being reduced to a set of images or spectacles.

*The first one, like they would lie all the time, they were like "Oh, she's like super[dark]." ... Okay, so I'm not super dark at all. Like I'm not light, but I'm not dark. And so they'd be like "Oh, yeah, she's like dark chocolate." Like I have tattoos and stuff, and they'd be like "She's got like just smooth, like clean skin and big booty, big boobs." And I'm like "Oh my God, I sound like a fricking balloon character like I don't sound human." And they just, they were really, the first agency was really objectifying, like it was not, like I never found it to be like in terms of endearment or anything like that. "Like oh, she's really smooth, sexy, whatever." It was*

*just like "These are her features, this is what she looks like, she's like 5'6", big tits, big ass" you know that T and A, like where am I. But like, you know, the white women they all have a vast, different like personalities and like education backgrounds, and like oh this one likes to travel, and she's really into like surfing and yoga. Like everyone else is like "Oh, well, she's black and she's like a Nubian Queen." Like that's it, that's your tell like that's all you get. So I think it's more appealing to have more things about a person.*

[(Jazzra)]

*Oh my goodness! Voluptuous, exotic, Caribbean Princess. I never was marketed as Jamaican; it was more Caribbean - it was an island beauty, curvy. If they had a picture of me, and I was in a black vest, black booty shorts, and black thigh-high boots, so the impression was domination, even though I wasn't trained as a dom. There was one ad that they did where it was like, "Obey her or else," or something like that. But it was mostly like a Caribbean princess, hot chocolate, that kind of thing... they were predictable. I didn't really feel much about it because it's - I saw some of the ads for the women, like the Latin women and the Latin love and all that stuff, so it was all about playing your race a bit. So I'm not surprised that I got hot fudge, you know what I mean? They're not going to have intellectual, whatever.*

[(Usha)]

On the one hand, marketing women with a racial identity other than their own can have its benefits. According to research participants, it protects their privacy and their actual identity. On the other hand, however, third parties' engagement in this process of misrepresentation only meets market demands and caters to client preferences. Under such circumstances, the threshold for visibility of recognition is much lower, such that the misrecognition and denial of recognition results in racialized sex workers being visibilized as spectacles—as a set of ideological images to a great extent leaving women feeling disempowered and controlled.

### Workers' advertising

Racialized and Indigenous sex workers' self-advertising/marketing strategies did not vastly differ from that of third parties. However, it is important to note that the intent and ultimately the outcome of these two types of marketing/advertising strategies are immensely different. That is, racialized and Indigenous workers' decisions and efforts to (in)visibilize aspects of their identity are calculated and strategic. Their calculated strategies include invisibilization and hypervisibilization: passing as non-racialized individuals, and performing uniquely raced, classed and gendered identities. More importantly racialized and Indigenous sex workers' calculated marketing/advertising strategies primarily focus on maximizing market demands, and increasing capacity to compete for economic rewards, while also managing racial stigmatizations.

Workers who used self-advertising/marketing strategies invested a significant amount of time and money. Their self-marketing strategy includes hiring professional photographers and specialists to build their websites. Some women limit themselves to taking selfies and posting advertisements on sites like Craig's List, Eros, and [Backpage.com](http://Backpage.com). Participants in this study described their advertising/marketing as including decisions about, and responsibility for, what information goes into their advertisements, and how they promote themselves and the services they offer. In this regard racialized and Indigenous workers I spoke with made calculated decisions to strategically invisibilize or hypervisibilize their authentic racial identity. Their strategic visibility/invisibility compositions are motivated by market demands and the optimum way of increasing income revenues for their personal gain. The following account by Laine articulated her intentions to hypervisibilize her beauty by performing or playing up her authentic racial identity as

<sup>14</sup> I borrow this term from Bruckert and Law (2013), who uses it to refer to indoor sector owners and managers, and to pimps

a marketing strategy. Laine is a mixed race woman who has ancestry in East Asian and white Canadian cultures.

*I was like, yes, I am your exotic. I use these words, you know, my exotic sparkling eyes, your mixed race, you know, all of those, all of those things. I've it all in there, and I'm like, you know what, it's true, if I am gonna hack capitalism, then I am going to exploit all of the angles that I have it's true... in my body, I am also, you know, thin. But all of these things, using all of those markers, privileged and you know typically attractive markers to make money, so this is just one more thing.*

[(Laine)]

Laine's business approach is to visibilize her exotic features to enhance her profitability. The strategy to hypervisibilize her racial features/beauty or her exoticness in advertisement includes performing normative stereotypes. Divya and Mariyam point out how their marketing strategy conforms to stereotypical features that are legitimated through accepted systems of social recognition:

*I market myself as like, have like Bollywood somewhere in my title. Like, I market myself as Indian. Yeah, when I'm doing my ads I have, like, a video. I have a video of me in a sari and, like, and then, like, pictures of [me in]lehenga<sup>15</sup> and stuff like that, so I - I play up the Indian aspects. A lot of my clients are Indian men.*

[(Divya)]

*When I used to work in Alberta, when I was just advertising as a South Asian BBW or just a regular ad, I wasn't getting as many calls, but the second that I put the word "Pakistani" in it, it's almost like it was a golden egg or something, a golden duck.*

[(Mariyam)]

Just like Divya and Mariyam, workers who made a choice to play up their exoticness did so to strategically distinguish themselves from the larger population of white sex workers. By standing out, these women are placing themselves in a position to attract a diverse clientele – white clients, clients of colour, high-class clients and working-class clients. Profitability within the sex industry means potentially more political and social capital. Leah recounts the way she markets her exoticness: “lush lips, and big butt and big thighs, and you know exotic, caramel skinned this and that.” Pearlina said that “I’ll say, caramel-coloured Caribbean beauty.” As visible in these firsthand accounts, several women used food references in their advertisement as well. By playing up their race and racial features, hypervisibilizing their exoticness in their self-marketing strategies, these women strategically conform and resist racial norms and stereotypes. In making these decisions, these women are strategically manipulating their visibility composition to obtain real economic effects and gain.

On the other hand, Lidia's business approach is to focus on the services she provides. Lidia's business approach is noteworthy because her strategic decision to keep her racial identity out of the advertisement allows her to control the distribution of information carefully. This is a good example of a calculated decision by an entrepreneur. Also, Day (2007) claims this to be a hidden quality of sex work, where sex workers “achieve a precarious independence through carefully controlling the distribution of information and knowledge” (p.55).

*Oh, I don't even need to, like I don't mention that I'm a person of colour at all. Like it's just my services, 100% and they meet me, and they're like “Whoa, wow,” and I'm like, yeah, well. And I find like maybe just for my own self, it's more, well I like it to be like as anonymous for me but also like being able to give the client like this is what you're getting, this is what you should expect. Like I'm a very tit-for-tat type person, so I want this experience to be about you and like good and all that stuff, so please let's have some sort of connection. But I also like to kind of keep the air,*

*an element of surprise... Like not, you know, it's just, yeah, it's different. So I don't, I don't need to advertise that I'm like a busty, ebony goddess.*

[(Lidia)]

In a service-based economy, Lidia's strategy to only focus on the human interaction and the emotional services that her clients can expect places her in a position to also attract a diverse clientele; a diverse clientele increases the potential for profitability. Lidia points out the “element of surprise” not only have a profound effect on the experience of the encounter, but from a business standpoint, her advertisement has a net widening effect. Lidia's business approach also points to the commercialization of intimacy (see Brents & Hausbeck, 2010).

Lidia and a few other workers' marketing and advertising strategy focus only on the services they provide. However, other workers were more like Laine – they made a choice to promote their interpersonal skills and personality, along with features like hair colour and hair length. Sarena notes that:

*[I] advertise myself as being a student. I focus mainly on like that I'm funny and I'm intelligent, and I am like very nice and bubbly, and I usually try to have my personality characteristics played up, but I do advertise myself as being, I actually do use food references in terms of skin colour a lot, [chuckles].*

[(Sarena)]

Sarena's strategy to market her interpersonal skills along with her racial identity also has tremendous profit potential. It also is a counter representation to the stigmatizing attitudes that paint sex workers as backward and uneducated.

Furthermore, as with third party marketing/advertising strategy, racialized and Indigenous sex workers' self-advertising and marketing strategy included decisions to pass as white. These intentional decisions to mute their race primarily served to manage stigma. Of course passing as a white sex worker inherently means that these women can maximize their capacity to compete for economic reward and increase their capacity to earn a living income. Of course, women who made the decision to pass as white were all biracial women with one white parent. Strategically muting their mixed racial identity was not difficult because these women also had pale skin, some had blue eyes, and they had the physique of a white woman – that is they had a smaller frame, and they were thin and tall. Among these women, those who inherited any of the non-white features, such as curly hair, or a big nose, transformed their racial identity by altering the features to resemble those of white women. For example, women who had curly hair would chemically straighten it, or some were able to use a flat iron simply. They also often used wigs.

*I am not a fan of how [my hair] looks right now. I'm not really comfortable with it. I never wore my hair like this and 'cause I think it looks ethnic, you know [chuckles] and it does, and I'm not comfortable being ethnic. For the most part, I have a straightening iron in my purse, and I have it straightened. It makes it easier to, to use to work with. It makes me look different I think. Like I think I look different with straight hair than I do with curly hair.*

[(Saskia)]

Furthermore, women with olive skin tones often marketed themselves as mixed race, with origins from Latin America, Spain or Italy. In these cases, women muted their true identity for an alternate identity. All Indigenous women in this study muted their authentic identity and invisibilized themselves as Indigenous. Their marketing strategies often visibilized them as white or as Mediterranean. Manipulating their subjectivity in this way allowed them to attract upscale clients and charge rates comparable to those of their white counterparts. For these participants, especially the Indigenous and black women, passing as white, mixed race or an alternate race is not by any means abandoning their actual identity and their culture, rather they are

<sup>15</sup> Traditional Indian outfits that made up of long skirt, blouse and a long scarf.

resisting the negative stigma and social recognition associated with Indigenous and black sex workers. Tallah recounts her experience with muting her racial identity:

*I just advertise myself as Brazilian because my pictures do show that I have brown skin so I have to dissociate, you know, with my brown skin with being black. So Brazilian is like the word, the motto, the word that I use on all my profiles to dissociate myself with, you know, my African roots.*

[(Tallah)]

For Indigenous women, claiming a white identity is the only way they get hired by escort agencies. According to these women, taking on this white or mixed race persona involves not just talking the talk, but it demands walking the walk that represents the idealized young, white womanhood. This means that when the women are out on their dates, they have to be very conscious about the way they speak – for example, they avoid using slang. To look and act like their upper-class or aspiring upper-class customers, racialized women had to tap into their white upbringing and education. Saskia, a mixed-race woman, reminisces about her experiences as a passing subject and the benefits of performing whiteness:

*I identify myself as white. Yeah, I was raised the white side of my family versus the coloured side, and I am definitely whitewashed [chuckles] I totally am, and I guess I am kinda racist in the fact that I pride myself on that. If being educated and speak well means I am white, ok I will take it, you know sadly enough I'll take it, like I, I love that I am mixed, I love that my kids are mixed. They all came out white looking too [chuckles] but I, there's a lot, there's a lot more positive reinforcement towards being white in any way shape or form. I'm not, I'm not unhappy to say that I'm mixed, but yeah, I am whitewashed more than anything ...Oh, it just means doors are open so much more easily, you know.*

[(Saskia)]

Saskia reflects on what it means to be whitewashed. In the following account, she reflects on what it means to walk the walk. For racialized and Indigenous women this means shedding some cultural habits and adopting some Eurocentric mannerisms.

*I always tell all my clients you don't have to remind me about how to dress appropriately when I see you. Because I am not walking in looking like a hooker [emphasis added by participant] you know. I'm very conservative. I know how when to shut my mouth, you know what I mean, how to read people ...Like I don't talk, excuse me with a, with a like ghetto accent, I don't use swear words or curse words or slang, you know. Yeah, or like a familiar gesture, like lame black woman sucks their teeth you know what I mean. You wouldn't catch me dead doing it, at all, no ...the opportunities are more likely to be offered to me than somebody else, yeah, yeah and if I were raised on my dad side because my dad's side is [name of a region in a city]. I would never have gotten those. I don't think I would be making as much or having the same type of standards that I do.*

[(Saskia)]

Workers in this study also pass as high-class in almost all of their business encounters. According to these workers passing as high-class requires them to be very mindful of the space in which they are operating – so if they are having dinner at a high-class restaurant, they must dress elegantly and follow the etiquette of a high-class white woman – like slowly sipping their wine and knowing when to use which fork. These women pointed out that successfully performing this idealized and standardized version of class and beauty was empowering. Manipulating clients and the management staff to believe in their disguise meant that they were rebelling while participating in a sector of the labour market that marginalizes and excludes women of colour and

Indigenous women. Manipulating their racial identity also allows them to resist the negative stereotypes of black and Indigenous women in the sex industry. Of course passing and performing whiteness benefits workers with the most social capital, and in this respect, the adult sex industry resembles yet another feature of the mainstream economy (Brents & Hausbeck, 2010).

Passing strategies were also prevalent among participants who identified as genderqueer or gender non-binary. These participants marketed themselves as “women” in their advertisement. If they worked for an escort agency or massage parlour, they visibilized themselves as women there as well. They also presented as women and performed the normative femininity with their clients. In the face of mainstream discourses and perceptions constructing the male patrons as dominant and in control, and the sex workers as subservient females, these strategies allow sex workers to manipulate the interaction with their clients and normative gendered, racial and class scripts. This, in turn, allows them to compete in as businesspeople the sex industry and make a profit. Secondly, it allows them to transform the male patrons from agents of oppression into mere consuming objects. In this way, by passing and performing normative racial and gender roles, the sex workers in this study invert the sexual scripts and see themselves as controlling and manipulating not only their own but also their client's sexuality for profit. Racialized women in this study pointed out that they felt empowered in using the normative expectations to their advantage (see Hannem & Bruckert, 2016).

## Conclusion

Throughout this paper, I have explored racialized and Indigenous sex worker's capacity to compete and profit within a neoliberal, consumer-driven, service-based marketplace. By charting these workers entrepreneurial attitudes, tendencies, and activities through passing and performing I locate their motivations and self-interest within the principles of capitalism. On the one hand, racialized and Indigenous sex workers' ability to profit as entrepreneurs shatters the well-established conservative assumptions that all racialized, and Indigenous sex workers are exploited victims who need to be saved by white men (Agustín, 2007). On the other hand, by participation in the upscale sectors of the Canadian sex industry racialized and Indigenous women are controlling the mode of production and this contradicts capitalist principles. It is in these contexts that racialized and Indigenous sex workers hack the Canadian sex industry under capitalism.

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