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**ORGANIZING RESISTANCE: THE CASE OF EROTIC DANCERS**

by

**SUZANNE BOUCLIN**

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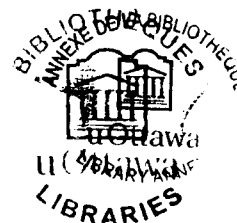
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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is intended to further the feminist goal of documenting women's history, with a particular focus on the labour organizing of marginal women. It presents and critically engages with attempts by Ontario-based erotic dancers to collectively resist changes in their labour practices and industry standards over the last three decades. Within this broader framework, the author focuses on the Dancers' Equal Rights Association (DERA) in Ottawa, with whom she has a long-standing working relationship. Specifically, this research grapples with the manner in which DERA emerges as a legitimate voice for dancers and whether its goals – the eradication of lap dancing and achieving employee status - resonate with the broader erotic dancing community. The object of this inquiry is to tease out and analyze the collective strategies adopted by DERA, and the contradictions that emerge within their discourses.

Feminist theories, that emphasize women's agential practices in light of conditions of constraint, and methodological assumptions that center women's experiences and foster self-reflexive analysis, guide the author's findings. As such, the centerpiece of this project is to identify whether DERA can effect changes within the erotic dance industry that will permit dancers to exercise agency within conditions of constraint, or whether its approach may serve to further marginalize particular segments of the dancer community.

The author concludes that collectively organizing has enabled dancers to subvert stereotypes encrypted in their choice of occupation and provides a space in which they can emerge as *workers*. It has also been an effective strategy for mobilizing the broader community around dancers' labour needs *as they define them*. However, the legitimizing discursive tactics adopted by dancer affiliations can further marginalize certain segments of the dancer population by catering to the goals of those dancers who already possess the 'cultural capital' to make more meaningful choices within conditions of constraint. Furthermore, DERA's successes notwithstanding, it remains reticent in adopting more formal labour organizing strategies. However, some of the more material changes that it wishes to implement may well require forging relationships with unions.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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**I am also indebted to James and to my parents, for their support, understanding, and encouragement when it was most required.**

**Most importantly, I am grateful to the members of DERA for generously sharing their life histories and for extending their friendship to me. This thesis is largely the result of the many interactions we have had over the last two years.**

## INTRODUCTION

*In trying to stop abuses in [the sex industries] one should not try to put women out of work (Pheterson, 1987: 5).*

Erotic dancing - also referred to as one segment of the skin trades<sup>1</sup>, exotic dancing<sup>2</sup> go-go dancing, stripping, the plus-sex business<sup>3</sup>, shake artistry, performance sex, topless / bottomless / nude dancing, the legal sex trade, panty-peeling, lap-dating, porno-active dancing<sup>4</sup>, table-top dancing, a part of the broader sexual economy<sup>5</sup> or sex work<sup>6</sup>, sexually oriented work and / or eroticized labour - is, in principle, the exchange of visual sexual thrills for money. While there have been shifts in the industry standards and labour practices over time, erotic dancing most often involves a woman disrobing

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<sup>1</sup> Skin trade is a useful concept because it emphasizes the work involved in erotic dancing as well as the fact that it is one visual experience among a broader spectrum of eroticized labour that (in principle) does not involve sexual contact between the viewer and the performer (Bruckert, 2002; Exotic Dancers Alliance, 1998). It also reflects the distinction between the sex trade (e.g. prostitutes, escorts, erotic masseuses) and the skin trade (pornographic actresses, erotic dancers) reinforced by many industry workers (Bruckert, 2002). While women working in either or in both trades remain vulnerable to stigmatization, some erotic dancers have steadfastly argued that they are entirely distinct from sex workers (DERA, 2000). Others however, recognize the specificities of the labour in which stripteasers engage, but favour coalition-building between women from the sex trades and erotic dancers as part of a larger group of service providers (Breyer and Passar, 1998; EDA, 1998; STELLA, 2000; IUSW, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The term exotic implies a form of 'imported' delicacy and is steeped with colonial discourses (Hill Collins, 2004; hooks, 1992; Monture, 1995). While it is the dominant term, it is not one I endorse; it only appears in my research when I am citing another author or an informant who adopts it.

<sup>3</sup> Yuracko (2004) characterizes industries that sell 'bundled commodities' of which one is sexual titillation as the 'plus sex' business; these industries include erotic dance clubs.

<sup>4</sup> Prewitt (1989: 140) distinguishes between erotic dance clubs and pornographic films in the following manner: consumers in strip clubs are visible to one and other and to the entertainers; they may become active participants in the entertainment (by getting on stage for instance); and they can engage in verbal interactions with the performers.

<sup>5</sup> Sanchez (1997) locates erotic dancing within a semi-organized collective of venues and practices of commercial sex.

<sup>6</sup> A number of writers and activists have subsumed erotic dancing within the broader rubric of the sex trade (L. Bell, 1987; S. Bell, 1994; Chapkis, 1997; Cornell, 2000; Delacoste and Alexander, 1987; Frank, 2002; Lewis, 2000; McClintock, 1993; Nagle, 1997). Generally speaking, the term sex trade refers to the diverse set of practices involving gradations of explicit exchanges of sex acts for monetary remuneration or other forms of compensation (Chapkis, 1997; Sanchez, 1997).

and suggestively positioning her body for heterosexual men;<sup>7</sup> and it usually takes place in striptease clubs.<sup>8</sup> Regardless of nomenclature, erotic dancing is fundamentally a means for women<sup>9</sup> to make a living. It can be part-time, temporary / seasonal work, or a full-time career. While erotic dancing can be highly rewarding, both financially and personally, it may also be experienced as exploitative and oppressive. More likely than not, however, the work of an erotic dancer is located between these two extremes (Bruckert, 2002; Egan, 2003(b); Frank, 2002; Sanchez, 1997) and dancers both individually *and* collectively negotiate choices for themselves within constraining work environments. In this context, resistance refers to tactics or strategies that individuals employ in order to subvert or contest the conditions of constraint in which they exist.

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<sup>7</sup> Although it has been a feature of Western landscape since the 1970s, male erotic dancing has not been the subject of in-depth study. Further, the research that does exist, with the exception of Smith (2002), focuses on the experience in the United States. For instance, Liepe-Levinson (2002) provides a rich analysis of gender performances in stripclubs and looks at both male and female erotic dancers. She discusses how two 'similar performances' - the removal of clothes and gyrating for money - have very different meanings when performed by a woman as opposed to a man. For women, erotic dancing has been described as anything from "a representation of Freud's primal scene" to female rebellion or "socio-sexual purgation" to the "instigator of vice and crime" (2002:1, ftn 1). Male dancers, on the other hand, have been described alternately as "turning the tables" (transgressing traditional viewer/viewed roles) or as just plain silly (Dressel and Peterson, 1982). More recently, some sociologists argue that the emergence of male strip clubs is evidence of female emancipation and greater formal equality among the sexes (Leroy, 1994). However, according to Liepe-Levinson, the nudity involved, and the sexuality that is enacted in male and female strip shows is of a different variety. The status that men hold in our society combined with the content of the male strip show (emphasis on male physical strength and skills) reflects a different power dynamic between patron and dancer. The nudity of women, on the contrary resonates with broader "the cultural and physical vulnerability" of women (2002: 9) as well as societal norms which dictate that men should have access to women's bodies.

<sup>8</sup> While lingerie shops, saunas / spas, juice bars, restaurants are also known to offer erotic / table dancing, the focus of this research is on workers within striptease clubs.

<sup>9</sup> I address the strip trade from the perspective of the women working within them. While I acknowledge that an examination of the men who also engage in this work would enrich this analysis, a thorough study of their experiences is beyond the confines of this research. My discussion on the sex and skin trade is inevitably focused on heterosexual stripclubs catering to men. Because there are so few male clubs (there is only one in the entire Ottawa-Hull area) women have fewer opportunities to patronize them. In fact, many of the clients in strip club are club 'virgins' who do not know how to act, what they are allowed to do and how much (if at all) they can touch the male dancer. This is very different than in clubs where women dance, according to Montemurro (2001) - who provides a detailed discussion of female patrons of male stripclubs - where the behavioural norms are institutionalized and regulated.

Throughout this research, I emphasize both individual tactics, such as discursive resistance within the Foucauldian understanding of power, as well as collective forms of resistance, such as formal organizing, which find their roots in more traditional Marxian blueprints for social change. My focus however, is on the latter: dancers' attempts to *collectively* respond to changes within their labour practices.

Shifts in industry standards have increased emotional and physical demands placed upon erotic dancers, their vulnerability to sexual and physical violence, as well as atrophied their income and employment security. The centerpiece of this thesis, therefore, is an effort at teasing out the potentials and complexities inherent to erotic dancers' affiliations that are attempting to collectively resist exploitative working conditions. Specifically, I explore how dancers' organizations, which have emerged throughout the last three decades, formed in an effort to effect more meaningful choices within their changing work environments. While I emphasize the experience of erotic dancers in the Ottawa-region, I do from time to time make reference to other models of organizing that may hold some potential for marginal and stigmatized workers. Finally, the following lines of inquiry guide me: How is the labour of erotic dancers organized in Ottawa clubs today?; In what manner has the labour structure shifted over time?; Since the Burlesque era to the present, in what form has dancers' resistance materialized?; What impact if any, have dancers' associations had on galvanizing changes in industry standards?; and How can we ensure that feminist theory and activism remain relevant to the process of effecting more meaningful choices for dancers in terms of standard labour practices?

Within this broader framework, I focus on the case of the Dancers' Equal Rights Association (DERA) in Ottawa, with whom I have developed and sustained a long-term working relationship. My goal is to identify whether DERA's discourses and approach

have the potential to enable transgressive responses (resistance) to the present situation of Ottawa-based exotic dancers.

My interest in contributing to the existing research around the labour organizing of marginal women workers (i.e. Fudge, 1997; Warskett, 1993) was generated by my commitment to feminism and to the promotion of social justice. As hooks (1997: 26) writes:

Feminism is the struggle to end sexist oppression (...) Its aim is not to benefit solely any specific group of women, any particular race or class of women. It does not privilege women over men. It has the power to transform, in a meaningful way, all our lives.

Indeed, documenting and critically engaging with the attempts by a group of women to collectively resist oppressive working conditions, speaks to bigger issues such as how gender, class, and race relations operate in the labour market. Furthermore, by focusing on the manner in which stigmatized workers, and specifically erotic dancers, actively resist oppression, I am engaging with a broader attempt to dispel myths about women as passive victims. My interest in this particular subject (the organizing of marginalized and stigmatized workers) was spurred upon reading *Whores and Other Feminists* (Nagel ed, 1997) during my final year of law school. It is at this time that I began to truly grapple with why my own feminist activism had not ventured into the realm of erotic labour. Indeed, Reinharz has warned that feminists must be "vigilant lest research from the standpoint of women' be a slogan masking the feminist researcher's application of her own ideas onto the women she studies" (1992: 72). For this reason, I continue to struggle with my own conjectures about erotic dancers as well as my broad understanding of the stigma hoisted upon women working within industries characterized by commodified sex. As such, my research object and my underlying assumptions about the erotic dance industry have shifted over the past two years of working with DERA and Stigmatized Labour Support Network (SLSN). I have also developed friendships with dancers, some of whom self-define as 'feminist-minded' rather than

'feminist', a term which, given my convictions, I find difficult to assimilate.<sup>10</sup> This in itself has disrupted and challenged my understanding of my own feminist principles and activism in powerful ways. Third, the knowledge produced from this research is, at its core, an attempt at political activism. Ultimately, it is my hope that this project will contribute to DERA's efforts at shaping better work environments for the erotic dancer community in Ottawa. By grappling with dancers' collective defiance and resistance, I am also attempting to record a moment of marginal and stigmatized women workers' history. With this in mind, I provide you with a breakdown of my chapters.

In chapter one, I outline and analyze the academic, legal, and autobiographical accounts of the working experiences of erotic dancers, including how they negotiate their lack of employment status. As will be noted, while there has been significant literature on the erotic dance business, there have been few attempts at amassing and engaging with the data on dancers' collective resistance to injustices. Nevertheless, recent studies by legal scholars and ethnographic accounts of dancers' employment status (or lack thereof) and everyday tactics adopted by dancers who resist unfair working conditions, are highly relevant and form the foundation of my discussion around labour organizing.

In chapter two, I discuss my theoretical influences and direction: feminist discourses around erotic labour. The aim is to summarize dominant discourses that frame erotic labour, to highlight some of the assumptions inherent to each, and to contrast these with more recent feminist theorizing. This chapter was borne of my

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<sup>10</sup> Indeed, DERA specifically promotes itself as 'feminist-minded' rather than 'feminist'. I tend to agree given that, while a women's organization, is not necessarily a *feminist* organization. First, there is a strict hierarchical structure in place whereby most, if not all, of the decision-making authority lies with one key DERA spokesperson. Second, as will be elaborated upon in chapter five, DERA's policies often reinforce existing structures of (dis)advantage, which marginalize particular segments of women. Finally, while some sex and skin trade worker organizations have aligned their activism in terms of broader feminist struggles (USPROS for instance advocates for affordable housing, abortion rights, anti-racist immigration policies, and universal childcare) DERA's activism lacks a more substantive feminist agenda.

struggle with the reality that how I understand the erotic industries is shaped by my feminist convictions, my social and economic privilege, and my close personal and working-relationship with my informants. To this end, my self-conscious doubling-back around striptease, resistance, and collective action has revealed my own shifting commitments and fractured ideas around equality, desire, power, the law, feminist theories, the body, and work.

Surely as a white<sup>11</sup>, middle-class, English-speaking, able-bodied woman, I occupy a space of significant privilege. Furthermore, as a feminist lawyer, I also have a penchant for pragmatism and often favour the use of formal resistance(s) over less tangible 'every day' acts. My commitment to direct action instead of abstraction remains at the center of this research. In spite of this, the postmodern influences on my understanding of the skin and sex trade will no doubt be revealed. I have for this reason adopted an interdisciplinary approach which commingles law, criminology, and women's studies in an attempt to recognize the prevalence of individual strategies of resistance in which dancers engage, while centering the more formal, collective forms of resistance. To this end, I have drawn upon multi-pronged qualitative research methods including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and literature review. These methodological tools are developed in detail in chapter three.

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<sup>11</sup> Anti-racist theorists argue that 'race' is a social construct, one that is dynamic and shifting and that the ideological concept 'white' must be read within a discussion of 'whiteness', or as Gilroy writes, "the founding absurdity of race as a principle of power, differentiation, and classification must now remain persistently, obstinately, in view." (2000: 7). Because I identify as white, I am privy to the bundle of rights bestowed upon people of a particular ancestral lines (i.e. French, English, Russian, Irish, German, Polish). Colonial and hegemonic structures have historically operated and continue to reinforce the idea that people who fit into the "white" category are both biologically and culturally superior to people who are othered. Being "white" has enabled me to vote, to attend institutions of higher education, to see people who look like me on television, in film and in the media. See generally: Omi and Winant, McIntosh, 1989.

Having outlined the general framework, theoretical underpinnings, and overarching themes to my research, chapter four examines developments in the striptease industry from the 1970s onward, and records how Ontario-area dancers have organized to resist disruptions in their working conditions.<sup>12</sup> A meaningful discussion around the significance and potential of dancers' affiliations cannot take place without a summary of past efforts. Indeed, sketching the historical shifts in the industry can assist in understanding, explaining, and subverting current systems of oppression that operate within the striptease business. For this reason, I document the work of those erotic dancers who have organized and fundamentally challenged stereotypes about dancers. Unwittingly or not, these women emerge as labour rights activists mobilizing to ensure better working conditions for dancers. That chapter closes with a detailed examination of DERA, whose members are my primary informants. While chapter four is more of a descriptive record of erotic dancers' affiliations, critically engaging with the DERA's discourses is the work of chapter five. The object of this inquiry is to tease out the meaning of DERA to its members, its potential as a venue for collective resistance, and the contradictions that emerged in its approach. In this chapter, I also grapple with the manner in which DERA has become a legitimate voice and whether that voice is one that resonates with the broader erotic dancing community. More generally, I tackle the question at the fore of my research: whether formal organizing, and DERA in particular, is a sustainable means for dancers to exercise agency within conditions of constraint. This thesis ends with a discussion of my conclusions, the potential relevance of this

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<sup>12</sup> While a thorough discussion around whether, and if so in what manner, these shifts have taken place in other international and national jurisdictions would have enriched this research project, the diversity in legal regulation and societal responses to erotic dancing renders such an examination beyond the confines of this thesis.

research to both feminist theories and activism around working class women's organizations, as well as considerations for future research on erotic dancers and collective resistance.

## CHAPTER 1

### Reading Erotic Dancing: A Review of Literature

The purpose of this chapter is to outline and analyze the academic, legal and autobiographical accounts of the working experiences of female erotic dancers. Part one is an overview of the literature related to the structure of the labour in which erotic dancers engage. I move from the research on erotic dancing of the 1960s to the 1980s, that draw on criminological symbolic interactionist perspectives, toward more recent ethnographic accounts that build upon performance theory, labour analysis, and postmodernism to provide a more complex reading of the working environment of erotic dancers. Part two outlines the research of legal scholars who would deem erotic dancers to be employees instead of independent contractors.<sup>13</sup> I go on to review ethnographic framings of erotic dancers' employment relationships. This research provides evidence that undermines some of the assumptions upon which 'dancer as employee' arguments are made. Further, it (re)conceptualizes erotic dancers as entrepreneurs. It is this body of literature that informs and sets the stage for my broader research project: documenting and critically engaging with the efforts of Ontario-area dancers who are attempting to collectively resist unfair employment conditions and effect

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<sup>13</sup> "Employed" and "self-employed" are not terms of art. Their definitions and the distinctions between them, are vague, complex, and vary depending on the sociological, legal and / or statistical context in which they are being used (Fudge et al, 2002). There are for instance, various formulations of the test currently used by Canadian courts and administrative tribunals for determining whether a worker is an employee or an independent contractor. Generally speaking, the following factors, while not determinative, may nonetheless be indicative of an employer-employee relationship: ownership of tools and equipment lies in the hands of the club owner, as do the risks of economic gains and losses; there is regularity of employment (or set schedules / shifts / hours of work); workers do not possess the right to delegate performance of their work; and public perception of an employment relationship (England, 1998). Note that some Canadian jurisdictions have expanded the definition of contractor to include the concept of "dependent contractors" which can extend collective bargaining rights to self employed workers who are economically dependent on particular clients (Fudge et al, 2002; Saunders, 2003).

more meaningful choices in terms of labour practices available to erotic dancers.

### ***Part One: From Deviance to Resistance***

*The characterization of the work of exotic dancers as deviant or stigmatized remains an unexamined preconception about women in the sex industry. It places women in a double bind. They aren't expected to have a sense of self apart from being exotic dancers because deviance becomes the most salient aspect of identity to the observer. When dancers assert a sense of self that is distinct from their personas, their behavior is interpreted as defensive and compensatory (Perrucci, 2000: 45).*

From the 1960s to the 1980s, a large proportion of the sociological research around exotic dancing emanated from the symbolic interactionist tradition. Primarily, this body of work explores women's personal motivations for occupational entry as well as the experiences of female erotic dancers as *deviants*.<sup>14</sup> For the most part, erotic dancing has been, and to a certain extent continues to be, framed as a deviant occupation. The majority of researchers examine how erotic dancers manage and negotiate stigma, and emphasizes their relationships with other deviant and stigmatized behaviour: working in the illegal sex trades ('prostitution', massage, escort); adopting a transgressive sexuality (lesbian, bisexual); committing petty crime (theft); and abusing alcohol and drugs (Boles, 2001; Boles and Garbin, 1974(a), 1974(b); Carey et al, 1974; Forsythe and Desotels, 1997; McGaghy and Skipper, 1970, 1974; Salutin, 1977; Thompson and Harred, 1992).

These texts, while adopting a labour framework, are limited in relevance to my research for a number of reasons. First, as Bruckert and Parent (2004) note, the symbolic interactionist research of the last few decades never fully subverted the traditional assumptions regarding deviance, nor had it provided adequate theorizing

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<sup>14</sup> For instance, Boles and Garbin (1974), Skipper and McGaghy (1974) and Salutin (1977) suggest that women enter, or remain within, the skin trade because of oppressive factors in their social and personal lives such as: lack of formal education, abusive families or partners, addictions, and financial hardship.

around gender and sexuality. Moreover, symbolic interactionist researchers failed at examining their own social, economic, and political locations and ultimately engaged in "othering." Similarly, Frank (2002) and Perrucci (2000) argue that the focus on deep-seated motivations of women who enter the skin trade overshadows broader social, political, and economic issues. Frank writes that the emphasis on the "social transgressions of women" in effect normalizes the desires of male customers who pay for women to take off their clothes and to engage in conversation with them. Her work attempts to question this very normalizing:

An assumption that I make (...) then, is that the behaviour of the male customers of strip clubs needs to be interrogated as a modern form of voyeuristic, gendered leisure practice, rather than unproblematically taken to be an expression of some normal male sexuality (2002a: 2).

Finally, earlier research does not account for the fact that there is no unified 'dancer experience': individual women are located along varying axes of (dis) advantage based on race, class, age, cultural background, sexuality and (dis) ability. This criticism can be extended to more recent research as well. With the notable exception of Brooks (1997, 2000) who discusses the focuses on the particular work-related inequities to Black dancers, race is rarely central to activist-thinkers' analysis of erotic dance - though it is sometimes broached in examinations of the broader inequities which dancers face (Ross, 2000; Funari, 2000).

The critique provided by Bruckert and Parent (2004), Frank (2002), and Perrucci (2000) of the traditional symbolic interactionist approach provides useful context and framing to the current discussions around the erotic dance business. More recent ethnographic research attempts at theorizing erotic dance in a more nuanced manner by looking at dancer-client interactions and the negotiation of power and resistance by dancers. The starting point for this research is that erotic dancers' labour is *legitimate* work. In the next section, I outline how dancers' interactions with clients have been read

as a 'performance'. To this end, Murphy (2003) and Price (2000) argue that, like *any other woman, erotic dancers perform gender* and may not be substantially different from other women in the work force. The distinction, of course, lies in the stigmatization and marginalization that erotic dancers experience (Bruckert, 2002; Egan, 2003; Pasco, 2002; Price, 2000; Ronai Rambo, 1989; Wood, 2000). From performance literature, I move on to outline the work of writers who have found that, despite experiencing oppressive working conditions, social stigma, and marginalization, dancers exercise agency and attempt to resist managerial authority; as such they constitute themselves as active subjects crafting more meaningful choices within constraining environments.

### **(1) Examining Dancer-Client Interactions**

As noted above, a more recent stream of research on the erotic dance business focuses on the manner in which women manage their interactions with clients. At the root of the dancer-client exchange is a dancer's economic motivation - to generate tips and liquor sales - and the customer's desire to have a 'sexual experience' - though not necessarily intercourse - and to enact socially constructed masculinities (Frank, 2002; Pasko, 2002; Liepe-Levinson, 1998; 2002).

For instance, a few writers draw upon Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical and interactional understanding of identity formation (Pasko, 2002; Ronai Rambo and Ellis, 1989).<sup>15</sup> These researchers adopt the concept of the "cynical performance"<sup>16</sup> to explain how dancers use their nudity to excite patrons and correspondingly effect a "counterfeit intimacy." This fabricated intimacy stems from a dancer's manipulation of the sexual

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<sup>15</sup> According to Goffman (1959: 18-21), deviant behaviour is a *performance*, shaped both by social context and audience. Individuals present positive outward impressions while trying to avoid embarrassment or conflict between their front stage / region (outward signs) and their back stage / region (self).

<sup>16</sup> A cynical performance is where the actor puts little credence into her performance but uses the presentation to achieve something, usually financial reward (Goffman, 1959: 17).

fantasies of her customer. She uses verbal ploys such as "You are my favorite customer" and "Have you missed me?" to lead her client to believe that there is in fact a special connection between them and that sexual intimacy may well be possible if he has the seductive wherewithal (Enck and Preston, 1988: 375, 370). Similarly, Pasko uses Goffman's (1959) notion of "confidence game" to explain the complex negotiation of power between an erotic dancer and her customer. Dancers maneuver symbolic communication and exercise emotional control over customers. Simultaneously, customers exercise a more pervasive power because the sex-object role assumed by dancers is both defined and managed by men, for men (Pasko, 2002: 50). To this end, erotic dancing both challenges and reinforces gender norms within the cultural and theatrical space of the strip club through the designs and location of clubs, costumes and personas of female dancers, as well as the behaviour and participation of male spectators (Liepe-Levinson, 2002: 8).

Other accounts of erotic dancing interrogate men's reasons for visiting stripclubs (Beller, 1997; Bildstein, 1996; Frank, 2002; Liepe-Levinson, 2002). For instance, Frank (2002) provides an account of the relationships between erotic dancers and their 'regulars'.<sup>17</sup> To this end, she shifts the discussion from the women who work as erotic dancers to the men who request their services. Frank concludes that what men purchase in strip clubs is an experience or an "interactive fantasy through which a variety of different desires are produced and expressed" (24). Finally, the client-dancer interactions are often discussed in the stream of self-account descriptions of erotic dancing (Ample, 1988; Atkinson, 1995; Beasley, 2003; Burana, 2001; Eaves, 2002;

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<sup>17</sup> There are basically two kinds of regulars. Those who visit a particular dancer anywhere from once a week to every night, and who sometimes follow her to a new or different club. There are also those who attend particular clubs on a regular basis as a form of masculinized entertainment. While the former develops a loyalty to a particular woman, the latter exhibits loyalty for the establishment (Frank, 1998; 2002a).

Mattson, 1995; Reed, 1997; Snowdon, 1994; Tracey, 1999). While interesting and / or titillating, and at times gut-rending, there is generally a paucity of new perspectives presented in these autobiographical works that either complement or contradict academic theorizing about erotic labour (Chandler, 1999; Jordan, 1992). Further, autobiography generally has been challenged as a method because it is difficult, if not impossible, to make broad generalizations based on individual lives (Becker, 1970). Nevertheless, the value of autobiographical work should not be dismissed. Their richness does not lie in either being representative or completely accurate. Rather, they provide a "forum" which reinforces solidarity among erotic labourers that can also promote debate among a broader audience (Chandler, 1999: 169).

## **(2) Dancers' Resistance**

*I think it extremely important that we understand how beauty and sexuality can function as a medium of power and control for the otherwise powerless (Bordo, 1993, 29).*

A number of feminist writers have extended Foucault's (1978) theory of power relations to working-class women's expressions of agency (Adair and Dalhberg, 2003; Banerjee, 1995; Enstad, 2000; Sangster, 2001;).<sup>18</sup> Briefly, Foucault argued that power should not be understood in negative terms, as something people 'have over' others, or as something that represses and censors. Rather, power is productive of bodies and objects, multifarious, and it operates through complex networks (1977: 119). Furthermore, where there is power there is resistance and "innumerable points of confrontation" through which subjects constitute themselves and exercise agency (1977:23).

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<sup>18</sup> My intent is not to provide a detailed summary of the scholarship that debates the utility of extending Foucault's analyses to feminist theorizing (See generally: Bordo, 1993; Diamond and Quinby (eds), 1988; Fraser, 1997; Hartsock, 1990; McNay, 1992; McLaren, 2002; Sawicki, 1991; Smart, 1989). Instead, I outline those writers who have determined that Foucault's framing of power and resistance has contributed to feminist readings of the work of erotic dancers.

A few feminist researchers have applied the concepts of power and resistance to dancers' negotiations within strip clubs. This body of literature emphasizes how in clubs power operates in a manner that both produces and constrains individual dancers. For instance, Rambo Ronai and Cross (1997) develop the concept of "narrative resistance" and argue that erotic dancers draw upon socially constructed narratives around deviance in order to shape their concept of self. That is, erotic dancers actively construct their personal as well as group identities by practicing narrative resistance. They use deviance discourse to actively transform negative labels - such as 'dirty girl', 'slut', 'bad' girl - into more palatable terms (101).<sup>19</sup> Frank, on the other hand, looks at power relations from the perspective of the male customers and the "ways in which the personal and the cultural are inseparably intertwined" (2002: 14). She argues that the potential financial and personal rewards that stem from working as a dancer, as well as the "radical political potential" of blending money, sex, and the public sphere, means that "sex work cannot be dismissed as a possible form of feminist resistance or an exercise of female agency" (2002: 16). She found that erotic dancers actively respond to their clients, resist managers' authority, and create spaces wherein they can explore and express their own sexualities and desires *in spite of* the fact that clubs are gendered settings catering to male fantasies. Bruckert adds that "with limited discursive, material, and ideological resources," dancers use the tools they possess to "contest the relations of authority and further their interests" (2002: 111) by affirming the status or entrepreneur and challenging management through rumours and gossip.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Heidi Mattson's work demonstrates this use of discourse. In talking about other dancers she refers to them as follows: "they were smelly, colourful girls, - each a different combination of cheap perfume, hair spray, spandex and lace" (1995: 126). Mattson contrasts this image with a customer giving her money for her tuition: "You're a good girl, Heidi (...) Give this to Brown [College]" (1995: 126).

<sup>20</sup> The concept of dancer as entrepreneur will be discussed further below.

Within these analyses, there is an understanding that despite dancers' assertions of agency, their ability to resist is mediated by broader social, economic, and political structures. As Frank writes, there are particular configurations of power and privilege "that situate certain groups of individuals as laborers and others as consumers"; this influences the forms of transactions that are sought and purchased (2002:16). Similarly, Pasko (2002) found that while erotic dancers exercise considerable power in stripclubs, this power is contingent on their ability to achieve and maintain a scripted sexual ideal. Moreover, the power they exercise is not transposed into their everyday social interactions and relations outside of clubs. On the contrary "their labour is perpetuated by inequality and performed with negative social and psychological consequences" (2002: 51).

In short, by adopting a 'sociology of work' (Grint, 1991) framing which locates erotic dancing within broader labour relations and societal structures these more recent ethnographic accounts challenge traditional understandings of work while emphasizing that social relations define both 'labour' as well as 'legitimate labourers'. However, for the most part, these texts do not provide much guidance on how to effect tangible change in dancers' workplace environments. With this in mind, my literature review shifts to the discussions around what legal scholars have determined to be the most constructive means of providing dancers with increased economic security, more meaningful choices when engaging in their labour practices, and material means of resisting unjust working conditions: formal employment status. What follows is a summary of the discussions around whether erotic dancers are employees or if their employment status falls within a more precarious and ambiguous, though sometimes more advantageous, category of independent / dependent contractor.

## **Part Two: Erotic Dancers - Employees or Independent Contractors?**

*One of the compromises that strippers make in choosing this occupation and participating in a job environment where they can be individual and independent, is the loss of protection. They lose the protection of the legal mainstream (Cooke, 1987: 92).*

The status of employee is a source of protection both at common law and within statutory frameworks. Employee status, or the lack thereof, has implication for taxation liability, eligibility for employment insurance and other benefits, as well as the applicability of protective legislation - including collective bargaining procedure.<sup>21</sup> Drawing on jurisprudential and statutory definitions of 'employee', a few American writers make the legal argument that dancers should be deemed to hold employee relationships<sup>22</sup> with club owners rather than considered independent contractors (Chun, 1999; Fischer, 1996; Wilmet, 1999).<sup>23</sup> Legal scholars have determined that one of the primary sources of vulnerability for erotic dancers (and other marginal workers) is the lack of formal employment status and unionized workplaces:

In the case of exotic dancers, although there are many high wage earners, dancers would still benefit significantly from the support of a union. The sexual harassment faced on the job from both patrons and management could be taken more seriously if addressed through a union. Many workers would probably not take the initiative against their employers unless they have union support. Knowing that a union is fighting on their side may provide critical support to an otherwise isolated and demoralizing working environment (Chun, 1999: 251).

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<sup>21</sup> Ontario's *Employment Standards Act*. R.S.O. 1990; *Labour Relations Act*. S.O. 1995; and *Pay Equity Act* R.S.O. 1990. See also: England, 1998.

<sup>22</sup> As will be discussed in chapter four, since the 1980s, and the subsequent adjustments in dancers' remuneration, the majority of dancers are considered to be 'freelancers' or 'independent contractors' rather than club employees who are scheduled to work on specific days. Nevertheless a minority have remained 'on schedule'. Scheduled dancers work for a wage of approximately \$35.00 per eight-hour shift and the manager usually determines the days that particular dancers will work. However, some women develop a good rapport with management and can ensure that they get the most lucrative shifts or those most convenient with their other social or familial responsibilities. Freelance dancers (independent contractors) can work any shift they choose providing they stay at the club for the requisite time outlined in their (verbal) agreement with managers (usually a minimum of four hours). While club rules vary, often both scheduled dancers and freelancers pay the stage / bar / deejay fee before every shift. See generally: Bruckert and Parent, 2004; DERA, 2002a.

<sup>23</sup> While this research is based in the United States, the jurisprudential and legislative tests for employee status closely resemble those applied in Canada. See generally: *Montreal v. Montreal Locomotive Works*, [1947] 1 D.L.R. 161; England (1998); Fudge et al (2002).

These authors have found that a number of factors work in favour of deeming erotic dancers employees. First, club owners and managers exert a high level of 'control' over the working environments of erotic dancers (setting shifts, charging deejay fees and fining dancers for breaking club rules). Second, the relative investment of erotic dancers (in terms of work attire and paraphernalia) is outweighed by the club owner's investment in his or her business operations (maintenance, food and alcohol supplies, security staff, utilities, liquor licenses, sound and light equipment). As Fischer (1996) argues even though dancers supply their own costumes and incur costs for tanning and sometimes plastic surgery, these "minimal investments"

do not rise to the level required to indicate independent contractor status - this is because the 'primary equipment requirement' is themselves, their exposed bodies and this does not constitute 'equipment' under the meaning of the [economic realities] test (1996: 546).

Third, American courts have held that dancers' decision-making authority is limited to choice of costume / persona, hairstyle, and choreography.<sup>24</sup> Fourth, aside from the ability to converse, dance suggestively and be physically attractive according to industry standards, both Wilmet (1999) and Fischer (1996) argue that there are few skill requirements or specific criteria for evaluating dancers.<sup>25</sup> Fifth, the key determinants that American courts look at in establishing who bears the risk of 'profit and loss' favour a finding of dancers being economically dependent on clubs. For instance, dancers'

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<sup>24</sup> *Harrel v. Diamond A Enter. Inc.*, 992 F. Supp. 1343, 1350 (M.D. Fla. 1997).

<sup>25</sup> In fact, Fischer argues that "nude dancing requires no special skill: "the only real requirement for nude dancing seems to be female anatomy. Of course a secondary requirement is simply a willingness to perform the work, to remove clothing as required by the club, to dance the required number of dances, and to meet the club's income quota" (1996: 549). While inflammatory and insulting in tone, it is worth noting that in a recent documentary on erotic dancing, Mary Taylor, co-founder of the Toronto-area Exotic Dancers' Alliance echoed the sentiment. When asked what special skills are required to be a dancer, her response was "Nothing. You don't need any skills to be a dancer today." (CTV, 2002). As will be elaborated upon in chapter five, Taylor seems to adopt a discourse that distinguishes between 'entertainers', the dancers of the 1970s and 1980s, and 'lapdancers', the women who work in clubs today and who do not, accordingly, require special skills.

income opportunities vary with a club's hours of operation, general atmosphere, when they are put on schedule (if at all), advertising, and set fees for private dances. Further, dancers' risk of profit loss, according to Wilmet (1999), is limited to the price of stage fees, which in turn are determined by clubs.

Relying on these factors, a number of American dancers have successfully used employment status as a rallying point around which to collectively resist unfair working conditions. In 1998, for instance, 500 erotic dancers successfully launched a class action against *Cinema Seven* and its owner Jim Mitchell under the *California Labor Code* (which covers unfair business practices), alleging they were mis-classified as independent contractors. The Superior court held in favour of the dancers: *Cinema Seven* failed to pay state-mandated benefits (including overtime and workers' compensation) and operated as an unlawful talent agency and charged dancers an illegal nightly 'stage fee' of \$100.00 to \$300.00 (Department of Labor, 1998). Dancers were awarded a multi-million dollar settlement to account for past claims. The number of women involved in this particular action indicates that these legal arguments, and the protections and benefits that might be secured if successful, do resonate with many erotic dancers. If deemed employees, the arguments go, dancers would have access to protective employment legislation, including venues for sexual harassment and sexual assault claims, pay equity, protections against hostile work environments due to the actions of non-employees, as well as accountability from clubs if their employment relationship is terminated without reasonable notice (Burnstein, 1998; Cahill, 1995; Snaden, 1996; Snowden, 1994; Yuracko, 2004). Furthermore, as employees, erotic dancers could forge associations with more traditional labour organizations, such as unions, and gain access to collective bargaining rights. Indeed, Funari (2000) has demonstrated that through unionization, erotic dancers can voice their opinions

regarding the terms and conditions of employment, access to due process, and benefit from protections against unreasonable managerial action.<sup>26</sup> Nevertheless, Brooks (1997, 2002) cautions that despite a measure of solidarity among Lusty Lady peep show workers, the (predominantly white) organizers put higher wages at the fore of their activism and overlooked issues of race privilege, or dismissing the quota system (which limits the number of dancers of colour per shift) as secondary issue. Furthermore, she outlines examples of overt racism by white performers, including disparaging comments about 'Black' music (such as hip hop), being rude to customers of colour (especially those who did not speak English), blocking Black dancers from the view of clients, or criticizing them for wearing too much perfume. For this reason, Brooks (1997) intimates that employment status and unionizing will not address the concerns of racialized women, unless dancers' affiliations adopt an anti-racist feminist agenda and develop and implement programs for cultural training within club settings.

### **(1) Dancers as Entrepreneurs**

While the proponents of employee status (and ultimately unionization of dancers) make persuasive arguments for strategic action and material changes within clubs and the industry as a whole, the legal scholars' analysis lacks ethnographic understanding of the erotic dance business. Below is a review of ethnographic writings that have found that dancers often shape their concept of self as entrepreneurs and that this form of individual resistance may be perceived as more beneficial for dancers.

Despite the very real benefits of employee status and unionization, some of the findings upon which the legal argument against independent contractor status rest, and

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<sup>26</sup> Funari's *Live Nude Girls Unite!* (2000) documents *Lusty Lady* peep show workers' efforts to formally organize in response to shifting working conditions: dancers were forced to pay stage fees, asked to 'date' clients or the owners' friends, and racialized women were subjected to discriminatory scheduling practices.

the conclusions drawn therein, have been challenged. In particular, there has emerged among more recent writings an understanding that erotic dancing is a transient entrepreneurial endeavor which allows for flexibility and mobility, and which subverts the traditional nine to five workweek. To this end, dancers may prefer seeing themselves as entrepreneurs rather than in a formal employer-employee relationship with club owners (Bruckert, 2002; Cooke, 1987; Frank, 2002; Rambo Ronai, 1992).

In particular, a few ethnographic accounts have emphasized how erotic dancers (Bruckert and Parent, 2004; Frank, 2002), like other sex and skin trade workers (Alexander, 1987; Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Chapkis, 1997; COYOTE, 1985; Lewis, 2000), present themselves as autonomous businesswomen who legitimately service a social need. Work discourses and labour framework have been the focal point for these ethnographic accounts (Bruckert, 2002; Frank, 2002; Funari, 2000; Liepe-Levinson, 2003; Murphy, 2003) as well as policy analysis of licensing and other regulatory schemes (Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale, 2000; Ross, 2000). The shift toward a labour analysis allows for a well-knit and textured understanding of the erotic dance business.

For instance, Bruckert and Parent (2004:17) have emphasized the positive aspects of the current work arrangement for dancers, such as flexibility of work hours and length of shifts. Further, these authors highlight that while owners attempt to regulate dancers' work through a system of fines, they must also be able to rely on a steady workforce. For this reason, owners and managers may well take care not to alienate particular women because the success of their business is to a large extent reliant on having attractive, friendly, naked women who are available to interact with patrons. Finally, taking on an individualistic, entrepreneurial status is a means by which dancers discursively and interactively realize subjectivity (Bruckert, 2002: 107).

Additionally, in contradistinction to Fischer (1996) and Wilmet (1999) who argue that erotic dancing requires little skill, the dance club, like other commodified sex industries exhibits a wide variety of organizational structure and job content which demands a medley of skills of the women who intend to make dancing a successful career. Erotic dancers usually learn about the organizational aspects of their work through informal socialization with other dancers, staff, drivers, managers, and owners. While generally not receiving any formal training, erotic dancers develop a number of skills that, while not always socially recognized, are nonetheless transferable: sales and marketing techniques, money management, business planning and accounting, diplomacy and people skills, legal analysis, as well as those skills specific to the *ars erotica*.<sup>27</sup> Further erotic dancers, like other women working with the service sector, learn to regulate the expression of their own and others' emotions (Hochschild, 1983)<sup>28</sup> in exchange for remuneration. One of their primary job requirements is to 'decode' male behaviour and individual patrons' desires and preferences (Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Bruckert, 2002; Egan, 2003(a); Frank, 2002; Pasko, 2002; Wood 2000).

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<sup>27</sup> Foucault (1978) points out that all cultures have endowed themselves with means of generating knowledge about sex. For instance, *ars erotica* treats sex as an object of knowledge whereby "truth is drawn from pleasure itself" (57).

<sup>28</sup> Drawing upon theatrical studies, Hochschild (1983) found that flight attendants engage in emotional labour (they control or suppress emotions as part of the labour process) by 'surface acting' or by 'deep acting'. The former involves displaying, through body language, the requisite emotions without deceiving oneself. The latter involves trying to induce and display the required emotions, or deceiving oneself as well as deceiving the other (1983:33-35). Jobs requiring emotional labour have three aspects to them. The employee is face-to-face or has voice contact with the client; she is required to produce a particular emotional state in others; and was hired to produce these feelings (Hochschild, 1983: 147; Wallace and Wolf, 1995). Further, the concept of 'emotional dissonance' (a discrepancy between what the worker expresses and how she actually feels) is commingled with emotional labour. Emotional dissonance is often associated with negative consequences, such as emotional exhaustion, lower job satisfaction, or not feeling valued as an employee (Williams, 2003). Finally, Hochschild found that in the work setting there can be management of emotions by *others*, including the organization / employer. This happens when "various elements of acting are taken away from the individual and replaced by institutional mechanisms" (1983: 49). These 'commercialized emotions' (1983: 140) are performed at a high personal cost to the worker.

### ***Part Three: Framing my Research Object***

While persuasive, understanding dancers as entrepreneurs has a number of limitations. Primarily, being an independent contractor is linked with the notion of autonomy and agency. However, the idea of entrepreneurship is more ideological than based in reality (Fudge et al, 2002:8). While the number of 'self-employed' people has statistically increased in Canada and worldwide over the last few decades, these individuals have been concentrated in the service sector, homework, and labour-only contractual relationships.<sup>29</sup> Further, almost three-quarters (72 percent) of self-employed women in Canada earn less than \$20,000 per annum (Lin et al, 1999; Rooney et al, 2003).<sup>30</sup> Likewise, self-employed women face particular barriers in accessing and accumulating capital; further, they often do not control the production of their labour (Fudge et al, 2002; Knight, 1996). This is especially true for young women, without a credit history (Jurik, 1998; Rooney et al, 2003). In fact, the majority of 'self-employed' workers could be classified as 'disguised wage labourers' or as workers engaging in 'false employment'.<sup>31</sup> Finally, women entrepreneurs face unique challenges because they remain the primary caregivers for children and elderly relations<sup>32</sup> and tend to work more hours than paid employees do (Mirchandani, 1999).

To conclude, the ethnographic texts that frame dancers as entrepreneurs, while rich in providing tools to destabilize traditional understandings of marginal women's

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<sup>29</sup> Note however that both women in paid employment and self-employed women remain, for the most part, ghettoized in specific industries and occupations (Armstrong, 1997; Fudge et al, 2002: 24).

<sup>30</sup> This is compared to 48 percent of women in paid employment (Lin et al, 1999).

<sup>31</sup> As Rainbird explains, "the majority of the self-employed earn a subsistence living only, although there is some scope for them to appropriate surplus value and accumulate capital of their own by virtue of their ownership of capital, self exploitation and employment of labour (1991: 214, cited in Fudge et al, 2002: 7).

<sup>32</sup> In fact, women tend to use self-employment as a means of negotiating the desire and need for generating an income with familial responsibilities such as child-rearing and care for the elderly (Arai, 2000; Vosko, 2002)

work, lack an analysis of the broader repercussions of being denied formal employment protections. Furthermore, they offer little in terms of options for direct political action; and do not provide a foundation for broader changes within clubs that might temper the oppressive working conditions faced by erotic dancers. On the other hand, the legal analyses, which offer important background on how labour organizing and employee status might assist dancers in subverting oppressive working conditions, lack the keen ethnographic insights of writings by women who have worked within the industry. Further, they do not interrogate the inherent inequality in employment contracts, or as Glasbeek states, the "superior/inferior nexus between property and non-property owners" (2002: 82).

The discussion that ensues in the following chapters is predicated upon both legal and ethnographic texts and understandings. As a lawyer engaged in ethnographic research, I will attempt to apply my substantive knowledge of the law and skills in legal analysis while centering the experiences of my informants through ethnography. I will draw upon both disciplines when grappling with whether, and if so under which circumstances, dancers may fair better as entrepreneurs or as employees, and more specifically how this might inform and be reflected within their attempts to organize in response to their shifting working conditions.

## CHAPTER 2

### Theoretical Underpinnings

*The trouble with insisting on classifying women according to polar extremes is not that it is unfair because we cannot do it to men; it is nonsense because we cannot credibly do it to anyone (Midgley and Hughes, 1976: 48).*

In this chapter, I outline the interpretive framework for my research: feminist theories. The ensuing discussion unfolds in four parts. Part one outlines the traditional feminist theorizing around industries characterized by commodified sexuality, otherwise known as the 'choice' vs 'constraint' debates (Abrams, 1995; Alexander and Delacoste, 1987; Baldwin, 1992; Chandler, 1999; Cornell, 2000; Geadah, 2000; Razack, 1998; Rubin, 1992). My intent is not to provide a fully developed overview of either framework's complex understanding of erotic labour. Rather I provide a heuristic device upon which more recent feminist theories have drawn, and often moved away from, in attempting to provide more contextualized understandings of erotic labour. An organizing concept for these feminist approaches is the idea of *choices made within constraints* (Chandler, 1999). Outlining what is understood by choices within constraint, the exercise of agency within oppressive social structures, is the work of part two. The balance of this chapter is devoted to teasing out two underlying principles of contextualized feminist understandings of erotic labour. First, erotic labour is *work*. Second, it is *women's work* that must be located within broader social, cultural, economic, and political structures. To this end, I draw upon the rich insight of early socialist feminists as well as more recent feminist labour theory, critical legal studies, postmodern feminism, and postcolonial analyses, which have enriched feminist understanding(s) of the sex industries. These feminist theories locate erotic labour along varying axes of disadvantage including class, gender, race, age, sexual orientation, culture, and (dis) ability. To this end, part three highlights both the ruptures

and the continuities within feminist theorizing around erotic labour. For instance, a number of the more recent feminist framings emphasize how women, either individually or collectively, *resist* the operations of oppressive societal structures. Finally, part four of this chapter explores the relevance of inquiring into the multiple and overlapping operations of oppressive societal structures and their impact on women working with the erotic industries to my research on the labour organizing of erotic dancers.

### ***Part One: A Review of Traditional Feminist Understandings***

The exchange of sexual entertainment or services for money is a 'contested commodity' (Radin, 1996) which has divided contemporary feminists. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, a debate emerged among feminists of the North around the rhetorics of choice / constraint or victim / agent as they related to the sex trades (Abrams, 1995; Baldwin, 1999; Chandler, 1999; Razack, 1998). More recently, these binaries have been challenged for being caricatured. As Carol Ronai Rambo puts it:

The simplistic binary constructs that my culture gives me to interpret these events, passive victim versus active agent, do not encompass my experience. I was both and neither, something different, something to be located in the underlying play of differences between the dichotomy of victim and agent (1999: 126)

While a more complete discussion of the 'two sides' is beyond the confines of this chapter, what follows is a thumbnail sketch of key arguments for both the constraint and choice frameworks. Briefly put, the constraint / violence / radical feminist understanding is that commodified sexual services exist because of the social and economic subordination of *women* and the on-going demand by *men* to buy access to women's bodies. As such, patriarchy<sup>33</sup> creates, legitimates, and sustains the need for the sex

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<sup>33</sup>Patriarchy essentially refers to forms of power held by men that shape women's *collective* experience of sexist oppression (albeit experience differently according to race, class, age, sexuality, and (dis)ability) and societal norms that regulate women's behaviour based on their biology (Kolmar and Bartkowski, 2000). Or, as Irigaray defines it, the "exclusive respect for the genealogy of sons and fathers" (1985: 202).

trade(s) and women are the victims of these broader gendered forces.<sup>34</sup> Further, sexual arousal is culturally influenced and our current pornographic consumer culture sells domination and subordination of women (and children) by men as titillating.<sup>35</sup> To this end, the purchase of women's bodies *by men* is part of the contemporary expression of hegemonic masculinity (Barry, 1979; Borish, 1997; Ciriello, 1993; Dworkin and MacKinnon, 1988; Giobbe, 1999; Holsopple, 1999; Hughes and Roche, 1999; MacKinnon, 1987, 1989, 1994; Overall, 1992; Pateman, 1988; Razack, 1998; Ramos, 2000; WHISPER, 2001).<sup>36</sup>

On the other hand, choice / pro-sex feminists frame sex workers as radicals, visionaries, and educators. The proponents of this position are sometimes referred to as "sex radicals." The term stems from the somewhat discordant efforts in the 1970s of lesbians, gay men, and women who consume commodified sexual services to subvert dominant norms of sexual practices and sexualities. Sex radicals argue that most women working in erotic industries enjoy their work; it can increase self-esteem and foster a positive body image. Furthermore, women working in industries characterized with commodified sexual imagery transgress and destabilize traditional notions of respectability and femininity, or engage in 'mimetic play' by assuming a hyper-feminine identity as an economic tool. Sex radicals argue for deregulation and legalization of all

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<sup>34</sup> The stereotypes (sex workers as victims) also run the other way. Some sex workers referred to feminists as "frustrated, man-haters" or "undesirable women who just need a screw" (Sax, 1987: 301).

<sup>35</sup> However MacKinnon and Dworkin, who are most often cited as the archetypal 'constraint' theorists, *explicitly exclude* erotic dancing from their definition of pornography. Dworkin argues however that in 'developing' countries where technology such as computers, and video equipment are uncommon, the struggle over the exploitation of women has centered around sex clubs and live nude performances (Cornell: 2000:5)

<sup>36</sup> The criticisms put forth by the 'violence' camp were most often directed toward the gendered power imbalances they saw as inherent to pornography. That said, they often subsumed lesbian pornography in their critique and saw it as complicit in reinforcing male hegemony. There has been considerable writing that has come out of queer studies that argues against this position and offer complex and insightful distinctions between heterosexual pornography and gay and lesbian sexually explicit material (Crimpt, 1993; Lorde, 1978; Meyer, 1993).

erotic labour based on the idea that consenting adults have the right to express their sexualities (Califia, 1994; Fabian, 1997; McLintock, 1993; Passar, 1999; Pendelton, 1997; Pheterson, 1987; Queen, 1997; Rubin, 1984; Snitow, 1984; Vance, 1982; Willis, 1983).

Note however, that while positioned as binaries, most accounts are not so narrow in design. In fact, the work and writing of most feminist theorists, women in the erotic industries, and community activists is much more nuanced and may draw upon both 'sides' of the debate. For instance, some sex radicals acknowledge the very real disadvantages faced by women, but argue that within the sex and skin trades there are openings for resistance to oppressive gender structures (Williams, 1989, 2000; Kipnis, 1996). On the other hand, many theorists and activists who identify with the radical feminist position defend the right of sex workers to do their work, while simultaneously critiquing the *institutions* of commodified sexuality that reinforce women's social and economic subordination (Borish, 1997; Chancer, 1993; Overall, 1992). With this in mind, I explore in the next section, what Chandler (1999) suggests as an alternative to binary understandings of erotic labour: the choice *within* constraint theoretical framework.

### ***Part Two: Contextualized Understandings - Choices within Constraints***

As noted above, distinguishing 'choice' and 'constraint' feminist models may well serve as a valuable heuristic device when grappling with more nuanced readings of erotic labour. In particular, Cynthia Chandler (1999) has provided an alternative understanding of erotic labour, which deconstructs both the discourses of choice and the discourses of constraint.<sup>37</sup> Chandler suggests that feminist movement and activism

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<sup>37</sup> While I attribute the concept of *choice within constraint* in the context of the sex trade debates to Chandler (1999), other theorists and activists have adopted similar understandings such as contextualized choices (Bernstein, 1999) and 'choices within limited choices' (Bruckert, 2002).

should examine both discourses and adopt an approach of *both choice and constraint*; one that is "is mindful of its own exercise of power" (1999: 163).

That is, both choice and constraint discourses exclude *some* women's stories in order to sustain group solidarity. Their rhetorics of 'truth' seek to 'help' women working within the sex and skin trades but in effect function "to silence and ignore the concerns" of these very women" (Chandler, 1999: 164). These 'truths' both produce and reflect power differentials among women, and between women and men. Moreover, rather than increasing choices and persuasive feminist strategies, rhetorics of truth constrain feminist movement into falsely dichotomous schools of thought which focus either on women's liberty and choices, or the constraints of a male dominated society on the lives of women (1999: 137). As such, positioning various discourses around the sex industries as in direct opposition does not strengthen feminist movement; rather, it "divides and alienates many women from it" (1999: 138).

Similarly, women working within the erotic industries have highlighted over the last few decades that mainstream feminist inquiry, whether unwittingly or not, has at times ignored their voices and experiences and denied the possibility that women can be sex workers *and* feminists simultaneously (Hartley, 1987; Jaget, 1980; Nagle, 1997). Further, academic journals and symposiums dealing with issues surrounding the sex and skin trades often overlook sex workers' contributions to the discussion (L. Bell, 1987; Carter and Giobbe, 1999; Chapkis, 1997; Nagle, 1997; Leigh, 1987). This is of particular concern because of the impact that feminist discourse, and radical feminist discourse in particular, has had on policy-making around the sex and skin industries (Baldwin, 1992, 1999). As such, many erotic labourers argue that in order for feminist activism and theorizing to remain pertinent, it must tap into the rich analysis that sex and skin trade workers can provide about gender oppression (Nagle, 1997). In short feminist theories

must be critical of any perspectives that exclude sex and skin trade workers' insights. It must also be mindful that there is no unified erotic worker voice.<sup>38</sup>

To do so, feminist theorists should acknowledge and respect individual women's *choices* or their ability to exercise agency, while remaining critical of the *constraints* in which these choices are made. As Chandler (1999) argues, this approach may enhance feminists' ability to acknowledge and help convey the concerns of women, and in this case, a particularly stigmatized and marginalized group of women: erotic labourers. In order to adopt such an approach, feminists may have to shift their focus away from freedom or limitation and "move towards asking what can be done to reduce or alter conditions within which people experience oppression" (1999:137). Understanding the choice to engage in erotic labour as one that is made within limited alternatives allows for a more nuanced understanding of the fact that choice *qua* choice does not amount to agency when made in the face of unpalatable options. However, it also highlights that despite the fact that women are located within marginal legal, social, economic, and political spheres, they do resist violence, 'talk back' to stigma, and subvert legal regulation. While erotic labourers may not have control over broader economic circumstances, or the actual conditions of their working environment, they do exercise power in their relations with customers, managers, and other labourers within the industries.

### ***Part Three: Recent Feminist Theorizing***

Recent feminist writing has explored how dancers negotiate their unique legal, social, and economic status along the axes of agency and choice. What follows is a

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<sup>38</sup> Note however that in examining contemporary sex workers' autobiographies, Chandler finds that they too are divided along choice / constraint lines (1999: 168).

review of feminist theoretical frameworks that locate erotic labourers within broader class, race, and gender structures. This section outlines feminist theoretical insights that shed light upon the 'constraints' in which women exercise agency. First, since the 1980s, feminist theorists and activists have emphasized that erotic labour must be understood as *work*. Socialist feminists have drawn upon these arguments and have begun examining the skin and sex trades through a labour lens. In so doing, they have highlighted the class / economic location of stigmatized and marginalized women. Around the same time, postcolonial and race theorists emphasized the importance of understanding how cultural systems shape women's experiences. Finally, postmodern analyses have examined how, despite these oppressive conditions, women resist these broader conditions. In this section, I trace the contours of these theoretical developments, which have expanded the choice/constraint arguments to provide more complete understandings of the experiences of women working within sex and skin trades.

### **(1) Sex as Work - Gender and Class**

Sex worker activists, and more recently some feminist theorists, have examined the experiences of women working within sex and skin trades through a labour lens. Before discussing their discourses however, it is helpful to begin with a snapshot of the labour location of Canadian women *generally* to move toward how these theorists position erotic labourers.

#### **1.1 A Snapshot of women's work in Canada**

Feminist labour analysis conceives of gender as a set of social relations rather than attributes ascribed to individual social actors. To this end, a relational approach to gender seeks to understand how gender relations shape, and are shaped by, key

institutions such as the labour market, the domestic sphere, trade unions, and immigration practices. Feminist labour analysis is centrally concerned with the intersections between gender and class as well as other social relations, including race-ethnicity, sexuality, age and (dis)ability (Armstrong and Armstrong, 1999; Vosko, 2000, 2003). Furthermore, it challenges the traditional human capital<sup>39</sup> and segmented labour<sup>40</sup> theories because of their 'gender blind' analyses of work (Armstrong, 1997; Ghorayshi, 2002; Krahn and Lowe, 1998).

Instead, the starting point for feminist labour analysis is that there is no unified women's experience of oppression and that divergent locations along class lines renders some women more vulnerable to economic exploitation than others (Agnew, 1996).<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, a number of feminist writers have provided profiles of women's work in Canada that highlight a number of similarities among working women (Ghorayshi, 2002; Townson, 2003; Vosko, 2000, 2002, 2003). Regardless of class, sexuality, age, race, (dis)ability and despite major increases in women's paid employment<sup>42</sup>, women still

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<sup>39</sup> This framework understands work as based on demand, skills, and abilities. Salary differentials and occupational status are due to the characteristics of individual workers. As such, women and minority groups are paid less because they have invested less time in their own development and because they are inherently less productive (Ghorayshi, 1990).

<sup>40</sup> Proponents of this model argue that there are primary labour markets with better jobs and opportunities for advancements, and secondary labour markets with poor working conditions, weak unions, and little opportunities for advancement. Structural barriers, make it very difficult for people within secondary labour markets to move into the primary labour markets (Ghorayshi, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> Gender, race, and class channel racialized women into specific kinds of jobs while simultaneously excluding them from others. For instance, housework and childcare have been used by upper class white women to "reassign some domestic work and infant care to working-class women of their own or different racial/ethnic group" (Ghorayshi, 2002: 133).

<sup>42</sup> Women accounted for 47% of the paid work force in 2003, up from 37% in 1976. Most of the increase in women's employment took place between the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s then dipped during the recession in the early 1990s (Statistics Canada, 2003: 6). However, there are variations among groups of women in terms of access to paid employment: women with (dis)abilities, racialized and first nations women, women living in rural areas, women over the age of 50, and new Canadians are less likely to have stable, paid employment (Ghorayshi, 2002; Jackson, 2003).

make less money than men<sup>43</sup>, and often occupy labour- and emotionally-intensive service sector jobs<sup>44</sup> (with correspondingly lower wages, less stability, and little-to-no benefits). In addition, Canadian women, regardless of social location, continue to take on the majority of (unpaid) childcare and eldercare responsibilities (Armstrong, 1997, Vosko, 2002). Female lone parents are also less likely to have paid work than their counterparts in two-parent homes<sup>45</sup>. Finally, due to broader societal shifts, such as the erosion of the welfare state, a transition to a technological-based economy, the displacement of the standard employment relationships<sup>46</sup> for other work arrangements (such as part time, temporary, and seasonal work), increased privatization of social services, and chronic shortages of affordable housing, women continue to be funneled into low-pay, and non-standard labour with less meaningful access to labour protections and job security.

Skin and sex trade workers form part of this growing non-standard labour sector and, like other marginal workers, occupy a contradictory space. They are managed in the same way as employees and are subjected to labour site expectations, while simultaneously denied wages, benefits, and stability generally associated with employment (Bruckert and Parent, 2004: 50). With this backdrop in mind, let us move to activists and writers who have developed a labour theory for understanding the

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<sup>43</sup> In 2002, women earned 69.2% of men's salaries for comparable work of equal value (Congrès du travail du Canada, 2003).

<sup>44</sup> In 2003, 70% of all employed women worked in the service sector, related health occupations, or other administrative positions (Statistics Canada, 2003: 8).

<sup>45</sup> In 2003, 68% of women who headed lone parent households (with children under the age of 16) held paid employment in comparison to 72% of their counterparts in two-parent homes (Statistics Canada, 2003: 7).

<sup>46</sup> The 'standard employment relationship' is one where the workers' wages are provided by another person or firm, s/he only has one employer, works full time on that employer's premises and can count on indefinite employment (Schellenberg and Clark, 1996: 2; Vosko, 2000). Historically, women, people with (dis)abilities, and racialized groups have been excluded from standard employment relationships (Vosko, 2003).

experiences of sex and skin trade workers.

## 1.2 Sex Workers' Discourse

Around the 1970s, sex worker groups as well as socialist and liberal feminists began to promote and understanding that sex work is fundamentally a labour issue (Alexander and Delacoste, 1987; Bruckert and Parent, 2004; Chapkis, 1997; Coderre and Parent, 2001; Jaget, 1980; Leigh, 1987, 1999; Nagle, 1997; Parent, 1994; Pheterson, 1987; Queen, 1987; Rubin, 1992). The concept of "sex work" adopted by the prostitutes' rights movement highlighted that women in the erotic industries were workers providing a legitimate service; this term enables women to subvert the connotations of wrongdoing or shame associated with 'prostitution' (Bernstein, 1999; Pheterson, 1987). The sex as work discourse that emerged in the West<sup>47</sup> with the formation of groups like Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics (COYOTE) and the International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights (ICPR) is a point of departure for sex workers' activism which includes: framing sex workers as *workers* rather than victims, lobbying against intrusive state regulation of sex workers, addressing worker vulnerability to violence, and distinguishing between 'survival sex' and 'sex as work'.

First, the sex workers' movement argued for a woman's right to choose 'prostitution' as an occupation,<sup>48</sup> albeit recognizing that is a choice which is intertwined with broader struggles women face in terms of the sexual division of labour and achieving the right to a living wage. To this end, sex workers' rights activists also

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<sup>47</sup> Kempadoo and Doezema argue however that a "hegemonic western script" about sex work is reinforced through the assumption that sex workers' political struggles were initiated in the United States and Europe during the 1970's. Rather, they found sex workers' organizing efforts date back to nineteenth century in Eastern Europe and Latin America (1998:12).

<sup>48</sup> COYOTE's membership has historically consisted of white, middle-class, college educated women who occupy a space or relative class, racial and educational advantage in comparison to other women working within the sex industries (Bernstein, 1999: 111).

acknowledge that divergent women experience their work differently: "some report job satisfaction, others job repulsion; some consciously chose [sex work] as the best alternative open to them; others rolled into it through male force or deceit" (ICPR, 1987: 308). Nevertheless, a common denominator among many sex workers is that their profession is one of the few lucrative ways for women in their particular social and economic positions to make a living wage (Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Chapkis, 1997; ICPR, 1987; Nagle, 1997). Therefore, an on-going struggle for sex worker activists is dissociating in society's collective imagination, the correlation between sex work from sexual intimacy, and sexual intimacy from personal identity (Parent, 2001). A second component of the sex worker discourse is the vociferous opposition to the on-going criminalization of sex workers as well as the legalization<sup>49</sup> of the sex industry and any corresponding forced registration or imposed medical tests and treatments (Alexander and Delacoste, 1987; Jenness, 1993; Leigh, 1999; Queen, 1997). As such, their discourse was influenced by socialist feminists who argued that the State is a capitalist and patriarchal instrument designed to benefit the elite, while simultaneously reinforcing the majority of women's economic exploitation (Eisenstein, 1981; Jaggar, 1983). Third, proponents of the sex as work framework also acknowledge that violence occurs within the sex trade. Indeed there is glaring evidence that women who assume 'bad girl' roles are often targets for sexual and physical violence<sup>50</sup> or are dismissed as having

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<sup>49</sup> As Leigh (1999) explains, 'legalization' refers to a system of government regulation and control of sex workers, whereas 'decriminalization' is the absence of laws criminalizing or legalizing consensual adult sexual activity.

<sup>50</sup> See for instance: *R. v. Petrozzi* (1987); *Smith v. Jones* (1999). It should be of particular concern to the feminist movement that the majority of women who were disappeared in Vancouver's downtown eastside were sex workers and racialized sex workers in particular (Turtle Island Native Network, 2003).

consented to any violence they endure by virtue of their occupational choices.<sup>51</sup>

However, they argue that violence is not something that is necessarily inherent to the sex and skin trades (Kempadoo, 1997).<sup>52</sup> Instead, it is systemic to erotic labour because of the moralistic regulation of the industries. These writers and activists accuse the (predominantly white middle class) feminist movement of attempting to impose its own vision of sexual morality on sex workers - who they identified as predominantly young, working-class white women (Cornell, 2000; Nagle, 1997; Vance, 1992). Sex worker activists highlighted that women working within erotic industries negotiate the same gender and class disadvantage than other women do, but they are additionally subjected to stigma and the 'whore' stigma in particular. Because of the stigma attached to their occupation, sex workers, they argue, are denied recourse available to 'other' women when abuses occurred; they are blamed for any violence they experience; they are refused adequate financial compensation for their services (ICPR, 1987; Pheterson, 1987; Rubin, 1992). In short, the violences to which women are subjected, is intertwined with: the discriminatory legal regulation of sex work - the prosecution of sex workers but not their clients (Adelberg and Currie, 1993; Almodovar, 1999; Shaver, 1993); obstacles and opportunities for sex and skin workers to make claims for public benefits, (Baldwin, 1997); and systemic barriers to asserting their claims as workers through formal labour organizing (Bruckert, 2002; Chun, 1999; DERA, 2000; Jenness, 1993). Finally, within this movement, there are proponents of a distinction between *survival sex* and *sex as labour* (ICPR, 1987; Nagle, 1997; Shrage, 1994). For instance, Shrage argues that our

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<sup>51</sup> The police have been highly egregious in investigating missing women who work as street level sex workers. For instance, in the United States, police are rumored to use the abbreviation "NHI" - for No Human Involved - when reporting the murder of a sex worker (Cassidy, 1999).

<sup>52</sup> Others see physical and sexual violence as an occupational hazard (Nord, 1995). Others still, like Shaver (1994) argue that the violence experienced by sex workers is not all that dissimilar to what is experienced by other women. However, the violence experienced by racialized women is sometimes overshadowed in these accounts.

analysis of sex work in the "Third world" must depart from our analysis of it in the "West." For this reason, she divides sex work into two classes: (i) that which is "forced" (and tied into the traffic of women), and (ii) that which is "free" (1994: 157-69). Similarly, Nagle makes the caveat that the contributors to *Whores and Other Feminists* focus on voluntary sex work rather than on women who engage in sex to survive on the street, who support an addiction, or who are coerced into it by others.<sup>53</sup> As Brewis and Linstead argue, the choice to be an erotic labourer is sometimes one that requires

inconsiderable courage, as an assertive and autonomous attempt to support oneself and one's child in face of unappealing alternatives such as benefit dependency, depending on an absent partner or badly paid and insecure job (2000: 234).

While feminist theories framing erotic labour *as work* have been invaluable in creating a more complex understanding of women's experiences and in highlighting the class issues inherent to sex work, they have at times overlooked issues relating to race. Alternatively, when race is addressed, it is, for the most part, done within the context of 'trafficking'. In response, critical race and postcolonial feminist theorists have emphasized divergent experiences of racialized women working within the industries characterized by commodified sex.

## **(2) Racialized Spaces of Sex Work - Gender and Race**

In the next sections I will outline the critical engagement that racialized women, first nations women, and postcolonial theorists have had with traditional feminist theory. I go on to explain why a race analysis is highly relevant to any research into women working as erotic labourers.

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<sup>53</sup> Women who are not sex workers, may nonetheless use survival sex in abusive relationships, when trying to provide a stable home for their children, if they have a drug dependence, or are in general financial need (Velasco, 1994).

## 2.1 Challenging white subjectivity

During the 1980s and 1990s, anti-racist activists and academics began to formally challenge the feminist movement for neglecting issues of 'race' and racism and for its adoption of a universal or essentialized notion of 'woman' (Armstrong, 1997; Hill Collins, 1990; hooks, 1984; Maracle, 1996; Monture-Angus, 1995; Spelman, 1989; Talpade Mohanty, 1997). The idea of a 'universal sisterhood' promoted by a middle class heterosexual able-bodied feminist movement was steeped in "white solipsism"<sup>54</sup> and displaced concerns of differently raced, abled, and classed women. Angela Davis discusses this in terms of "abstraction" of women's issues from race and class:

[The feminist movement's] theories and practices have frequently implied that the purest and most direct challenge to sexism is one exorcised of elements related to racial and economic oppression - as if there were such a phenomenon as abstract womanhood abstractly suffering sexism and fighting back in an abstract historical context. In the final analysis, the state of abstraction turns out to be a very specific set of conditions: white middle-class women suffering and responding to the sexist attitudes and conduct of white middle-class men. This approach leaves the existing socioeconomic system with its fundamental reliance on racism and class bias unchallenged (1984: 18).

Some white Western academics have attempted to redress these past mistakes. In particular they discuss how racism(s) affect the construction of meaning and how the intersection of gender, race and class intensifies inequalities among diverse groups of women. For instance, Laura Donaldson (1992: 40) argues that feminist theorists must resist attempting to appeal to "some transparently universal ground of being." Instead they must negotiate the meaning of female identity within the context of language, race, gender, class, sexual orientation, physical (dis)ability, religion, and so on. A component of this is challenging white subjectivity:

[R]ace shapes white women's lives. In the same way that both men's and women's lives are shaped by their gender (...) white people and people of colour live racially structured lives. In other words, any system of differentiation shapes those on whom it bestows

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<sup>54</sup> Adrienne Rich (1979: 299) describes this as the tendency to "think, imagine, and speak as if whiteness described the world."

privilege as well as those it oppresses. White people are "raced" just as men are gendered (Frankenberg, 1993: 1).

A feminist race analysis, as I will discuss below, is fundamental to understanding working-class women's experience because of the intersecting systems of oppression, which shape their working lives.

## **2.2 Racialized spaces in erotic labour**

Sherene Razack (1998) argues that any understanding of dominance as only *gendered* does not take into account the two other major hegemonic systems of *class* and *race*. Razack is critical of arguments that relegate race and class issues as "complications" to the more central gender domination: "prostitution is thus conceptualized as an *effect* of sexual power relations, which is exacerbated by racism [and economic exploitation]" (1998: 339). Monocausal theories, she argues do not allow for a complete examination of how some women, middle-class white women predominantly, are "stakeholders in this game, which begins with racism and economic exploitation as much as it has to do with sexism" (1998: 341). Migrant women from the 'Third World', for example, flee the economic violence of imperialism that directly benefits women in the 'First World' as much as they flee patriarchal violence (1998: 354). Further in more recent work, Razack (2002) revisits the brutal murder of an Aboriginal woman working in the sex trade. She argues that the light sentence the two white killers received (manslaughter) was due to the fact that, as a racialized woman and a sex worker, Pamela George represented a body that could be violated by white 'respectable' men with impunity. As such, 'zones of prostitution', according to Razack are racialized spaces where universal justice does not operate (2002: 126).

Women writing from the 'third world' also adopt a race / class / gender analysis to understand the experiences of women working within the sex and skin trades (Truong,

1990; White, 1990).<sup>55</sup> For instance, Luise White (1990:2) argues that women in Nairobi see sex work as a viable means of "capital accumulation." Sex and skin work is in some cases fundamental to the survival of families, first because it supplements familial income, which greatly decreased with the advent of a cash crop economy, and second because it provides men with an outlet for their sexual needs when they migrate to the cities. She explains that for this reason the state has facilitated the 'industry-alization' of sex, and sex work has become a form of labour "derived from the utilization of the body" (1990: 197). Having examined women's diverse experiences within hegemonic sex, race, and class systems, I discuss below how, despite women's locations along varying axes of disadvantage, they do exert agency and *resist* oppressive social systems.

### **(3) Resisting Constraint - Agency in Light of Oppressive Systems**

A recurring project in more recent feminist theorizing is an emphasis on aspects of women's resistance to oppressive systems that regulate their lives. (Agnew, 1996; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990; Mills, 1997; Smart, 1992). Feminist writers and activists who adopt a postmodern / poststructuralist theory of power<sup>56</sup>, deconstruct the unitary notion of the female subject and accentuate the shifting nature of identity and location (Alcoff, 1991; Bruckert and Frigon, 2003; Bosworth, 1999; Cornell, 1995; Cixous, 1983; hooks, 1984). To this end, the writing of Michel Foucault has been highly influential. As discussed in chapter two, in *History of Sexuality* (1978), Foucault offers an understanding of *how subjects are constituted by power relations* rather than being

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<sup>55</sup> This body of knowledge is insightful, and any discussion of the sex and skin trade that does not include this perspective is vulnerable to charges of eurocentricism. Drucilla Cornell also remarks that the discussion about sex work must move beyond the Northern (first world) perspective and grapple with "the way emerging post-colonial nations have dealt with pornography, as well as sex work in general, in their effort to constitute new nation states and in some instances to build socialist societies" (1998: 1).

<sup>56</sup> While postmodernism and post-structuralism are separate theoretical frameworks (Barry, P. 1995) a thorough discussion of their nuances and distinctions is beyond the realm of this chapter.

*repressed by* them (32). Rather than looking at the "infinitesimal violences" that are exercised through power, he argues that we must look at power as a productive force that creates and maintains *discourses* and *subjects*, within the context of power-relations (1978: 129). As such, where there is power, there is resistance and multiple spaces of confrontation through which subjects constitute themselves and exercise agency.

Feminist theorists who have drawn upon Foucault's work have enumerated myriad ways in which women resist and overcome experiences of oppression. However, not all strategies are equally successful; some subvert dominant paradigms, others "stretch and bend" as oppose to subverting them; others still reinforce the status quo (Brewis and Linstead, 2000: 224; Bruckert, 2002; Nagle, 1997). Nevertheless, resistance, in whatever form, is an attempt at exercising agency.

First, women discursively construct their own experiences, their own subjectivities (Bordo, 1993; Cixous, 1986; Fraser, 1997; Mills, 1997; Smart, 1992). As Smart writes, "there have always been multiplicities of resistance" against constructions of women as cultural dupes (1992: 7). For instance, women from the 'third world' have discursively challenged the language used to define their experiences - terms like 'immigrant women', 'women of colour', 'racial minority women' have been deconstructed to illustrate how they reproduce hierarchies between 'Western women' and everybody else (Agnew, 1996; Mohanty, 1989; Ng, 1990). Anti-racist feminists have often used the metaphor of 'silence' and 'speech' when describing the exercise of agency (Agnew, 1996; hooks, 1992; Monture, 1995). As hooks explains, "speaking becomes a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage when we move from being object to being subject" (1992: 12). Similarly, sex worker activists and some academics challenge traditional feminist research on their lives and work, and offer more nuanced analyses (Bernstein 1999; Bruckert and Parent, 2004; Leigh 1997; Nagle 1997; Sprinkle

1998). Women working within the sex industries adopt the term 'sex work' or 'entrepreneur' strategically as a means of legitimizing their work for the mainstream (Chapkis, 1997; Jenness, 1993). As Theresa Dulce, founder of DANZINE, a sex worker's rights organization, writes:

Depending on what I was personally doing, I'd call myself a dancer, a model, an escort, a working girl, an outreach worker, a sex educator. Whatever I felt like, really. I thought 'sex worker' was more for the press or students. They had to call us something, because nine times out of ten they didn't know shit (2003:1).

The act of writing is another means of actualizing freedom (Cixous, 1986; Gaucher, 2003; Monture, 1995). Recently, collections of essays, individual accounts and ethnographic studies of and by skin and sex workers have emerged in an attempt to center the voices of the erotic labourers in academic debates (Bruckert, 2002; Eaves, 2002; Hartley, 1987; Jaget, 1980; Nagle, 1997). Finally, performance and reclaiming of the sexual and the corporeal through the body is also a powerful means of contesting<sup>57</sup> the multiple operations of class, gender, race, age, that constitute an erotic labourer's subjectivity (Butler, 1990). For instance, erotic dancers exercise 'agency within fragmentation' through choice of music, exploiting their own sexuality to enhance tips, and satirical or sarcastic performances (Bruckert and Frigon, 2003; Johnson, 1998).

In essence, women tap into a multitude of everyday strategies "to achieve some dignity and self esteem" (Agnew, 1996: 104; Das Gupta, 1986; Druvarajan and Vickers, 2002). Nevertheless, women also resist through material practices (Bosworth, 1999; Braidotti, 1994). For instance, they exercise agency through more formal institutionalized channels such as political lobbying and legal challenges to structural

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<sup>57</sup> There is a debate around the use of the term 'resistance' as opposed to the term 'contestation'. Rose (1999) for instance, argues that resistance implies a monolithic force against which people struggle. He prefers the umbrella term 'contestations' which includes discursive resistance(s), tactics, and negotiations. Throughout this research, I alternate between either term, emphasizing a broad arsenal of strategies for subverting oppressive societal structures.

injustices (Dobrowolsky, 2000; EDA, 1993). Furthermore, women resist by forging alliances with other women in order to struggle in solidarity against oppression (Black, 1988; Das Gupta, 1986; Druhvarajan and Vickers, 2002). In short, diverse groups of women have organized within their own communities, whether cultural, linguistic, or occupational to subvert oppressive conditions. As will be discussed below, this particular form of resistance - organizing - is highly relevant to any discussion around strategies for improving women's working conditions.

### **3.3 Working Class women's resistance**

James Scott (1990) adopts the notion of 'infrapolitics' to describe the strategies of resistance adopted by working class people. That is, despite appearances of consent, individual workers challenge their subservience within employment structures in myriad ways: humour, theft, 'slacking off', gossip, ignoring customers, and quitting (Bruckert, 2002; Hill Collins, 1994; Scott, 1985, 1990). Workplace resistance can therefore be defined as "an action (or actions) aimed at either passively or actively slowing, reversing, avoiding or protesting management direction of control strategies in the workplace" (White, 1999: 69). Women workers in various labour locations have always resisted to unfair managerial initiatives, work-place discipline, unhealthy environments, and dismissal. It is worth noting that women's collective forms of resistance (and indeed working-class resistance more broadly) find their roots in a traditional Marxian blueprint for social change. Briefly, Marx's historical materialism sees the history of class struggle as one of distinctive relations between the owners of the means of production and the producers, or put differently, between oppressors and the oppressed (Holmstrom, 2002):

the history of class struggles (...) is between freeman [sic] and slave (...) in a word oppressor and oppressed (Marx and Engels, 1948: 9).

Fundamentally, Marx believed that within a capitalist society, self-emancipation of the working class would end all other forms of oppression(s). Social revolution would begin

with class-conscious labourers *collectively organized* to change the exploitative conditions inherent in the wage labourer-capitalist relations. It is in this Marxian tradition that the labour movement emerges as a form of collective resistance to the inherently exploitative employer-employee relationship (Craig, 1996; Glasbeek, 2002).

However resisting through strikes, outright resignation, and formal labour organizing is often not always a tenable option for working-class women generally (Briskin and McDermott, 1993; Warskett, 1996)<sup>58</sup> or women in erotic industries specifically, given their marginal and stigmatized status (Bruckert, 2002; Chun, 1999). More precisely, dancers work in highly competitive environments and are afforded few legal protections. As such, they tend to make use of 'every day' acts of resistance rather than risk backlash from clubs when attempting to formally organizing. For instance, many skin trade workers affirm their 'entrepreneurial' status, framing themselves as innovative, autonomous workers who pride themselves of their labour (Brewis and Linstead, 2000; Bruckert, 2002).

Despite the predominantly individualized forms of resistance adopted by sex and skin trade workers, some women have actively forged formal alliances and even formed unions as a means of working toward collective solutions to oppressive working conditions (Brooks, 1997; Chun, 1999; Cooke, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Funari, 2000; Miss Mary Ann, 1998). To this end, erotic labourers' adopt multiple strategies of resistance - both collective and individual - to respond and improve their working conditions.

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<sup>58</sup> For a number of reasons, working-class women have been reticent to join unions. Historically, unions have been complicit in the gendered segmentation of the labour market, have supported sexist ideologies about women's work, and reinforced anti-democratic structures which marginalize women members. However, more recently, unions have seen a dramatic increase in women's participation and leadership who have brought gender to the center of some union activism, challenged and removed the male standard of the generic worker, lobbied for universal childcare and pay equity, and built and sustained broader alliances with the feminist community (Briskin and McDermott, 1993: 7-14; Interview with Rosemary Warskett, 2004).

Generally speaking, these myriad strategies of resistance - both micro and macro should not be understood as in opposition to one and other. However 'everyday acts', often serve to further individual aspirations, and do at times undermine solidarity among dancers (Cooke, 1987). Further, the covert / discursive / individual strategies of resistance are difficult to incorporate into a broader political vision that usually accompanies collective resistance strategies.

Despite highly charged and competitive work environments, erotic dancers nonetheless have been successful in forming unions for sex workers generally, as well constituting organizations that cater specifically to the needs of erotic dancers.<sup>59</sup> Further, while some sex and skin trade workers' alliances have folded (CABE, DANZINE); others remain vital and have managed to sustain their activism (STELLA, IUSW). In fact, COYOTE maintains that given erotic labourers' marginality and social locations, self-representation and self-organization are the most viable and best solution for the sometimes dangerous, sometimes unhealthy working conditions with which sex workers are faced (Cornell, 2000; Jenness, 1993). For instance, the Exotic Dancers Alliance in San Francisco successfully filed with the equal Employment Opportunity Commission for sexual discrimination and sexual harassment decrying the physical and verbal harassment by managers and the difference in wages between male and female staff (Breyer and Passar, 1998). The *Lusty Lady* peepshow workers went a step further; dancers had expressed serious concerns to management about the two-way mirrors in customer booths<sup>60</sup> and like all other establishments, there were 'quotas' on the number of dancers of colour that could be on stage at once. Racialized women, and Black women in particular, were not permitted to work the 'private pleasures' booths - a labour

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<sup>59</sup> A detailed discussion of these dancer affiliations is the work of chapter four.

<sup>60</sup> Customers were photographing and filming women without their consent and disseminating the images for profit (Brooks, 1997; Funari, 2000; Miss Mary Ann, 1998).

practice that could substantially increase a dancer's income.<sup>61</sup> In 1996, the dancers covertly convinced 80% of the staff to sign a petition in favour of a union. *Lusty Lady* dancers organized and the SEIU agreed to file grievances on behalf of the dancers for the club's violations of labour laws and its racial discrimination (Brooks, 1997; Funari, 2000; Miss Mary Ann, 1998).<sup>62</sup> The *Lusty Lady* became the nation's first *peepshow*<sup>63</sup> to unionize.<sup>64</sup> Soon after, the club owners informed dancers that they were closing due to lost profits. The dancers solicited the assistance of a local grocery cooperative, formed their own co-op and *bought out* the club (Chea, 2003).<sup>65</sup>

#### ***Part Four: Moving toward Praxis and Framing my Research***

In this chapter, I have outlined how feminist theorists have suggested ways to think about erotic labour in a manner that subverts past dichotomous approaches. My starting point is that matters are far too complex to be captured adequately by either of "wholesale theories" (Radin, 1996: xiii) of choice or constraint. The more recent contextual approaches outlined above, that draw upon feminist labour theory and postcolonial studies emphasize the need to interrogate broader societal structures of

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<sup>61</sup> Management's rationale was that clients preferred to have intimate conversations with white women (Brooks, 1997).

<sup>62</sup> *Lusty Lady* workers allied themselves with the Exotic Dancers Alliance (who had an informal affiliation with the SEIU Local 790. Their chapter was named the Exotic Dancers Union.

<sup>63</sup> Peep shows are different from stripclubs in that there is no direct contact between entertainers and patrons; customers watch dancers from individual booths through glass windows. As such, dancers do not compete with one another for tips, however, some women who want to make additional income can work the private booths where men pay ten dollars to have an individualized performance - which is also behind glass. Nevertheless, the workers often refer to themselves as 'strippers' or 'dancers' (Brooks, 2000; Funari, 2000).

<sup>64</sup> In 2003, the workers at the *Lusty Lady* ratified a new two-year contract, raising dancers' pay by three dollars an hour and increasing sick pay to two days. They also negotiated an additional two dollars per shift in the first year of work and an additional four dollars a shift in the second year to account for dancers' preparation time.

<sup>65</sup> They elected a board of directors and voted on all major managerial decisions (including hiring standards). Under the co-op owned, dancer-managed arrangement, dancers still receive an hourly wage. However, they now have the option to pay \$300 to buy into the co-operative and receive a portion of the profits based on the number of hours worked (Chea, 2003).

oppression. Furthermore, feminist postmodern analysis enables theorists and activists to recognize that women do, despite their marginal and stigmatized locations, resist these oppressive conditions.

Throughout this research, my point of departure is feminist theorizing that has integrated additional axes of oppression resulting in a complex and variegated approach to understanding the impact of (dis)advantage on women's lives in all their diversity and complexity (McLaren, 2002). This stems from a conviction that incorporating a number of feminist insights that focus on the intersection of agency and domination in the lives of women allows for new approaches that can reduce "women's daily suffering" (Chander, 1999: 137). In canvassing various framings of the sex and skin trades, my goal has been to set a foundation for a larger project - an attempt at theorizing the collective resistance(s) of a particularly marginalized and stigmatized group of working-class women: erotic dancers. This critical engagement with feminist theories enables my findings to be framed within the understanding that erotic dancers are labourers who operate within constraints: poor working conditions, limited access to labour protections and collective bargaining mechanisms, social marginalization, and stigmatization. They are also often subject to hostile state regulatory practices. However, it also provides me with the tools to contextualize the manner in which dancers exercise agency through: (i) their attempts to resist oppressive structures and cultural demands; and (ii) their collective efforts to reshape labour practices, which they have determined, limit their individual choices. In short, documenting erotic dancers' attempts to organize in Ontario, and discussing the extent to which formal resistance enables dancers to craft better working conditions, contributes to the growing literature on the striptease industry. Despite their near absence from historical records, Canadian women, and working-class women specifically, have a long history of collectively resisting oppressive systems of

class, race, and gender in order to expand their fundamental human rights (Dobrowolsky, 2000). By adopting a feminist lens that centers labour and resistance, mine is an attempt to engage with the paradigm shift in theorizing around women working as erotic labourers from seeing them as either sex radicals or victims. Instead, I adopt a more nuanced understanding of women's labour which locates their occupational choices, and their ability to resist exploitation, as fundamentally influenced by an individual's location along broad axes of differentiation such as race, class, and gender. These theoretical assumptions in turn guide the epistemological and methodological considerations that are discussed in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER 3

### **Epistemological and Methodological Considerations**

In attempting to understand how erotic dancers have organized to collectively resist unfair working conditions, I adopt a methodological approach, which resonates both with the goals of my participants and with my feminist commitment to broader social transformation. To this end, my 'methodological path' (Lentin, 1994) is feminist, committed to local knowledge(s), qualitative, ethnographic, women-centered and self-reflexive. This chapter is an overview of my epistemological assumptions, methodology, research tools, and approach to content analysis. It ends with a discussion on the limitations inherent to my research, as well as my strategies for circumscribing and addressing these challenges.

Before moving on however, I would like to highlight that the organizing concept for this chapter, and indeed my entire thesis, is a commitment to feminist theory and activism. This research is feminist by virtue of: (1) the origin of my research object - my concern for the experiences of women as they define them and as located within socially constructed gender relations; (2) the purpose of my inquiry - to think about meaningful changes to the working environments of erotic dancers and how to implement them; and (3) the nature of the relationship between myself (researcher) and my research informants - interactive, dynamic and self-reflexive (De Lauretis, 1986; Harding, 1987; Stanely and Wise, 1983). What follows is a discussion of the epistemological assumptions that give shape to this feminist research.

## ***Part One: Epistemological Assumptions - Feminism and Knowledge Claims***

Epistemology is an interrogation of what is understood as 'knowledge', who claims it, and / or is deemed to possess it, and the manner in which competing knowledge-claims are dealt (Stanley and Wise, 1990). Feminist Standpoint Epistemology (FSE) is premised upon the notion that "neither orthodox nor feminist empiricists [have] adequately accounted for the varied historical and material conditions out of which people produce knowledge (Code, 1995: 41). It is located within, but also proceeds, from the grounded analyses of women's material realities in an attempt to understand the multiple oppressions women experience as the structural consequences of inequality (Cain, 1990; Code, 1995; Jaggar, 1983; Smith, 1974; Stanley and Wise, 1990). FSE privileges 'subjugated knowledges' - the knowledge of the oppressed - and over dominant knowledges - eurocentric, masculinist knowledge systems (Harstock, 1983; Harding, 1987; Hill Collins, 1990). In addition, individual women are understood to have variegated, intersecting standpoints based on their race, class, sexual orientation, culture, age, and (dis)ability. Each, as Harding argues, has its own ontological legitimacy:

Once we admit the existence of feminist *standpoints* there can be no *a priori* reason for placing these in any kind of hierarchy each has *epistemological validity* because each has *ontological validity*. Here we have contextually grounded truth (1987: 28).

Moreover, feminist standpoint enables researchers to produce "good quality" knowledge<sup>66</sup> from a site that one has identified and agreed to occupy for others (Cain, 1990: 136).

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<sup>66</sup> Cain defines 'good quality knowledge' as one that is derived from realist epistemology; it is 'integrally political' and highlights the site-specific character of all knowledge; it must be capable of thorough assessment by those for whose use it was intended; and it ought to account for the researcher's own knowledge as well as her research participants' knowledge (1990: 138-139).

Working from a feminist standpoint has been enriched my study of the collective resistance of erotic dancers. As noted, because there is not monolithic underlying "woman's experience" feminist researchers should strive to provide local, small scale accounts of women's everyday realities (Aptheker, 1989; Longino, 1993). I am focusing on a specific form of stigmatized and sexualized labour performed by predominantly working-class young women, in a particular region of the 'West' at a specific social moment (which has been defined by some as 'postmodern'<sup>67</sup>). Further, my informants all self-identify as 'white'. The knowledge that emerges from my research, then, is highly 'localized' and evidences both subjugated (stigmatized and marginalized working-class women) and dominant (white abled-bodied young women) experiences. It is further localized given my active membership in SLSN and my personal relationships with key informants. As indicated below, these feminist epistemological assumptions in turn influence and shape my methodological approach: feminist ethnography.

### ***Part Two: Methodological Foundations - Feminist Ethnography***

Ethnography is neither inherently feminist, nor a creature of feminism(s) *per se* (O'Leary, 1977). Instead, feminist ethnography draws upon methods from various traditions. For instance, it is highly influenced by constructionist frameworks whereby the researcher accepts that she interprets and defines her reality as well as the experiences of others (Harding, 1992) and it challenges positivism and essentialism, generally, while keeping gender as a central lens of analysis (Reinharz, 1992). To this end, feminist ethnography, as Nancy Tuana explains, entails

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<sup>67</sup> Simon Gottschalk (2000) writes that postmodernism refers to three interrelated phenomena: (1) an historical moment - the post-World War Two era with increased disorganized and accelerated transformation in all social institutions and the uncertain and ongoing effects of these changes; (2) a psychological expression of this historical moment; and (3) the cultural articulation of a particular historical moment.

the practice (...) of keeping a clear focus on issues of gender to identify and to remove practices and institutions that contribute to the oppression of women (2001: 4)

Qualitative research, and feminist qualitative research in particular, centers participant's lives as they themselves define them (Gilligan, 1982; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994; Oakley, 1981). Feminist ethnography therefore serves a number of purposes for feminist qualitative researchers. It is a means of documenting the activities and experiences of diverse groups of women and of excavating their perspectives on these activities and experiences. Further, feminist ethnography allows researchers to reinterpret women's everyday realities and behaviours into expression of social contexts (Lofland, 1975; Reinharz, 1992).

In short, feminist ethnography allows me to engage in cultural critique of women's work in broader cultural, economic, race, and legal contexts through a participant-centered understanding of what erotic dancers want and need in terms of broadening their choices within the industry, and how they go about effecting change. In engaging with this feminist ethnographic study, two principles serve as compasses in my attempt to further feminist movement: the centrality of women's experiences and voices (Brown and Gilligan, 1992; Kirby and McKenna, 1989) and self-reflexivity (Gouldner, 1971; Harding, 1992; Stanley and Wise, 1990, 1993).

First, building upon the works of early critical theorists of the symbolic interactionist tradition (i.e. Becker, 1970; Goffman, 1959), feminist theorists have challenged traditional sociology based Cartesian dichotomies of *knowers* versus *known*, *subjectivity* versus *objectivity*, *science* versus *nature*. Feminist critiques have highlighted that these distinctions ultimately rest on the division between the male subject and the female object. Furthermore, they argued that 'knowing' is highly political and that binaries fostered an elitist sociology unable to produce ways of knowing that challenge and subvert subordination. Instead, feminist sociologists posit that women are the

*known* and also the *knowers* and that feminist research must make visible the lived experiences of women in all their diversity (Lentin, 1994; Stanley and Wise, 1990); lives which historically have been disappeared from historical records' (Dumont, 2000; Mann Trifimenkoff, 1985; Spender, 1982). While centering the experience and knowledge of erotic dancers in my ethnographic inquiry, I also highlight that there is no monolithic erotic dancer's voice or experience. In fact, there is a spectrum of issues upon which dancers' organizations have focuses: from subverting economic exploitation to fighting for the right to survival; from sexual expression to sexual exploitation, harassment and assault; from health and safety issues to violations of fundamental human rights. Other dancers, however, express little or no interest in changing their work environments. While all of these voices must be granted equal space and respect, the object of my research (examining the labour organizing of dancers) necessarily implies that some voices (labourers struggling to mobilize) may overshadow others (women working as erotic dancers who appear indifferent to labour struggles). Nevertheless, when possible my research highlights the contestations, omissions, and exclusions within erotic dancers' attempts to mobilize.

The second founding principle to my research is self-reflexivity, or the attention to my role as a researcher. This is meant to ensure that the politics and assumptions that inform my research, my choice of methodologies and the process of data analysis are acknowledged self-consciously and continually kept in check (Maracek and Crawford, 1989). These two principles, women centered research and reflexivity, guide my ethnographic project: examining the collective efforts of erotic dancers to respond to unfair working conditions and etching more meaningful choices in labour practices available to erotic dancers. With this in mind, I move away from methodology - or the

"theory and analysis of how research should or does proceed" (Harding, 1987: 3) to examine the means by which I will engage my research.

### ***Part Three: Research Tools - Feminist Methods***

Feminist ethnography often involves multiple methods, drawing on the strengths of each (Wax, 1971). The data presented in the following two chapters are drawn from a number of interrelated qualitative research strategies; these aim to draw out complex and sometimes conflicting perspectives and meanings. Recall that qualitative research methods focus on how individuals understand their experiences, their social and historical location, and those of the people around them. They also interrogate how individuals construct meaning from their surroundings through metaphor, rituals, social structures, and social roles (Berg, 1995; Bogdan and Biklen, 1982).

To explore the working conditions of erotic dancers and their attempts to organize in response to these conditions, I adopt a 'triangulation' approach which weaves semi-structured interviews with qualitative analysis, textual analysis / literature review, case study, and participant observation. As Reinharz (1992) explains, triangulation involves the use of a variety of methods in order to generate "multifaceted information" (202). This approach is useful for feminist inquiry because it allows researchers to "illuminate previously unexamined or misunderstood experiences" (1992: 197). Erotic dancers and other women working within the commodified sex industries have felt excluded from feminist debates, research, and activism surrounding the skin and sex trades. Triangulation, however, can facilitate a respectful listening to the concerns of erotic dancers by enabling me, as researcher, to develop a more textured and comprehensive understanding of how erotic dancers' frame and experience their labour. As I explain below, interviews and participant observation have facilitated my

immersion into this research project and the development of an intersubjective understanding between my informants and myself (Islam, 2000; Reinharz, 1992: 46).

### **(1) Literature Review**

A literature review generally refers to a summary and interpretation of relevant literature on a given subject matter; in this case, the erotic dancing industry, marginal labour, and the regulation of sex workers. A feminist literature review serves an additional purpose: to question and deconstruct dominant assumptions and rhetorics underlying studies and texts (Reinharz, 1992). In engaging with previous research on the erotic dance industry, the labour of erotic dancers, and their attempts to organize, I also highlight divergent and sometimes overlapping feminist discourses on the sex and skin trades. To this end, I draw upon primary sources such as interdisciplinary research (including criminology, women's studies, law, sociology, anthropology, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, critical race theory, and political science), substantive and procedural law, as well as writing by grass-roots sex and skin trade workers' organizations (such as COYOTE, DERA, EDA, STELLA, and WISE). Secondary materials include media coverage of issues relevant to the erotic dance business, close reading of documentaries and newspaper, as well as fictional accounts and autobiographical work by women working as erotic dancers. Artifacts such as these not only reflect, but shape, societal norms and understandings around nudity, desire, and the businesses characterized by commodified sexuality. Further, these data serve to substantiate and / or challenge my primary sources.

### **(2) Participant Observation**

Reinharz includes feminist participant observation under the rubric of "Feminist Change-Oriented Research" (Reinharz, 1992). The fundamental purpose of participant

observation is to allow research *participants* to make decisions about the study format and its data analysis. Feminist participatory research is a communal rather than a hierarchical endeavor whereby research participants are actively engaged in the project.

As Reinharz explains:

In feminist participatory research [FPR], the distinction between the researcher(s) and those on whom the research is done disappears. To achieve an egalitarian relation, the researcher abandons control and adopts an approach of openness, reciprocity, mutual disclosure, and shared risk (1992: 180).

While true in theory, in practice the knowledge gleaned from participant observation is never "innocent truthful knowledge free from exclusionary power" (Chandler, 1999: 179) between a researcher (read expert) and her informants (read object). However, I have tried to temper this reality by adopting a self-reflexive and women's centered approach to participant observation. To this end, I draw upon hooks' (1989) ethical guidelines for researchers located in dominant positions: academics should acknowledge their position of power and resist framing their findings as definitive but also critically engage with their research participants. In adopting this approach, participant observation has been invaluable to me in building coalitions with erotic dancers' affiliations based on mutual respect and aimed at addressing the problems identified *by that community*.

This particular research project was galvanized when Chris Bruckert invited me to attend a Stigmatized Labour Support Network (SLSN) meeting and introduced me to Sam Smyth, co-founder of the Dancers' Equal Rights Association (DERA). Since that time, I have spent over two years observing and participating in the work of SLSN and DERA. During the exploratory stage of my research, I attended approximately 20 SLSN meetings, throughout which I wrote extensive field notes. Moreover, I took on an active role in the membership in terms of drafting SLSN's mandate and objects, acting as a steering committee member for a research project undertaken by DERA, and chairing roundtable discussions between SLSN and government officials. This work with SLSN

and DERA has been instrumental in highlighting my own assumptions, interpretations, and conclusions in terms of the labour that the women perform and their relationships vis-à-vis each other and their customers. Additionally, it has highlighted my own position as both an *insider* of my research group as a member of SLSN, which has enabled me to access information that might otherwise have been unavailable to another researcher<sup>68</sup>, and an *outsider* as a graduate student who has never worked as a dancer who must keep in check the pull to present my understanding as 'definitive' (Hill Collins, 1991; hooks, 1989; Islam, 2000). Within this precarious space, I have nonetheless managed to informally challenge some members' linguistic protocol - such as the use of the term "feminist-minded", "exotic", and "girls".

Finally, a smaller portion of my research involves fieldwork and direct observation at burlesque fundraisers and Ottawa-area stripclubs. Whenever appropriate and possible, I supplemented these with more extensive commentary after each observation period.<sup>69</sup>

### **(3) Semi-structured Interviews:**

Semi structured interviews are essentially open-ended questions designed to draw information combined with some closed-ended questions that help circumscribe research. From a feminist perspective, the informal semi-structured interview permits a greater degree of interaction between the interviewee and the interviewer (Bologh,

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<sup>68</sup> This was especially the case with information gleaned through conversations both during and after SLSN meetings.

<sup>69</sup> Note that while stripclubs geared toward heterosexual men are more open to women than they were in the past, my presence as a spectator was noted. While some men ignored me, some men asked me why I was there and correspondingly gave me some insight into why they attend clubs, and a few assumed that I was an off-duty dancer (and requested a dance for later).

1984), allows participants to expand on pertinent personal experiences, and fosters a more equitable information-sharing sessions (Reinharz, 1992).<sup>70</sup> During the course of this research, I conducted individual interviews with two sets of informants: primary and secondary. My five primary informants, current and former DERA members<sup>71</sup>, vary in age from their mid 20s to their mid 30s, identify as white, are English-speaking, and live within the Ottawa-Carleton region. Two are in long-term relationships. Two are single-parent heads of households. Four stated they are currently experiencing financial difficulties. All chose to hold interviews in comfortable, informal loci such as their home or mine. These interviews were essential to my research because they allowed me to focus on how erotic dancers relate to the work they perform, and whether collectively they might be able to alter the aspects of their labour which did not correspond with their sense of self. Nevertheless, as noted above, my sample is small and should not be taken as representative of all Ottawa-area erotic dancers.

My secondary informants, SLSN members and other community activists, include a legal studies professor, a labour organizer who was instrumental in unionizing a group of independent contractors, and a health care provider who does outreach work in stripclubs. These data provided context and continuity to my research through insight on the relationship between community partners and DERA, theoretical concepts that

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<sup>70</sup> I found that the main disadvantage of semi-structured interviews was that the loose focus in questions often resulted in large amount of unrelated material once the narratives were transcribed. Further, due to the breadth of conversational topics, it was often difficult for me to remain within the one to two hour time when interviewing my informants. Indeed, one session ran for four hours.

<sup>71</sup> DERA limits its memberships to women who have or who are currently working as erotic dancers. It is through my membership to, and volunteer work with, SLSN that I developed contacts with DERA members. SLSN was created to support the efforts of DERA and to coalesce a number of community members (academics, activists, health care professionals, social workers, lawyers and students) around issues of concern for Ottawa-based erotic dancers, which DERA has identified. These include: the presence of lap dancing; unsanitary working conditions; wage structure; and interpersonal issues.

broadened the scope of my analysis, and in-depth understanding of the fundamental importance, as well as the inevitable pitfalls, of collective resistance. Further, these interviews provide the backdrop from which I attempt to understand broader implications of organizing erotic dancers.

Finally, while not conducting formal interviews, I have engaged in considerable correspondence via electronic mail with women in other jurisdictions - both national and international - who are currently championing the rights of skin and sex trade workers (STELLA, IUSW). Information drawn from this communication includes not only the life histories of women who have, and who are currently doing, similar work to that of DERA and SLSN, but also bibliographic materials, web-links, popular culture references and international caselaw.

Altogether, eight interviews were completed with primary and secondary informants. Central questions in my interview guide related to general working conditions in clubs, industry standards and whether they have shifted over time, wage-structures, and individual opinions on issues such as lap dancing, independent contractor *versus* employee status, managing interactions with clients and getting dancers involved in associations like DERA and SLSN. In every interview, I also asked dancers to give me their ideal working scenario, including the number of dancers on the floor, how wages would be earned, who would own the clubs, whether or not there would be alcohol served, and whether clubs would allow sex acts to occur. At the end of each discussion, I requested feedback from participants on my questions and approach.

Interviews were taped on cassette and transcribed verbatim.<sup>72</sup> While I took some editorial license in deleting interruptions and conversation that was of a social nature and not related to my research, I was alive to pauses, silences, and breaks in

narrative; these remain in the official transcript. The process of transcribing the interviews was time-consuming and labour-intensive for a number of reasons. I diligently produced transcripts within a day or two of the interviews and typed out two simultaneous copies. One was what I refer to as a 'clean' copy of the official transcript; this was forwarded to participants for commentary. The other was a 'personal' copy with comments, questions for clarification, ideas for the next interview, and my personal reactions to participants' responses.

#### **(4) Feminist Case Study**

A case study is research that focuses on a specific group / social phenomena in order to gain insight into understudied activities, their changes over time, and their significance for future events (Carroll, 1976; Reinharz, 1992). Therèse Baker's comments on case studies are particularly relevant to my research. She notes that the case study's main purpose is "to try to figure out why certain situation prevails or how an organization or a group has succeeded" (1994: 300). Detailed examination of national and international efforts by erotic dancers and other women working within industries characterized by commodified sex is a broad and ambitious project; in fact, too broad and too ambitious for a Masters' candidate. Accordingly, I have decided to focus on the case of DERA in Ottawa while still paying close attention to other Ontario groups (the EDA in particular) and the Lusty Lady in San Francisco.

My empirical focus is on DERA because is it currently active while other Ontario-based dancer's rights organizations have folded. It is also the only Ottawa area erotic dancer's organization. DERA has documented a number of its activities through meeting minutes, records of phone conversations with government officials, personal electronic

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<sup>72</sup> Attached as Appendices A (DERA members) and B (Community members) are my interview guides.

correspondence, newspaper clippings, and research over the last three years. These data serve as a valuable resource for my research, given that the activities of other dancer affiliations were either not documented (neither internally, nor by the media), or have to a large extent disappeared from the historical record. To this end, my case study is intended as a glimpse at a nodal point in Ottawa-based erotic dancers labour organizing. Finally, I have undertaken this particular case study because of my personal engagement with DERA through my membership to SLSN and through friendships with its members. The next section outlines the procedures through which I interpreted, coded, and processed my findings from the above methods.

#### ***Part Four: Content Analysis***

*The process of meaning making is largely intuitive and unconscious. Through textual analysis, interpreters can explore, refine, and test those first impressions by reading the text more self-consciously (Sullivan, 1997: 57)*

While the centering of women's voices and reflexivity are at the core of feminist qualitative research, issues of *authority* and *power* are sometimes overlooked by feminist researchers (Miles and Huberman, 1994). As Doucet and Mauthner (2002: 123) argue:

data analysis presents researchers with the challenge of keeping respondents' voices and perspectives alive, while at the same time recognizing the researcher's role in shaping the research process and product.

What follows is a discussion of some of the dilemmas I faced in attempting to engage in feminist content analysis of transcripts, archival texts, and field notes.

Before beginning however, it merits mention that my analysis began when I attended my first SLSN meeting, and long before I had read any academic work on the *erotic dance industry* or conducted interviews. That is, data analysis cannot be cut apart from the other phases of research. On the contrary, it is an on-going, dynamic,

contradictory process that has taken place throughout my research project. As such, the initial stages of qualitative analysis - the familiarization with data and identification of recurring themes - can be terribly confusing and disjointed. In fact, a good deal of this work is as intuitive and fluid as it is explicit and systematic (Bryman and Burgess, 1994; Sullivan, 1997). Issues of authority arise because intuitive and systematic approaches are imprinted within my social location: a white, well-educated, English-speaking, middle class, able-bodied woman (Doucet and Mautner, 2002; hooks, 1984). Further, in reading texts, I noted authors' social location when possible, and any biases outwardly acknowledged (or sometimes implied through language) and more illusive underlying assumptions in their analyses. Keeping in mind Flax's (1990) concept of "thinking fragments" and that there is no *one* legitimate reading of a text, I journaled my feeling vis-à-vis other academic work: ambiguity, frustration, disbelief, (dis)agreement. Third, I summarized the main ideas and evaluated the reliability of the author's arguments. Fourth, I noted similarities and contradictions in the framing(s) of dancers' work and their experiences. Later on, I compared how the data gleaned related to my other sources of information, and interview transcripts most notably. When reading these interview transcripts, I tried to uncover 'thematic networks', including how informants define the nature of the erotic dance business, the desire to change working conditions in clubs, how they resist despite these sometimes exploitative conditions, and the impediments to organizing dancers. That is, after my second reading, I reduced the data to a more manageable size and identified recurring themes and key concepts. Furthermore, I adopted "linguistic repertoire analysis" (Witherell, 1987: 79) highlighting inconsistencies, stereotypes, counter-stereotypes, variabilities, patterns and nuances in participants' narratives as well as the feminist discourses they have adopted and those they have rejected.

A second issue is that research is subjective and interpretive and therefore inherently biased, value-laden, and historically located (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Stanley and Wise, 1990). As Doucet and Mautner note, "in analyzing data we are confronted with ourselves, and with our central role in shaping the outcome" (2002: 126). That is, one of the most common dilemmas around qualitative research is that the process and procedure often reflect the researchers' hidden personal, professional and theoretical constraints as well as her role in meaning-making (Doucet and Mauthner, 2002). Data analysis is the means through which, as a researcher, I 'make sense' and provide coherence to the information I have accessed and the experiences I have documented. To be sure, my ethnographic focus is on the 'Western' experience and is constrained by my own location - white, middle class, English-speaking woman with a formal education living in a urban setting. For this reason, I have, throughout this research process, tried to be vigilant of my own insensitivities to context when they arise and to adopt a self-reflexive, self-conscious, self-critical position. To reiterate, the use of feminist standpoint analysis that aim at producing "good knowledge" (Cain, 1990) assists me in subverting the pull to locate myself (researcher) as an expert, to center the participants' experiences, revisit the research object in light of both and produce accessible research (Stanley and Wise, 1990).

### ***Final reflections***

With these epistemological and methodological considerations in mind, I end this chapter with a discussion of the limitations of my research. One limitation to my research is that I was unable to interview women who are currently working as erotic dancers in Ottawa, who know about DERA, but who have decided not to get involved with the organization. While I requested that my informants assist me in developing contacts with other erotic dancers, the scope of my snowball sampling remained within

the parameters of DERA membership. This is significant because non-members may well adopt different discourses around key DERA issues such as banning lap dancing and the 'dancer' / 'prostitute' distinction. Further, DERA membership is limited to predominantly white women who have the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991)<sup>73</sup> which enables them to be 'good girls'. As such, DERA's position may not represent a number of dancers, especially those tend to be concentrated in 'seedier' establishments, and who are more vulnerable to physical and sexual violences: older women, racialized women, women for whom English is not their first language, and new Canadians. Interviews with these other(ed) women would have provided more meaningful insight into who DERA represents. An additional limitation is that DERA's membership overlaps with SLSN's and both are fairly small groups. A primary concern for me was whether my informants, despite assurances of confidentiality, the use of consent forms and pseudonyms to protect their identity, may have felt ill-at-ease in straying from the discourses adopted by key DERA spokeswomen. Finally, my research would have been greatly enriched by the insight of younger dancers who have just entered the trade and their views on the labour conditions within clubs. Notwithstanding the fact that DERA's membership is limited to a particular segment of the dancer population may well provide insight into on whose behalf the organization speaks, the discourses they adopt, the form of organizing they favour and the future direction of their work. For this reason, the limitations noted above do not render my research fatally flawed. Instead, they serve to circumscribe my research and speak to the 'generalizability' (or lack thereof) of my findings.

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<sup>73</sup> Note that Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital is exclusively used in terms of class. As Sinnerland and Sanderson (2002) argue, cultural capital should be understood as a device, which articulates patriarchy and capitalism. Indeed, some authors have extended the concept to examinations of gender and labour (Bruckert, 2002).

An additional issue is that due to time and length constraints, this research cannot sufficiently examine the variations across time and place which affect the organization of the erotic dance business (Brewis and Linstead, 2000). I borrow from Brewin and Linstead (2000: 4) who state that sex work is "both problematic, caught in an anxious tension of the global and local in a geometry of difference". There are tensions between this *localized knowledge* - how individual, Ottawa-based dancers experience their occupation, talk back to stigma, resist economic and sexual exploitation - and more *global messages* that shape and reflect their experiences - consumerism (McNair, 2002; Radin, 1990), global trends in labour (Bauman, 1998; Beck, 1999), systemic racism and the eroticization of racial differences (hooks, 1992), discursively formed and hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1995; Razack, 1998), and the performance of gender and femininity (Butler, 1990). In short, while women working as erotic dancers actively shape and interpret the social relations and processes that constitute their everyday realities (Smith, 1987), they produce knowledge and exercise agency within *systems of constraint*. While my theoretical chapter outlines some of the constraints in which women working in erotic industries operate, this is not a complete account of the impact of these constraints. I believe that this area of study, the global trends that influence, shape, and maintain structures of oppression, and how they are implicated in erotic dancers' efforts to organize, requires more in-depth analysis. Correspondingly, my particular research project is limited to a detailed documentation and examination of the collective response of dancers to shifts in their working conditions and where their collective action can assist in crafting more meaningful choices for dancers operating within systems of constraint.

## CHAPTER 4

### **‘Bad Girls Like Good Contracts’<sup>74</sup>: Erotic Dancers Collective Resistance**

*The telling of, listening to, affirmation of, reflecting on, and analysis of personal stories and experiences ‘from the ground up’ are potentially empowering action research strategies drawn from women’s organising (Patricia Maguire, cited in Roy 2004: 1).*

In most Canadian and American jurisdictions, there has been a shift in the labour performed by erotic dancers from a more *visual* form of entertainment (stage dancing) to what Frank (2002) refers to as *individualized services* and interactions (lap-dancing). The change in industry standards and labour practices requires additional physical and emotional investment from dancers (Bruckert, 2002) but correspondingly renders them more vulnerable to physical, sexual and economic exploitation (DERA, 2002). Throughout these shifts, pockets of dancers have consistently organized in attempts to collectively craft more meaningful choices within conditions of constraint.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of efforts over the last three decades by Ontario-based dancers to collectively resist unfair labour practices. Dancers’ affiliations emerge as a venue through which women can potentially exercise agency and subvert the oppressive, institutionalized structures of their workplace. They are formed by virtue of dancers’ shared position in relation to specific social structures: their workplace; their common experiences as stigmatized workers; and a collective commitment to distinct strategies for change. As with other forms of collective resistance by women, these collective tactics are both anchored in their everyday experiences and intended as a means of improving their social and economic lives.

Whenever possible, I provide an account of the organizational structure, primary

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<sup>74</sup> Logo adopted by picketing Lusty Lady peepshow performers in San Francisco (Funari, 2000).

goals, intra-group dynamics, and activism of four erotic dancers' organizations: CAFE, EDA, ABE, and DERA.<sup>75</sup> Note that feminist historians have long been committed to discovering and revealing "the forgotten and ignored women of the past in order to change the very conception of history that has rendered them insignificant" (Mann Trofimenkoff, 1985: 2). However, in light of the marginal, stigmatized, and often hidden nature of the erotic dance industry, a history of the women working within it is not readily accessible, nor even documented at times.<sup>76</sup> Rather, the data that do provide a record of the formal organizing of dancers are often fragmented and must be cobbled together from a small pool of sources including oral history (interviews), academic and autobiographical literature, and electronic references. Moreover, given the gendered, classed, and racialized nature of historical records generally, the limited documentation that does exist is vulnerable to be (dis)appeared altogether (hooks, 1984). Finally, while feminist historians have actively been reconstituting a *her*story of women's activism, work, and achievements over the last few centuries, they have at times neglected the imperative need to document women's more recent struggles and contestations. As Dale Spender writes:

While we are prepared to put much energy into reclaiming women from the distant past, our record is not so good when it comes to preserving our more recent heritage. In fact, we have sometimes been careless about the way we have discarded that very heritage (1982: 54).

As noted in my literature review, this lacunae is further compounded by the fact the few authors who have thoroughly examined dancers' resistance have focused on

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<sup>75</sup> Other dancer affiliations have emerged all over North America. As with Ontario-based groups, some have survived (Exotic Dancers' Alliance in San Francisco; Las Vegas Dancers Alliance) while others are now defunct (Montréal-based *Les Lilis*; DANZINE).

<sup>76</sup> While a few historical texts do exist (Corio, 1968; Jarrett, 1997; Ross, 2000) they paid little attention to formal labour organizing. As discussed in my review of literature, like the ethnographical accounts that overlook dancer affiliations, this may be due to the fact that little to no historical records of dancers' formal resistance remain. Notable exceptions include Brooks, 1997; Chun, 1999; Cooke, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Miss Mary Ann, 1998; and Funari, 2000 who have attempted to record the history of dancers' collective action.

informal, individual, everyday acts rather than formal, collective organizing (Bruckert, 2002; Frank, 2002a; Murphy, 2003; Price, 2000; Ronai Rambo, Sanchez, 2003). For the above reasons, sketching out, and engaging with, attempts by dancers to create formal associations is a meaningful contribution to the existing literature on erotic dancers specifically, and stigmatized, working-class women generally. Finally, my findings are framed with the feminist theoretical model of choices made within constraints; dancers mobilize around changes in their workplaces in an attempt to collectively resist oppressive structures and craft a space within which they can constitute themselves as agents.

Before beginning however, a few introductory comments merit mention. First, what is understood as 'formal' or 'collective' organizing is generally the creation of an occupational association or a network of erotic dancers mobilizing around specific issues, rather than forging relationships with the broader labour movement through unions. As with other types of women's networks, which 'connect' women for specific purposes, these associations have few established procedures or membership requirements, and individual leaders tend to hold most of the decision-making authority (Purkayastha, 2004: 7). Nevertheless, in Ontario, one dancers' union has been formed, but it was, as will be discussed below, short-lived (Johnson, 1987).<sup>77</sup> That being said, unions have been a successful form of labour resistance and workplace transformation in the United States, Germany and in Australia (Brooks, 1997; 2000; Chun, 1999; Funari,

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<sup>77</sup> Other dancer affiliations that will not be discussed in this chapter include the group of women who in 1967 picketed in front of their Vancouver club demanding higher wages, staff privileges, and a dressing room with heat. However, they were unable to certify (Ross, 2000). Further, in 1977, Better End All Vicious Erotic Repression [BEAVER] - reputed to be Canada's first sex and skin trade worker associations - was founded by Margaret Spore. While it advocated on behalf of all sex trade workers, BEAVER was predominantly made up of erotic dancers

2000).<sup>78</sup> Second, throughout this chapter, I consider the economic, social, and legal contexts from which dancers' affiliations emerge. Erotic dancing is located within a unique matrix of legal, economic, and cultural institutions that govern whether or not it is recognized as legitimate work. Stripclubs and their attendants are subject to specific municipal, provincial, and federal regulations that circumscribe the means by which erotic dancers can make an income. Further, the labour of an erotic dancer is neither static nor ahistorical. Rather, in tandem with social, economic, and political trends, it has been redefined over time. Third, Ontario-based erotic dancers' affiliations have primarily organized in response to club-specific concerns, such as the licensing of dancers, or normalizing lapdances within clubs, and have often limited their membership to current or former dancers. In other jurisdictions however, dancers have mobilized with other women working within the erotic industries (EDA San Francisco<sup>79</sup>, STELLA<sup>80</sup>, IUSW<sup>81</sup>) or have forged alliances with unions and even reshaped their entire working environment (EDU, Lusty Lady<sup>82</sup>). Fourth, a number of these organizations developed in an *ad hoc*

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<sup>78</sup> For instance, as noted earlier, *Lusty Lady* workers joined the SEIU and eventually bought the club. Dancers also unionized in Alaska with hotel and restaurant employees. In Germany, dancers organized under the Median Trade Union; in Australia dancers formed the Striptease Artists Union. England's International Union of Sex Workers also represents erotic dancers.

<sup>79</sup> The EDA's mission is "to address the lack of civil, human and labor rights on behalf of exotic dancers and other sex industry workers" (EDA, 1998).

<sup>80</sup> STELLA is a Montréal-based sex workers' advocacy group, drop-in and resource center. In a recent edition of *Constellation* (2000), its bi-yearly magazine, a STELLA spokesperson argued that regardless of what segment of the erotic industry dancers 'fit into' they are, like other sex workers, subject to stigma and marginalized. As such all sex workers (including skin trade workers / erotic dancers) should pool their resources and energies and work together rather than reinforcing hierarchies within the erotic industries.

<sup>81</sup> The International Unions of Sex Workers is certified under Britain GMB union. The IUSW advocates for the decriminalisation of all sex work; the right for all sex workers (which includes erotic dancers) to form and join professional associations or unions; and the right for sex workers to receive the same benefits as other self-employed or contracted workers (Mission Statement, n.d.).

<sup>82</sup> The Lusty Lady in San Francisco became the nation's first peepshow club to unionize in the late 1990s through the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); their SEIU chapter is called the Exotic Dancers Union (EDU). See generally: Brooks 1997; Miss Mary Ann, 1998; Funari, 2000.

manner and have subsequently disbanded for a variety of reasons, including membership disengagement and financial constraints. This has also been the case for organizations in other jurisdictions - DANZINE in the United States for instance.<sup>83</sup> Some of these organizations have few remaining archives, making a more thorough review of their activism, direction, and recruitment strategies more difficult. On a final note, while this chapter is divided in sections that are meant to follow certain time lines, the reality is that history is not linear and there are overlaps in experiences, and changes within the industry and dancers' activism. However, for clarity, I have attempted to maintain discrete categories that describe changes within the workplace then how dancers responded to these changes. With this in mind, it is helpful to historically locate the emergence of the stripclub before proceeding to how erotic dancers' organized in response to shifts in their labour practices.

### ***Part One: Locating the Striptease - Exeunt Burlesque, Enter Bump and Grind***

Broadly stated, there have been three 'eras' of erotic dancing within the last century: the Burlesque of the late 1890s to the 1930s; the emergence of the striptease clubs in the 1970s; and the advent of lapdancing and more 'personalized entertainment' in mid 1990s. Burlesque of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century has been categorized as a highly

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<sup>83</sup> DANZINE formed in 1995 when a hand full of erotic dancers and one woman working as an escort decided to create a 'zine' (independent publication) discussing issues relevant to women working within the erotic industries and promoting dancers' artwork and writing. DANZINE became a non-for-profit organization in 1996, with Teresa Dulce as its Executive Director. Under her direction, DANZINE became involved in two health care initiatives: peer education in dancers' dressing rooms (DanceReach) and needle exchanges once a week (StreetReach). While initially a 'dancer' group, DANZINE branched off to create the Bad Date Line where women would leave an anonymous report on voice mail and avoid having to deal with the police. Further, the group formed a thriftstore to provide affordable clothing for women and a source of income for the agency. Their latest initiative was the Bio Hazardous Disposal Mobile Unit that collected syringes, crack pipes and potentially hazardous materials and properly disposed of them. Aside from small operational grants, DANZINE received no financial government backing. In 2003, DANZINE folded due to lack of funding (Dulce, 2003).

subversive era of erotic dancing because the sexual explicitness always overlapped with verbal insubordination and gender bending (Allen, 1991). The *Oxford English*

*Dictionary*, refers to 'burlesque' as

the species of composition which excites laughter by caricature of serious works, or by ludicrous treatment of their subjects; a literary or dramatic work of this kind (...)  
Grotesque caricature (...) An action or performance which casts ridicule on that which it imitates, or is itself a ridiculous attempt at something serious; a mockery (1995: 174).

Burlesque emerged as a comedic and sexualized form of entertainment in North America with the arrival of Lydia Thompson's 'Blonde Beauties' burlesque troupe from Europe in 1869. These entertainers engaged in gender bending - women playing men playing women - and subverted societal norms of femininity - exposing their bare shoulders and legs. The transgression of societal norms meant that performers, and Lydia Thompson especially, continuously battled to maintain their own discursive representation through theatrical performances and stage personas in light of social disapproval, critical commentary, and the policing of women's bodies (Pullen, 2001).

Burlesque disrupted societal norms for a number of reasons. The overt display of voluptuous female bodies in revealing clothes or corseted costumes destabilized Victorian bourgeois male authority.<sup>84</sup> While marriage gave men the right to possess women and their sexuality, the burlesque performer invited the male gaze and 'gave away' a segment of her husband's proprietary rights (Allen, 1991). The old school burlesque also provided women (both on the stage and within the audience) with an outlet for self-expression, performance, and debaucherous fun. This is in large part due to the fact that the shows were written, produced, and performed by women and most

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<sup>84</sup> While dancers of the burlesque era were voluptuous, by the 1970s, a particular male-defined standard of beauty became the norm in most clubs: white women with medium to large size breasts, long blond hair, tiny waists, long and shapely legs (Ross, 2000).

female performers had speaking parts (Allen, 1991; Theakston, 2003, Zeidman, 1967).<sup>85</sup> Simultaneously, discourses of law, medicine, and social sciences brought into being a problematic feminine subject that required surveillance and regulation (Foucault, 1978; Smart, 1992). Women's bodies were constructed as inherently dangerous and unruly, and legislative and juridical action was taken to eliminate their display (Allen, 1991; Shuttleworth, 1990; Smart, 1992).

By the mid-twentieth century, burlesque in its satirical form, had faded and was replaced with a new form of erotic entertainment: the striptease. At this time in the United States, as Allen (1991) writes, that burlesque became a 'quasi-pornographic theatre' catering almost exclusively to men. With the 'Golden Age' of American society and its corresponding 'professionalization' and cultural stratification, burlesque was taken over by male theatrical proprietors and booking agents and the display of female bodies became the major attraction for the overwhelmingly male audience (Trachtenberg, 1991: xii). With this shift in production and management, burlesque's subversiveness was somewhat stilted. Rather than brazen, outspoken, gender-bending women, the genre moved toward the display of the women's bodies in stylized erotic 'gyrating motions' starting with the belly dance in the 1890s, to the shimmy, the 'cooch' and eventually the striptease (Allen, 1991).<sup>86</sup> Despite the so-called 'downgrading' of the burlesque form, striptease emerges as a distinct art form that emphasizes the tease, and the illusion of nudity. As Freidman explains, "the key to the striptease was not how

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<sup>85</sup> Interestingly, Chantal Hébert (1981, 1989) argues, the Québécois-style of burlesque which emerges around the early twentieth century's defining feature was that it had an overwhelmingly female audience base. Hébert found that Québec's burlesque, with home-grown characters like Tizoune Père and Juliette Petrie was entirely unique and was a means by which the Québécois people expressed their distinctive culture and values.

<sup>86</sup> As Trachtenberg argues: "Speech was taken from women performers and sexuality in the debased form of the stylized erotic dance was separated from the insubordination that had given early burlesque its threatening electrical charge" (1991: xii).

much a woman stripped, but how much the people in the audience thought she stripped, as well as how successfully she encouraged their desire that she strip" (1996: 204).

From the 1950s to the early 1970s entertainers worked at theatres such as *The Burlesque* and *The Victory* in Toronto. Striptease 'queens' wore elaborate and formidable vaudeville-style costumes, long gloves, stockings with garters, and gowns with sequins (Corio, 1968; Ross, 2000; Zeidman, 1967). Entertainers used ostrich plume, balloons, sheer body leotards, parasols, fans, banana skirts, pasties, veils, smoke and bubbles as peek-a-boo props giving audiences quick 'flashes' of their bodies. In particular, women like Gypsy Rose Lee, Ann Corio, and Lily St. Cyr were famous for their finely choreographed, extravagant and sultry shows. These stars rarely removed all of their clothes; instead they stripped down to pasties and g-strings and teased their audiences with the 'bump and grind' (Ross, 2000: 232).

Striptease provided women with a venue for self-expression, a means of earning a good income, and opportunities to travel. However, the agency and independence it fostered was tempered and shaped by broader institutions of class, gender and race. While stars like Gypsy Rose, Lili St Cyr and Sally Rand could sometimes make up to \$4000 a weekend, such headliners were few and held a position of privilege and economic superiority in relation to other dancers (Ross, 2000). In fact, the majority of women working in striptease theatres negotiated their working conditions and salaries within highly stigmatized and male-managed environments. Dancers and striptease venues were stratified and the women with the most 'cultural capital' (white, blonde, with large breasts) were slotted in the nicest clubs with the best dressing rooms, performance space, promotion and lighting, while 'other(ed)' women worked in 'lower end' clubs (Jarrett, 1977; Ross, 2000). Indeed their acts, while not intended as political statements, revealed the dominant assumptions about race, class and gender as evidenced through

Pocahontas / Cowgirl and Vampire / Little Red Riding Hood personas. As Becki Ross explains:

Gawking at dancers of colour and white women who impersonated the Other, white consumers were reassured of their own normality and cultural dominance; social boundaries between spectator and performers, the civilized and the uncivilized, and the near homogeneity of [the audience was] affirmed (2000: 234).

Finally, some of the occupational hazards of dancers working the burlesque scene included potential loss of earnings from carrying around large sums of cash, health risks from injecting silicone directly into their breasts before shows, and physical violence from customers trying to burn dancers with cigarettes (Ross, 2000: 233). There is evidence nonetheless that dancers engaged in 'every day acts' of resistance to improve their personal working conditions. For instance, some stars would walk out of a show if their change room did not meet their needs (Zeidman, 1967). However, upon extensive archival research, it seems that there are only a few documented collective acts of resistance by North American dancers in this era. The first being the Burlesque Artists Association (BAA) formed in 1933, led by former burlesque producer Tom Phillips, in response to eighty-hour workweeks and low earnings for entertainers. At its height it had a paper membership of 1300, though it remained male-dominated throughout. While one woman executive board member (and secretary) was elected in 1934, it is only in 1936 that the BAA began to represent stripteasers (Zeidman, 1967). The same year, the BAA was successful in obtaining a charter from the Associated Actors and Artists of American (AAAA) and achieved a closed-shop union, effectively increasing minimum wage for entertainers to \$22.50 per week and rehearsal time was cut down to fifteen hours a week. As Zeidman (1967) notes, it is ironic that the BAA was most successful and active just before the decline of the burlesque industry.<sup>87</sup> When

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<sup>87</sup> In 1937, the BAA changed its name to the Brother Artists Association, reflecting the temper of the times and removing itself from association with burlesque (1967: 216).

burlesque went 'underground' working conditions for women became more difficult. Jarrett (1997) found that without access to protective legislation or unions, dancers who were denied the status of 'artist' faced economic instability and were forced to work longer hours for less pay. However in 1940, the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA) began to represent some dancers through recognition agreements, contracts for minimum wage, and casual engagement contracts. In the end though, it was forced to abandon striptease artists when the Federal Court found them to be independent contractors (Wilmet, 1999). As will be discussed below, there is no evidence of such organizing that catered specifically to the needs of women entertainers either in the United States or in Canada until the later quarter of the twentieth century. This may in part be due to the reality that debates and activism by women about their rights in the workforce and the gendered dimensions of employment inequality only truly galvanized during the 1940s. Contemporaneously, women experienced major shifts in their employment opportunities: young, and predominantly single, working-class women were drawn into, and subsequently jettisoned out of the manufacturing industry during the great war, upon the return of male soldiers (Strong-Boag, 1997; Timpson, 1991: 2). It is only during the 1960s that second wave feminists, whose approach to the issues from different ideological standpoints, began to actively engage in critiques of women's overall location within the labour market. Specifically, women collectively pressured governments to implement policies that would enhance women's employment opportunities and formal equality (Boyd, 1997). It is within this economic, political, and social context that the stripclub emerges.

## ***Part Two: From 'Runway Shakers' to 'Go Go Girls' - The Emergence of the Strip Club***

It is only in the 1970s that the venue known as the 'stripclub' emerges in Ontario. At the federal level, the Supreme Court of Canada determined in 1975 that performing nude in a cabaret theatre did not amount to an "immoral performance" under section 163(2) of the *Criminal Code*.<sup>88</sup> Around the same time, the Ontario Superior Court rejected the Liquor Board's claim that it had jurisdictional authority over the form and content of entertainment within licensed establishments. Shortly thereafter, the definition of 'theatre' was expanded under the *Liquor Control Act* and ultimately opened the door for taverns to hire women to strip (Cooke, 1987: 96). With a shift in venue, the nature of the entertainment varied as well. While dancers still took pride in their appearance and shows, performances were standardized into three-song sets (Bruckert, 2002). While local ordinances on nudity varied, generally dancers would remove all of their clothing (down to a g-string) by the third song. As one Montréal-based dancer of the era noted, this convention sometimes interfered with a woman's ability to make money by teasing customers who demand that the stage performer 'take it all off':

The wors[t] part is, they'll get to see it anyway, the weasels, club rules: the third dance you show all, and some nights, you walk away with just enough to buy that gold-tassels sequined mini that'll be sure to get the big money next time.<sup>89</sup>

Generally speaking, dancers were considered to be entertainers who performed approximately five stage shows per six-hour shift. The average weekly remuneration ranged from \$300.00 and \$600.00 (Bruckert and Parent, 2004). Between stage shows, entertainers were strictly forbidden by law from fraternizing with customers for fear that

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<sup>88</sup> *R. v. Johnson* [1975] 2 S.C.R. 160.

<sup>89</sup> Sophie, cited in STELLA, 2000: 11.

they might be soliciting for the purposes of prostitution.<sup>90</sup> As throughout the burlesque era, performers, not their patrons, bore the brunt of the stigma associated with the industry and dancers were fined rather than club clientèle. Additionally, despite the *Criminal Code* offence of being nude in a manner “which offended public decency” or “without lawful excuse,”<sup>91</sup> some dancers faced dismissal if they did not ‘show pink’ (Bruckert and Dufresne, 2002; Tracey, 1997). Interestingly, a number of dancers secured favourable judgements and had their criminal charges dismissed. A few provincial courts even determined that nude dancing before a consenting adult audience who expressed approval and appreciation for this form of entertainment did not amount to an immoral performance (*R. v. Gray*). Additionally, ‘clean up’ initiatives by municipal councils - charging as many performers as possible with nudity offences and forcing clubs to incur such high legal fees that they would have to close their doors - actually operated as ‘free advertising’ through the media’s disclosure of the types of charges. This led to a massive influx of American patrons with US currency and actually improved business (Ducharme, 1999: 2).

Bruckert (2000) found that with increased nudity and the move toward more ‘seedy’ entertainment such as mud wrestling and wet T-shirt contests, striptease emerges as a ‘social problem’ (Spector and Kitsus, 1973) to be controlled. It is also around this time, that Ontario dancers began to consider organizing to challenge both changes in the industry and intrusive state regulation.

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<sup>90</sup> In Québec for instance, it is only in 1999 that the Court of Appeal overturned a provincial law banning fraternization between patrons and dancers. The Court determined that the law amounted to an infringement of dancers’ and patrons’ freedom of expression under the Canadian *Charter of Rights and Freedoms* on the basis that it interfered with their autonomy and right to meaningful participation in society (Moore and King, 1999).

<sup>91</sup> See: Sections 163 and 170 of the *Criminal Code of Canada*.

### **Part Three: Dancers Unionize to Resist Licensing - CABE**

In 1977, Toronto's mayor, David Crombie, launched a veritable attack against "the yawning cesspool of Yonge Street" and its sex shops, massage parlours, pornographic theatres, and strip clubs (Morrow, 2000: 1). To this end, in 1978, Toronto municipal authorities proposed a by-law that would have required all club owners, operators, and attendants (dancers) to obtain licenses.<sup>92</sup> The city claimed that licensing would provide dancers with professional credibility, ensure better regulation of the industry, and protect entertainers. However, in order to obtain a license, dancers would be required to get a doctor's certification that they were free of sexually transmitted infections, submit photographic identification, establish that they did not have a criminal record, and pay an annual fee (Cooke, 1987; Johnson, 1987; Morrow, 2000). A group of Toronto-area dancers led by Diane Michaels, 'Sugar Bouche', 'Mama Mia', 'Notorious Nadine' and 'Peaches' organized in an attempt to form a union in response to the licensing scheme. In 1979, the Canadian Association of Burlesque Entertainers (CABE) was recognized by the Canadian Labour Council, Local Union No. 1689 and became Canada's first, and hitherto only, *union* of dancers.<sup>93</sup> CABE went before city council to

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<sup>92</sup> Under sections 150 and 151 of the *Municipal Act* R.S.O.1980, c. 302, municipalities have the power to: license, regulate and govern adult entertainment establishments; determine the area within which they may or may not operate; and limit the number of clubs per jurisdiction. These municipal laws' cannot be attempts at regulating matters under provincial or federal jurisdictions; however, there is a presumption that by-laws are *intra vires* and passed in good faith (OAEBA, 1995).

<sup>93</sup> Around the same time a group of dancers in Ottawa picketed in front of city officials' homes in response to proposals to increase regulation of that city's clubs. Their organizing was short-lived and limited to a few public demonstrations (Bruckert and Dufresne, 2002; Harris, 1984).

make a case against the licensing scheme.<sup>94</sup> Licensing meant that already marginalized dancers, who possessed criminal records, would be pushed out of the clubs and likely turn to street level sex work to earn a living (Johnson, 1987). Further, through licensing government organizations such as taxation and social services could access information that might be used against women in custody proceedings or criminal matters (Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale, 2000). With the exception of having dancers' stage names on licenses rather than their real names, CAFE's submissions were ultimately ignored and the licensing scheme was passed (Cooke, 1987).

Despite this defeat, CAFE remained highly vocal about erotic dancers' concerns. For instance, in *Algonquin Tavern* (1981), CAFE challenged clubs that blacklisted union members. In order to render a decision, the Ontario Labour Board first had to grapple with whether erotic dancers were independent contractors or employees.<sup>95</sup> CAFE argued for the latter, or alternatively that dancers were dependent contractors, because of the level of managerial control over dancers' working conditions. The taverns argued that the dancers were independent contractors and therefore had no access to collective bargaining<sup>96</sup> and the Board agreed. Specifically, dancers were not an 'integral' part of the taverns' businesses. Rather, they were one of many forms of entertainment, such as bands, comedians, and wrestling that taverns promoted. As such, dancers were held to be ancillary to taverns' primary means of revenue-generation: food and alcohol. To this

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<sup>94</sup> The Metropolitan Licensing Commission has the discretion whether or not to provide club owners and dancers licenses to operate or work within the adult entertainment industry. The Commission can suspend a license if the health or safety of any public member is at peril by the continuance of the licensed enterprise (By-law No. 20-85, s.29).

<sup>95</sup> *CAFE v. Algonquin Tavern*, [1981] O.L.R.B. Rep. August 1057.

<sup>96</sup> Interestingly, there was a tripartite element to the case: both the union and the taverns argued that, in the alternative, dancers were the employees of their booking agency. The Board found the agency's role was insignificant and focused instead on the bilateral relationship between the dancers and the taverns.

end, dancers were independent contractors because they worked for a number of establishments at once, and were not economically dependent on one specific clubs. Ergo, dancers were denied the safeguards and benefits generally afforded to 'employees' through protective employment legislation and common law duties (which provide for minimum standards including, among other things, maximum work hours, minimum pay requirements, general wage protections, overtime benefits, stipulations on hours of work as well as public holidays and other non-working days, proper notice for termination, and minimum vacation time).<sup>97</sup> However, the board drew a distinction between 'freelancers' and 'house dancers'<sup>98</sup>; the latter could be deemed employees and were eligible to organize.<sup>99</sup> Due to insufficient support from dancers, CAFE chose not to pursue the matter (Weagle, 1999).

However, other CAFE activism includes mobilizing *in favour* of Toronto's 'g-string' bylaw, which required dancers to wear opaque clothing to fully cover their pubic area. In response, the city of Toronto had attempted to legislate against full nudity and require all dancers to wear a g-string.<sup>100</sup> The by-law was challenged and in 1985, the Ontario Court of Appeal struck it down because its dominant purpose was not to regulate adult

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<sup>97</sup> The lack of access to basic protective employment legislative or common law remedies is further compounded by the stigma associated with the labour dancers perform and the fine line they walk between legal and illegal sex acts.

<sup>98</sup> House dancers or 'scheduled' dancers received a weekly wage, were required to work a set number of hours (usually six to eight hour a shift). Freelance dancers on the other hand, worked according to their own schedule, receive no base salary, but were required to meet the basic hourly requirement (usually four hours per shift) as set by the club (Bruckert, 2002). Note that dancers are not the only labourers who draw a distinction between freelancers and regular workers. Truck and taxi drivers, photographers, reporters and actors have similar categories of labourers (Langille and Davidov, 1999).

<sup>99</sup> The Labour Board listed eleven factors that were determinative of employee status including entrepreneurial activity; ownership of tools, equipment, and supply of materials; degree of specialization / skill; and the magnitude of the contract amount (at p. 1061).

<sup>100</sup> Toronto By-law 107-78, subsection (2). *Toronto v. Merit Corp.* (1983), 23 M.P.L.R. (HC).

entertainment. Rather, it aimed at regulating public morals, a matter squarely within the federal government's jurisdiction.<sup>101</sup>

Essentially, CAFE was defeated in most of its attempts to craft different working conditions for dancers, and disbanded only three years after its inception. Cooke remarks that the group's favouring of the g-string law may have led to loss of confidence in its leaders by membership. To this end, CAFE could "not act from a position of strength" (1987: 96). This is not uncommon for women's groups on the whole who form because of shared values but whose members ultimately disagree with how and whether those values should be concretized. As Adamson, et al write:

When confronted by the demands of a complex political reality, the straightforward clarity that political principles provide in the abstract often become opaque and contradictory, and [women] within the same political current can have significant disagreements over political positions and tactics (1988: 169).

Despite CAFE's inability to act as the collective voice for dancers, it nonetheless contributed to challenging societal assumptions about dancers as 'deviants' or victims; instead the union presented the women as labourers and agents working to effect changes in their occupational environment.

#### ***Part Four: The Shift to Table Dancing – The Early-to-Late 1980s***

After CAFE folded, there was a hiatus in dancers' formal organizing until the early 1990s. During that time, there are a number of broad societal shifts, which shaped, and are reflected within, the micro-level of the stripclub. Within the more global move toward neo-conservatism promoted by Ronald Regan and Margaret Thatcher, Canada's Mulroney government, throughout the 1980s, emphasized deregulation of the private sector and downsizing of the public sector, and produced and reproduced pro-family rhetoric (Timpson, 1991). Canada's economy suffered a severe decline in the

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<sup>101</sup> *Re Koumoudouris et al. and Municipality of Metropolitan Toronto* (1985), 52 O.R. (2d) 443.

1980s which forced already marginal working class women from scarce manufacturing jobs to the service sector, with correspondingly low wages, little to no employment benefits or security, long hours and non-standard employment relationships (Phillips, 1997; Vosko, 2000). The government had also significantly reduced funding for social services such as education, health, and welfare, which disproportionately impacted women who are both the main providers and users of these social safety mechanisms (Armstrong, 1997). Provincially, the Harris government dismantled employment equity laws, implemented the intrusive 'Workfare' program, and slashed funding to kindergarten and day care services, women's shelters and legal aid.

In light of these conditions, a number of working-class women who possessed or were able to achieve the industry's standards of 'sexiness', opted for erotic dancing as an alternative to working for minimum wage (Bruckert, 2002; Frank, 2002). Around this time, the industries characterized by commodified sexual services underwent rapid expansion and diversification: internet pornography, massage parlours, peep shows, escort services, dominatrixes, tanning salons for 'gentlemen', and live nude modeling shows. By the mid 1980s, the moral panic around AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections positioned commodified sexual interactions as 'clean' sexual outlet for consumers and a profit center for producers (Singer, 1993: 37). The expansion of stripclubs at this time might also be understood as part of the on-going backlash against feminist movement (Faludi, 1991); an offshoot of increased mobility and business travel and the spread of 'touristic practices' in the era of globalization (Bauman, 1998); or as one representation of the new capitalist 'striptease culture' (McNair, 2000).

In addition to increased numbers of stripclubs, the nature of the labour practices in which dancers engaged also changed throughout the 1980s: table dancing was standardized and dancers' wages were consistently chipped away. In a typical club that

offered table dances, entertainers would carry around a little "stage" the width of a hatbox and approximately eight inches high and solicit dances from customers. For five dollars, a dancer would stand on her stool while undulating suggestively and disrobing for the length of one song. Initially, most dancers welcomed the break from monotonous stage shows and enjoyed the opportunity to earn additional income. However, table dancing increasingly became dancers' primary source of income as their wages atrophied (Bruckert, 2002). With the exception of 'feature dancers'<sup>102</sup> remuneration for the few 'housegirls' went from a per-show basis to per-shift basis at about \$40.00 a shift. In addition, clubs began requiring dancers to continuously circulate the club and sell table dances. Dancers who refused to cooperate with the new labour practices were fined, scheduled for less lucrative shifts, or 'blackballed' and told not to come back to the club. Rebecca Cooke argues that with table dancing, women effectively encouraged "hands-on entertainment rather than dance in order to make their money" (1987: 98).<sup>103</sup> According to Mary Taylor, whose work history spans the 1970s to the 1990s, and co-founder of Exotic Dancers' Alliance in Toronto, mandatory table dancing left dancers with few options: they could leave the industry altogether; incorporate table dances into their work; refuse table dances and weather the substantial decreased in income; or try to find work in more isolated clubs as feature performers (Weagle, 1999).

With few employment options and intense competition, many dancers felt coerced into 'doing more' for their nightly earnings. In fact, by 1983, table dancing had become normalized in clubs and was for all intents and purposes an occupational

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<sup>102</sup> Feature dancers are akin to erotic dancing 'celebrities' that have been hired by a club for promotional purposes. They tour various cities and perform more elaborate shows on stage. They are usually paid on a weekly basis and can earn considerably more than freelance or scheduled dancers (their salaries range from \$750.00 to \$3000.00 a week).

<sup>103</sup> It is worth noting that according to the Ontario Adult Entertainment Bar Association (OAEB) however patrons attending table dance clubs knew that touching was strictly prohibited and those who infringed club rules were immediately evicted (1995).

requirement. While there have always been women who have 'done extra' (including masturbation, fellatio, meeting customers after hours) to make a living, dancers operated within normative good girl / bad girl boundaries and those who did not comply could face ostracism (Bruckert, 2002). With *de facto* mandatory table dances, many dancers felt they lost their ability to choose whether or not to 'cross the line' with certain customers, or when they needed more money and were instead locked in doing 'more' for less wages.<sup>104</sup> Furthermore, as Bruckert and Dufresne comment (2000: 75), a number of dancers lost the sense of being entertainers (on salary) and became 'deskilled' and 'deprofessionalized' service providers (working for gratuities). However, with the change from performance-based labour to service-provision, there were also positive consequences for workers: as 'free agents' of sorts, they were no longer required to work full-time, nor were they compelled to travel 'the circuit' (Bruckert and Parent, 2004: 46). This increased flexibility opened up the industry to women who hitherto could not accommodate these occupational requirements because of their childcare or eldercare responsibilities for instance.<sup>105</sup>

Despite the industry shifts, to the author's knowledge there was no formal organizing around this time. However, dancers always engaged in individual 'everyday acts' of resistance. For instance, some women narratively constructed themselves as entertainers in spite of changes in the industry, and / or physically negotiated space to avoid being touched by patrons, and /or refused to comply with licensing and other by-law requirements (Bruckert, 2002; Frank, 2002; Ronai Rambo, 1999).

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<sup>104</sup> Personal communication with Valérie who worked in Toronto during this era.

<sup>105</sup> Dancers could decide the shifts they wanted to work, could work at several clubs in one week, and could opt for part-time, sporadic, or full-time work in clubs.

### ***Part Five: The Normalization of More 'Personalized Services' - the 1990s***

In the early 1990s, Canada's service sector was being restructured to reduce labour costs and maintain Canada's competitive edge in the global economy (Ghorayshi, 2002). By the early 1990s, after a decade of Tory rule, the federal Liberals returned to power. Their 'Red Book' which outlined Jean Chrétien's social policy included provisions for increased job creation and reduced barriers to employment, fiscal responsibility, and specific promises of employment equity for women. However, the Liberal's policy directives did not include changes that the feminist movement had, for over three decades, decried: increased access to social assistance and employment insurance, universal childcare, affordable housing, and programs aimed at debunking gendered ideologies that devalue women's work (Armstrong, 1997, Neal, 2003). Within this broader social context, the erotic dance industries underwent additional transformations. First, throughout Ontario, and practically industry-wide, clubs began the highly egregious practice of requiring erotic dancers to pay "stage fees", "deejay fees", "tip outs", "freelance fees" or "commissions" for every shift they work.<sup>106</sup> Dancers were charged anywhere from \$10.00 to \$30.00 by clubs before they were able to earn money from customers. Clubs promoted the idea that dancers are engaged in *contract for service* (independent contractors / self-employed own account) rather than in *contracts of service* (employees) with clubs (Bruckert and Parent, 2004; Weagle, 1999). Management argued that they rented out the venue in which women sold titillation and company; dancers therefore paid the fees for access to the customers. These fees,

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<sup>106</sup> While in the early 1980s women were paid minimum wage by the hour in addition to having to report their own tips, by 1987 the Mitchell Brothers' *O'Farrell Theatre* in San Francisco had removed salaries and implemented the stage fee system. The fees in the US (from \$50.00 to \$150.00) remain considerably higher than those in Canadian clubs (from \$20.00 to \$75.00).

combined with lost wages meant that the stage show essentially became a form of advertisement and dancers' main source of income were gratuities obtained through private dances. Furthermore, in 1994, the Tax Court of Canada held that erotic dancers, who earned their primary wages through gratuities from customers - *even when they receive a small wage from clubs* - were engaged in *sui generis* agreements with customers over which clubs had no control.<sup>107</sup>

Second, the creation of secluded 'champagne rooms'<sup>108</sup> for more personalized interactions at a higher cost (usually \$10.00 though prices vary with jurisdiction), and shortly thereafter the emergence of 'contact dances' (lapdancing) fundamentally altered the nature of the labour performed by dancers. Third, clubs underwent a 'suburbanization' and developers moved beyond the realm of the traditional working class neighborhoods to commercial districts. Fourth, economic trends such as globalization, increased mobility of workers; the corresponding cuts in workers stability and benefits also impacted how dancers identified with their labour (Kempadoo and Dozema, 1998). Of these shifts in labour structure, lapdancing has, without doubt, been the most contentious. In fact, not-unlike table dances in the early 1980s, lapdancing emerges, in the late 1990s, as essentially the *sin qua non* of stripclubs.

Mary Taylor recounts that lapdancing came to pass because dancers grew "tired of dancing on plywood boxes" or on tops of tables and knew that they could get better earning by dancing directly in front of patrons or sitting on their laps (Weagle, 1999: 21). In the early 1990s Toronto-area clubs began promoting two types of table dance: five

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<sup>107</sup> *Sauvé v. Canada* (Ministry of National Revenue M.N.R.), [1994] T.C.J. No. 1093.

<sup>108</sup> Champagne rooms (executive lounges, private booths) are cubicles partitioned with walls or half walls, beads or curtains. The average cost of a champagne room dance without touching is about \$10 to \$15 dollars and with touching from \$20 onward.

dollar standard table dances (on elevated surface) or ten dollar dances for face to face, up-close dance in a champagne room, but by 1994, lapdancing was prevalent in most Toronto-area strip clubs (OAEBA, 1995). Lapdances occur in secluded booths and are essentially "body-to-genital friction and masturbation" (Rambo Ronai, 2002: 403) that cost about \$20.00<sup>109</sup> In principle, a lapdance involves a half or fully naked dancer gyrating on a patron's lap (facing him or with her back to him). In practice however, the extent of contact between a patron and a dancer varies according to dancers' personal boundaries and social location, customer preference, municipal regulations (where they exist and are reinforced), the presence or absence of seclusion, the amount of money exchanged, and club rules. In Ontario, there has been considerable caselaw, municipal legislative enactments, and dancer / management organizing around the issue of lapdancing. Specifically, in *Mara v. East*<sup>110</sup> police officers charged the accused (Patrick Mara, the owner and operator and Allan East, the manager) with allowing an 'indecent performance'<sup>111</sup> to be presented at *Cheaters Tavern*. The evidence put forth by the officers included various dancers:

- i) Being nude except for wearing open shirts;
- ii) Fondling their own breasts, buttocks, thighs and genitals while close to customers;
- iii) Sitting on customers' laps and grinding their bare buttocks;
- iv) Sitting on customers' laps, reaching into their pants and masturbating them;
- v) Permitting customers to touch and fondle their breasts, buttocks, thighs and genitals;
- vi) Permitting customers to kiss, lick and suck their breasts; and
- vii) Permitting what appeared to be cunnilingus (*R. v. Mara, 1994*).

In Judge Hachborn's opinion, while the behaviour may have offended community

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<sup>109</sup> Prices vary across jurisdictions but generally the cost of a lapdance is between 15\$ and 30\$.

<sup>110</sup> *R. v. Mara and East* (unreported decision of His Honour Judge Hachborn of the Provincial Division, dated February 10, 1994).

<sup>111</sup> Section 167(1) of the *Criminal Code*, R.S.C., 1985, c. C-46 reads:

Every one commits an offence who, being the lessee, manager, agent or person in charge of a theatre, presents or gives or allows to be presented or given therein an immoral, indecent or obscene performance, entertainment or representation.

standards in other contexts, he found in this case that the behaviour was innocuous by comparison to the conduct dealt with in *Tremblay*<sup>112</sup> and *Hawkins*<sup>113</sup>. He emphasized however, that *but for* these cases, the conduct would have likely been deemed 'indecent' under the *Criminal Code*. With that, he dismissed the charges and held that lapdancing did not amount to indecency.

Almost two years later, the Ontario Court of Appeal unanimously reversed the lower court's judgement and set aside the acquittals of both Mara and East. First, the court found that Justice Hachborn had not applied the "community standard of tolerance" in determining indecency. It therefore assessed whether the conduct exceeded the standard of tolerance in contemporary Canadian society as applied in *R. v. Butler*<sup>114</sup> and deemed that the conduct in issue was harmful to society for a number of reasons:

- i) It degrades and dehumanizes women;
- ii) It desensitizes sexuality and is incompatible with the dignity and equality of each human being;
- iii) It predisposes persons to act in an antisocial manner ;
- iv) It presents a risk of real physical harm to the performers (unwanted touching and the spread of infectious diseases)<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> *R. v. Tremblay*, [1991] 2 S.C.R. 932 involves the *Pussy Cat Lounge* where customers could pay \$40.00 to go into a cubicle with a nude dancer who would pose suggestively and writhe on a mattress. During the performance customers were permitted to undress and masturbate. Drawing upon expert testimony that praised the healthiness of masturbation, and given that there was no touching and the acts were consensual, the court acquitted the accused.

<sup>113</sup> In *R. v. Hawkins* (1993), 86 C.C.C. (3d) 246, the Court of Appeal that videotapes displaying explicit sexual activity devoid of affectionate relationship and involving violence and necrophilia were degrading and created a substantial societal risk of harm.

<sup>114</sup> In *R. v. Butler* [1992] 1 S.C.R. 452 the accused, who owned a shop providing heterosexual 'hard core' videotapes and magazines was charged with of selling obscene material for the distribution and sale of obscene material under the *Criminal code*. The Supreme Court took this opportunity to clarify the meaning of "obscenity" under the *Criminal Code*. First, it divided pornography in three categories: (1) explicit sex with violence; (2) explicit sex without violence but which subjects people to treatment that is degrading or dehumanising; and (3) explicit sex that is *neither* violent *nor* degrading or dehumanising and does not involve children in its production. The court determined that not everyone would agree upon what kinds of representations would fall into which categories and what would constitute 'undue exploitation'. Because this issue could not be left to the 'individual tastes of judges', there must, the court held, be a norm that will serve as the standard in determining what amounts to an undue exploitation of sex. That norm is the community standard of tolerance.

<sup>115</sup> *R. v. Mara and East*, [1997] 2 S.C.R. 630 (S.C.C.); aff' D (1996), 88 O.A.C. 358 (Ont. C.A.) at para. 12

As such, lapdancing and other similar contact between patrons and performers was found to exceed community standards of tolerance and was indecent. Finally, the court held that on the facts, *Mara* could be distinguished from both *Tremblay* and *Hawkins* and that the trial judge had erred in holding otherwise. The Supreme Court of Canada agreed and upheld the convictions. Sopinka J. writing for the majority reiterated that the two key factual points distinguish *Mara* from *Tremblay*: physical contact between patron and dancer that occurred in *Mara* (which was strictly prohibited in *Tremblay*) and the public nature of the activity (an open tavern vs a private room). Likewise, *Hawkins* dealt with electronic images viewed in a private living room, rather than actual dancers performing in a tavern. As such, the public nature and the physical contact between patrons and dancers amount to indecency.<sup>116</sup>

However, between the trial judgement and the Supreme Court's final ruling, the erotic dance industry underwent significant change. With Justice Hachborn's decision that lapdancing was not indecent, clubs began promoting and capitalizing on touch dances (Harvey, 1995). Simultaneously, two anti-lapdancing discourses began to dominate in the media and within community groups. First, some opponents of lapdancing argued that it was inherently harmful to the moral order of society and disrupted the nuclear family. A second line of argument was that lapdancing was harmful to the health and wellbeing of women (Lewis, 2000). Certainly, while some dancers felt that lapdancing provided them with an additional means of earning an income, others felt that it decreased their ability to make choices regarding their labour practices and to negotiate unwanted physical contact with customers.<sup>117</sup> Two Toronto-

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<sup>116</sup> *Ibid* at para. 29

<sup>117</sup> Personal communication with Francine, STELLA member.

area groups organized as a result of the aftermath of the Hachborn decision: the Exotic Dancers' Alliance (EDA) and the Association for Burlesque Entertainers (ABE). Both favoured and utilized the 'harm to dancers' discourse in efforts to bring about changes in the industry.

### ***Part Six: Toronto Dancers Get Organized - EDA and ABE***

#### **(1) Exotic Dancers Alliance (EDA)**

In 1994, a woman from the Peel region approached the Health Department regarding her concerns about the working conditions for erotic dancers and her desire to eliminate lapdancing booths. A staff-person (Rhonda Collins) from Peel Health agreed to work with her; this initiated a series of regular meetings with dancers, health workers, and government officials to brainstorm around health and safety issues of particular relevance to women working as erotic dancers.<sup>118</sup> As a result, the Exotic Dancers Alliance (EDA) was formed in 1995 and was incorporated in 1999.<sup>119</sup> The EDA has a board comprised of five directors; a minimum of two-thirds of directors must be current or former exotic dancers (EDA, n.d).<sup>120</sup>

Mary Taylor was the EDA's first Executive Director, and had been active in trying to improve dancers' working conditions for several years. In fact, in 1992, Taylor led

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<sup>118</sup> The Health Department agreed to pilot test with three Peel area clubs a public health nurse; community development worker and a police officer would go into clubs. The nurse would do intake work with dancers and answer their questions around issues of diet, rashes and drug and alcohol use.

<sup>119</sup> Initially, it operated under the name Exotic Entertainment Occupational Advisory Committee (EEOAC). The EEOAC has its funding cut in 1996 and the group changed its name to the Exotic Dancers Alliance. The EDA was incorporated as a not for profit organization funded through membership fees, donations, fundraising and public foundation funding.

<sup>120</sup> Key spokespeople include: co-founders Mary Taylor and Chantelle Olivier as well as Christina Alcivar, Rebecca Randall, Rona Reed, Paula Snellgrove, and [REDACTED] (a current and highly active DERA member in Ottawa).

thirteen other dancers who "marched in G-strings, bras and little coats" to the office of a Scarborough area bar to denounce management's decision to raise deejay fees from \$10.00 to \$20.00. The 'walkout' resulted in dancers' fees being lowered to \$15.00 (Hendly, 1999). Ultimately, however, Taylor left the industry when lapdancing became a *de facto* occupational requirement:

Everybody has their line they've gotta draw (...) I didn't like it in the end and I would only go to work out of desperation when I needed to pay bills.<sup>121</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Taylor became heavily involved with EDA and drafted its mission statement with the following objectives:

- Building solidarity among exotic dancers;
- Developing programs and services to improve the economic autonomy and well-being of dancers; and
- Improving the treatment of dancers in the judicial system (EDA, .

### 1.1 EDA Initiatives

Despite these broad goals, ultimately, with shift in form and content from stage to table to lap dancing, EDA formed in response to *lapdancing*.<sup>122</sup> In addition, the EDA initially opposed licensing fees, though predominantly because members did not feel it would be adequate to maintain their standards for the industry: "licensing doesn't keep illegal immigrants out of the profession, and penalizes dancers who travel around Southern Ontario to work (Taylor, cited in Prittie, 1999: 1).<sup>123</sup> The EDA also strives to help women protect themselves from intrusive state regulation and violence occurring within the

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<sup>121</sup> Interview with Snug, 2000: 1).

<sup>122</sup> Personal communication with Mary Taylor (June, 2004).

<sup>123</sup> As will be developed in chapter five, like DERA, the EDA's discourses operate in a manner that reproduces hierarchies among dancers, in this case, dancers who are Canadian citizens are pitted against racialized women and migrant workers.

clubs.<sup>124</sup> Finally, while EDA's main goal was not to unionize dancers, some members were very much in favour of more formal labour organizing. Rebecca Randall, who was involved with EDA and danced in the 1990s, found that while dancer associations may well be equipped to assist in giving dancers a voice, non-unionized groups remained at a disadvantage in trying to guarantee adequate police protection and better labour legislation. She argues that

having an effective union to represent exotic dancers would be ideal. But it is difficult to say whether bar owners would take it seriously, or how a union could keep track of members in such a fluid workplace (1997: 37).

To this end, the EDA has kept a close eye on the developments in San Francisco (where dancers collectively bought out their peep show club) and has compiled an information package breaking down legal jargon should dancers want to formally organize at a particular club (Prittie, 1999). The Association has also joined with community partners to address health and safety issues. In fact, its first major project, in conjunction with Peel health officials, was to implement an outreach program, whereby nurses and EDA members went into clubs several times a month to distribute health information, and administer free hepatitis B shots (EDA, 2001).<sup>125</sup> Other key health concerns include: getting clean, functional and safe stages; putting doors on bathrooms and giving dancers more privacy in changerooms; installing lockers for every dancer working per shift; having the poles cleaned regularly; and hiring cleaning staff to work throughout the day rather than only first thing in the morning (EDA, 2001). More basic requests were the

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<sup>124</sup> For instance, a Toronto-area dancer had her head smashed against the wall by a gang of young men. When the police arrived at the club to break up the brawl, they found the dancer in her underwear and concussed. Instead of offering to get her medical assistance, they counter-charged her for having bitten one of her assailants (Landsberg, 2001).

<sup>125</sup> Hepatitis B is a liver infection. The virus is transmitted through blood and infected bodily fluids. Transmission can occur through direct blood-to-blood contact (on shared razors or tweezers for instance), unprotected sex, use of non-sterilized needles (Hepatitis B Foundation, 2003).

lifting of club rules that banned dancers from bringing in their own meals, having basic amenities in clubs like soap in dispensers, shower facilities, and laundering services for the towels dancers use during their stage shows (EDA, 2001).

The EDA's primary vehicle for information-sharing among dancers was, until recently, their monthly newsletter *The Naked Truth*. This accessible, humorous, and attractive newsletter was a means by which dancers could access basic legal information and links to social services such as English language training and discuss ways to address unsafe and unhealthy working conditions. The Association also engaged in community education and fundraising through seminars and 'burlesque' shows.<sup>126</sup> While the EDA has garnered support from feminists like Michele Landsberg, artists, and community groups, at its peak, EDA's paper membership was at less than twenty (Hendly, 1999). Labeled an 'anti-lapdancing' organization by owners and managers, EDA members have been banned from a number of clubs (Prittie, 1999).

Around 2000, Mary Taylor left the EDA due to infighting and stepped down from her position as Executive Director. In her opinion, power had become too centralized, communication among members had broken down, and some dancers were more concerned about getting media attention than continuing to struggle for better working conditions for dancers.<sup>127</sup> Taylor has recently started a new organization, the Exotic Dancers' Association of Canada (EDAC), which appears to be an informal network which emerging out of Taylor's website (Leong, 2002).<sup>128</sup> Rhonda Collins, a health care

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<sup>126</sup> In 1999, EDA put on the Neo-Burlesque Entertainment which featured "avant-garde performances using mixed media, as well as some tasty comedy a la stripper mode" (Reid, 2001: 1). Performers went before a sold-out audience of 300 and EDA raised more than \$2000 used to keep operating their telephone line, website, and newsletter. Two more fundraisers were held in 2000 and 2001. However, problems in advertising resulted in low ticket sales and little funds were reported to have been raised (Reid, 2001).

<sup>127</sup> Personal communication (June, 2004).

<sup>128</sup> Taylor has started her own business teaching 'every day' women how to dance suggestively for their lovers: [www.peepandplay.com](http://www.peepandplay.com)

practitioner, who has never worked as an erotic dancer, took the helm of EDA after Taylor left. Under Collins' direction, EDA increasingly forged greater alliances with social workers, community groups, and the police in efforts to improve dancers' working conditions and general health (Thesenvitz, 2002). However, the EDA also supported a joint licensing effort between itself, the Peel Regional Council, and the Police. EDA argued that the long-term aim of licensing could ultimately be a self-regulating system whereby dancers themselves administered the licenses<sup>129</sup> and city council and police would be able to access the database of files when necessary - in cases of missing women for example (Weagle, 1999).

Lewis and Maticka-Tyndale found that the most successful work done by EDA at its peak (in the late 1990s) was outreach in clubs in conjunction with local health units. To this end, they found that the approach favoured by the EDA was more service-oriented than a grass-roots model of organizing dancers (1998: 17). Lack of funding<sup>130</sup> and in-fighting, due to its pro-licensing and anti-lapdancing position, led EDA to shut down its main website, cease printing *The Naked Truth*, and disconnect its phone line. Hence, most of its service-provision efforts have been abandoned.

Notwithstanding this decline, since June 2002, the organization has made use of *MSN Messenger*® as a means of increasing communication among dancers. Members discuss an array of issues including: dancers' employment status (or lack thereof), industry standards, strategies for dealing with coercive managers, advice on how to fill out taxation forms, the best hair removal methods, self-defence in clubs, and

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<sup>129</sup> The questions and concerns that arise around professional associations for erotic dancers will be developed in chapter five.

<sup>130</sup> In her in-depth study of women's groups, Ng (1990) found that funding can be a double-edged sword because it influences the policy direction of an organization which may be required to shape its agenda to fit the funding-bodies requirements and ultimately lose the confidence of its members.

interpersonal relationships. Contentious questions and heated debates arise, especially around lapdancing and other sex acts that occur in clubs. For instance, one member known as 'Dancer on Tour' simultaneously challenges dancers who 'do more' and attempts to spur on collective action by 'real dancers'<sup>131</sup>:

I am proud to be a 'clean' dancer who does everything to prove to the world that not all dancers are whores, prostitutes, or toys. It is a shame that there are so many dancers out there more interested in 'cut-throating' each other than pulling together to get better conditions and a fair wage or at the least an abolishment of 'fines' and 'stage fees' (Posted October 14, 2002).

Interactive telecommunication technology holds the potential to bring about new affiliations between dancers as well as attract a more diverse constituency to the discussion. Becoming a member of the EDA's chat board is fairly straightforward: one only needs to fill an on-line registration form and obtain a password. As such, artists, students, and journalists have accessed the service and engaged in rich exchanges with dancers on-line. However, this easy access also means that customers and club owners can log on and dancers run a risk of self-censure for fear of being blacklisted. Nevertheless, the interactive, informal format allows for dancers engage at their convenience (which is easier than attending meetings). They can (generally) post their opinions with anonymity, which may be more difficult in traditional dancer organizations, which tend to be small and tightly knit. However, the chatline is limited to those women who have access to the internet and may well exclude more marginalized women who are most vulnerable to exploitation: poor women, racialized women, older women, and women for whom English is not their first language.

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<sup>131</sup> The hierarchies reproduced and reinforced through statements like this will be elaborated upon in chapter five.

## **(2) Association for Burlesque Entertainers (ABE)**

Around the same time as the EDA began to mobilize, another group of dancers and community members emerges in response to lapdancing. Following Justice Hachborn's decision in 1994 and the normalization of contact dancing that ensued, the Toronto-based Association for Burlesque Entertainers (ABE) focused its activism and political lobbying around lapdancing and its potential harm to women. Recall that the city of Toronto was the first Canadian municipality to institute a by-law banning lapdances in August 1995 on the pain of stringent fines for both individuals and corporations.<sup>132</sup> The by-law emerged from a campaign spearheaded by ABE's Katherine Goldberg and was backed by New Democratic Party (NDP) members.<sup>133</sup> During Council meetings, ABE, who claimed to speak on behalf of 200 dancers,<sup>134</sup> having received complaints nation-wide, appeared before the Human Services Committee of Toronto. ABE argued that a ban on lapdancing must be imposed because dancers were being coerced into 'upping the ante' and were pressured into providing sexual services in order to make a living wage. Dancers reported feeling disempowered and victimized:

I remember the very first night we lap danced (...) we were driving home from the club and we were crying our eyes out. We both felt like this is not what we were brought up to do. These strangers fingers all over you (...) it was really nasty (Lewis, 2000:10).

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<sup>132</sup> At least 50 other Canadian municipalities (including Calgary, Edmonton, Montreal, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Winnipeg) have implemented similar by-laws. Some city officials cite public health and safety reasons for the ban, others see it as a means of ensuring a certain level of community standards. As former Calgary mayor Al Duerr states, "I haven't found anybody to describe any positive contribution lapdancing makes to society" (Lunman, 1996, n.p.).

<sup>133</sup> Other key ABE spokespersons include its director, Lily Medeiros and Vice President Michael Goldberg. ABE was supported by then Metro City Councilor Jack Layton as well as former NDP Cabinet Minister Marilyn Churley (Ferguson, 1995).

<sup>134</sup> At the time, ABE had a membership list of 200 people. However, membership was not limited to dancers. This was highly contentious, as Dawn, a Toronto-based dancer remarks: "Katharine made it look like she was speaking on behalf of all the women in the business, when in fact she wasn't. There was no consultation between her and the other dancers. Now the women are split on the issue - - there's a lot of bad blood out there" (Highcrest, 1995: n.p.).

Further, close contact of that nature, ABE pointed out, increased the likelihood of sexual violence within clubs and the transmission of infections (Goldberg, 1997a; Slawych, 1996). In a statement to the Council, Goldberg stated that:

Everyone is at risk. I'm not saying all exotic dancing is bad, but lapdancing and prostitution in bars is bad (...) I don't think lapdancing can be controlled. I urge you to get rid of it (...) lapdancing hurts everyone, [it] hurts other women. For instance, a man fingers a girl and has a cut finger (...) and he gives her AIDS or venereal diseases (...) she goes home and gives it to her husband and so on (ABE, 1995; in Lewis, 2000: 11).

The by-law was passed and immediately challenged by a coalition of club owners, the Ontario Adult Entertainment Bar Association (OAEBA), as well as the Professional Lap Dancers Association (PLA), founded by Markham-based club manager Frank Vatalaro - who also served as its President (Highcrest, 1995).<sup>135</sup> The OAEBA had a number of dancers who publicly pronounced that they were in favour of the club owners' position. Two dancers intervened in the matter, arguing that the ban on lapdancing infringed their freedom of expression under section 2(b) of the *Charter*.<sup>136</sup> Of these, one expressed that she enjoyed lapdancing for both the economic and personal rewards:

Close contact dancing has been prevalent in clubs in Metropolitan Toronto since the spring of 1994. I chose to participate in close contact or 'lap dancing' for a number of reasons. One reason was the fact that I could make more money doing close contact dancing. I also enjoyed the personal contact that I developed with my customers doing close contact dancing.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>135</sup> Little is known about the origins or membership of the PLA, however in at least one other jurisdiction, dancers and clubs have worked together to fight a lapdancing ban. In 1999, Tampa city council passed an ordinance to end contact dances (to reduce the transmission of disease). The owner of the 'Mons Venus' club organized a group of erotic dancers to picket city council. One of the protesters, Jamie, argued that the ban substantially cut into her income: "How are you going to support three kids making seven dollars an hour?" (Green, 1999).

<sup>136</sup> Section 2(b) of the *Charter* provides that everyone has the freedom of thought, belief, opinion, and expression, including freedom of the press and other media of communication.

<sup>137</sup> Affidavit sworn September 10, 1995, Ms. Johne (an intervenor/exotic dancer licensed under By-law No. 20-85).

Nevertheless, the Court of Appeal upheld the by-law as both within the municipality's competence and jurisdiction.<sup>138</sup> In addition, there was no infringement of dancers' freedom of expression because close-contact dancing was not found to be constitutionally protected; in the alternative, the limit imposed by the by-law was demonstrably justifiable in a free and democratic society, under section 1 of the *Charter*.<sup>139</sup>

In 1996, ABE returned before the Committee and called for an amendment to the bylaw, which would prohibit the use of champagne rooms in the clubs. These booth, it argued, rendered dancers vulnerable to unwanted touching and sexual assault (Slawych, 1996).<sup>140</sup> ABE called for greater police protection and municipal regulation of clubs on the pain of being shut down for breaking the law (Goldberg, 1997).

While initially other dancers' interest and participation in ABE meetings was significant, membership declined as women became afraid of getting blacklisted for their involvement with the group or for contesting lapdances (Highcrest, 1995). In fact, Goldberg herself was banned from clubs or 'taken off schedule' for her activism and for refusing to engage in lapdancing (Lunman, 1996).<sup>141</sup> Likely, others were concerned that increased regulation would ultimately amount to increased policing of dancers, rather than of clubs.

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<sup>138</sup> *OAEBA v. Metropolitan Toronto (Municipality)* (1997), 118 C.C.C. (3d) 481 (O.C.A.), aff'd. (1995), 101 C.C.C. (3d) 491 (Ont. Div. Ct). The OAEBA sought an order quashing the by-law on the basis that it as *ultra vires* and encroached upon federal government's jurisdiction over criminal law. The OAEBA's appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada was denied.

<sup>139</sup> Interestingly, had the Court of Appeal not upheld the by-law, the Ontario government had planned to enact labour or liquor laws that would effectively ban lapdancing (Boyle, 1995).

<sup>140</sup> ABE also intervened at the Court of Appeal in *R. v. Ludacka* (1995) 105 CCC (3d) 565 where the court found that female dancers who invited members of the audience on stage and rubbed their breasts and buttocks against customers' bodies and faces were engaging in immoral performances. The manager was charged for allowing the performance because it exceeded the accepted standards of tolerance in the contemporary Canadian community.

<sup>141</sup> As noted elsewhere in this researcher, throughout attempts to get organized, club owners have fired women, arbitrarily raised house fees, or subjected particular dancers to intense harassment (Miss Mary Ann, 1998; DERA, 2003).

Though successful in enlisting dancers and community members around having lapdancing banned, ABE ultimately failed primarily because its sole focus, getting rid of lapdances, overshadowed other workplace issues, and because dancers themselves felt alienated from the organization. As Dawn, a former ABE member remarks:

The dancers didn't organize around lap dancing and no one is talking about other workplace issues such as filthy change rooms, long hours, and the whole wage structure. When we could lap dance we had some choice in how we worked. Soon the club owners will have total control again -- and we'll go back to the same old slavery of the 1980s. The dancers lose (Highcrest, 1995: n.p.)

Despite Dawn's and other dancers' views on lapdancing, Jacqueline Lewis, who has conducted in-depth interviews with a number of Toronto-area dancers, found that the majority held positions similar to ABE's on the lapdancing issues. As one woman explains:

I had enough of men saying to me 'I'll give you 50 bucks for a blow jobs' (...) I hated the way it made me feel. So I'm actually enjoying dancing more since the ban [on lapdancing] (cited in Lewis, 2000: 211).

The difference in perspective ultimately lies in the measure of choices or control individual dancers subjectively construct. That is, where dancers establish and maintain their own personal standards in spite of increased contact with patrons, they generally do not mind lapdancing (Egan, 2003a).

Despite considerable implicit support for its efforts, according to ABE's legal council, the dancers' association lost steam and folded after the *Pelletier* decision,<sup>142</sup> in which the Supreme Court determined that lapdancing was within community standards (personal communication, May 29, 2004). However, as late as 1998, ABE was still appearing before city councils across the country and successfully lobbying for municipal

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<sup>142</sup> The *Pelletier* decision will be elaborated upon in part seven.

bans on lapdancing.<sup>143</sup> For instance, the Association provided evidence before the Alberta Queen's Bench that lapdancing often escalated to intercourse. The Court relied on this evidence and found that lapdancing constituted a health risk relating to the transmission of sexual diseases.<sup>144</sup> ABE is the only Ontario-based dancer organization which actively pursued activism on a national level rather than limiting its scope to regional issues; thus its members also destabilized traditional stereotypes about dancers and emerge as a pan-Canadian advocacy group for dancers.

### ***Part Seven: Ottawa Dancers Organize to Resist Standardized Lapdancing - DERA***

Thérèse Blais-Pelletier co-owned a stripclub where dancers performed ten-dollar lapdances in partial cubicles; patrons sitting at the bar or walking by could see everything that took place inside these booths. Ms. Pelletier enforced strict no touching rules on the part of performers; however patrons could touch the dancers' buttocks and breast *only*, and only in the context of procuring a private dance in a champagne room. Club rules also prohibited dancers from providing additional 'sex acts' such as fellatio or masturbation and patrons who 'crossed the line' were immediately expelled from the club. In 1997, two undercover police officers visited the bar and purchased lap dances. At no time did dancers touch the officers, nor did they offer additional sexual services. Nonetheless, Pelletier was charged with bawdyhouse offences contrary to sections 210(1) and 197(1) of *Criminal Code*.<sup>145</sup> Based on the officers' testimonies, the trial judge held that these acts were not indecent and that the club, under Ms. Pelletier's constant

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<sup>143</sup> See for instance: Goldberg, 1997b; New Westminster City Council Minutes, 1997; and Saskatoon City Council Minutes, 1995.

<sup>144</sup> *The Body Shoppe v. Calgary* [1997] A.J. No. 269.

<sup>145</sup> In 1997 and 1998, there were a number of raids conducted in clubs in Québec and Ontario and hundreds of dancers and customers were arrested. See for instance: *R. v Herremans* [1998] O.J. No. 355 (Gen. Division) where the court held that sex acts between performers and patrons amounted to an immoral performance.

supervision, enforced strict rules to which both dancers and patrons complied.<sup>146</sup> The Court of Appeal reversed the acquittal and entered a conviction with a \$150.00 fine.<sup>147</sup> That decision was overturned by the Supreme Court of Canada in December 2000.<sup>148</sup> The majority of the Court determined that the trial judge had thoroughly considered all relevant factors in analyzing the community's 'standard of tolerance' as developed in *Mara* and *Tremblay* and made no error of law in his application of that test.<sup>149</sup>

With the Supreme Court's ruling, lapdancing was effectively legal, subject to municipal ordinances. Since the early 1990s, the city of Ottawa had a by-law in place that *prohibited* contact dances between dancers and patrons. As in other jurisdictions with similar proscriptions though, the by-law had never been systematically enforced (DERA, 2002; Tyler, 2002). For the first few months, after *Pelletier* of the nine Ottawa area clubs, two clubs continued to officially ban contact between customers and dancers, and one passed a petition among employees, of which 95% signed in favour of a total ban on lapdancing (Jaimet, 2000). However, within a year, all Ottawa-area clubs promoted lapdancing. Some dancers were in favour of the new industry practice and felt it was a sustainable way to increase their income.<sup>150</sup> Others attempted 'passive resistance' (Bruckert, 2002) and simply refused to perform \$20.00 dances. Ultimately however, they were either blacklisted from clubs or left the industry because they were

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<sup>146</sup> *R. v. Pelletier* [1993] J.Q. no. 107 at p. 119.

<sup>147</sup> *R. v. Pelletier* [1998] J.Q. no 4316 (C.A QB).

<sup>148</sup> *R. v. Pelletier* [1999] 3 SCR 863 (S.C.C.).

<sup>149</sup> The dissenting judges, however, found the sexual contact compounded by the fact that the acts were not private in nature amounted to indecent behaviour and they would have upheld the conviction.

<sup>150</sup> This position is exemplified by Juliana Beasley, a photographer and dancer from the United States who says the following about her work: "When I discovered lapdancing, I was delighted because my job description was cut and dry - no more conniving for tips. I provided a service and was paid up-front. I had the freedom of choice to interact with customers verbally if I cared to, but my income didn't depend on me making conversation with men or developing regulars (...) I personally found it less emotionally taxing" (2003: 4).

unable to generate sufficient income. Others still felt that their ability to exercise agency was constrained because they could no longer narratively resist customers by saying touching was against club rules (Lewis, 2000). As a result, they experienced increased vulnerability to economic exploitation and sexual or physical violence.

It is the latter position that is promoted by Samantha Smyth, a former Ottawa-area dancer. Smyth co-founded the Dancers' Equal Rights Association (DERA) as a means of organizing women to oppose the new industry practices. According to DERA, lapdancing has become the defining feature of the erotic dance industry and has resulted in "the abuse, mistreatment and exploitation of women working in [Ottawa]" (DERA, 2001:1). DERA was incorporated in 2000 and received its first grant from the United Way in 2001 for the purposes of opening a drop-in resource center for erotic dancers.<sup>151</sup> Its broad objectives are the furthering of dancers' labour and human rights. However, its overarching goal is the eradication of deejay fees and *de facto* mandatory lap dancing as a means of improving working conditions for erotic dancers.<sup>152</sup>

In conjunction with the Stigmatized Labour Support Network (SLSN) - a coalition of dancers, service providers, academics, and lawyers - DERA is mobilizing to champion the rights of female erotic dancers. Its specific objectives include, the establishment and operation of an exotic dancers' association for the purposes of:

- a) Any and all things possible to protect and to promote the human rights of exotic dancers;
- b) Preventing the degradation of working conditions in adult entertainment parlours;
- c) Ending the financial exploitation of exotic dancers;

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<sup>151</sup> The aim of the resource center is to provide dancers with an "owner and manager free place to discuss concerns and learn what their REAL rights are" (DERA, 2003: 2 *emphasis in original*). While the resource center has not yet come to fruition, Smyth is currently doing outreach work out of the Ottawa Rape Crisis Center.

<sup>152</sup> DERA is a fairly small group of women and their perspective may not represent the views of all dancers. As noted in both my theoretical and methodological chapters, there is that there is no unified 'dancer voice'. However, DERA has taken a principled stance on lapdancing (that it should be banned in all Ottawa-area clubs). As will be discussed in chapter five, this position may not always resonate with the general dancer community.

- d) Assisting in the development of health and safety regulations for adult entertainment parlours;
- e) Developing educational campaigns and information material outlining the legal and labour rights of exotic dancers under existing legislation;
- f) Providing a non-threatening environment for exchange and discussion of issues related to exotic dancers and their working environment (2002a:2).

Some initiatives include public education (speaking at conference, organizing roundtable discussions with government officials), coalition-building, political lobbying, establishing a dancer support group, fundraising and promoting in-club health programs. Before moving on to discuss these, a caveat is in order. DERA's official position does not always resonate with those of individual members, nor with the broader dancer population. Its position on lapdancing may alienate already marginal women working within the industry. That is, the goals formally endorsed by DERA, may only be responding to the needs of the privileged minority of dancers (women who are: white, middle class, conventionally attractive by industry standards, young, English-speaking and who may have formal education, or hold other part time work). In the next chapter, I critically engage with DERA's tactics, but for now, I provide you with an overview of the work DERA has committed to as well as its future goals. While more of a descriptive exercise than an analytical one, I do draw your attention to contentious issues, and particularly those which may work against DERA's attempts at collective resistance.

### **(1) DERA Initiatives<sup>153</sup>:**

DERA's key spokesperson and recruiter is co-founder and Executive Director Samantha Smyth, a dynamic and resourceful woman. Smyth has been at the helm of most, if not all, of DERA's initiatives. DERA has capitalized on the fear of sexually

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<sup>153</sup> The data presented are drawn from DERA publications, minutes from DERA and SLSN meetings, as well as personal communication with Samantha Smyth and Pam Oikle.

transmittable infections by forging bonds with the city's health department. Maticka-Tyndale (1999), who worked with the Exotic Dancers' Alliance in the Toronto-area, found higher than average rates of sexually transmittable infections amount erotic dancers as compared to women within the same age group (20-29) who did not work in the industry. Exposure to risk, she found, came from genital contact with vaginal secretions of other dancers left on poles, furniture and clothing and with ejaculation deposited on clothing or directly on their genitals during lap dancing. Nevertheless, Maticka-Tyndale cautions that erotic dancing *in and of itself* does not directly place women at risk. Instead, it is when dancing extends to direct sexual contact with customers that the risk increases (i.e. through lapdancing). As Bruckert and Dufresne (2002) note, health officials have often relied on the risk of communicable disease to support bans on lapdancing. DERA, who ultimately wants lapdancing banned in Ottawa clubs, has, based on the EDA/Peel Health model, been working in conjunction with Pam Oikle<sup>154</sup>, a public health nurse for the region of Ottawa-Carleton. Ms. Oikle and other volunteers have, for over three years, been going into clubs offering dancers as well as other staff, and patrons, Hepatitis B shots and in-club health care.<sup>155</sup> Additionally, DERA is working toward requiring clubs to implement a sexual assault policy whereby workers could launch a formal complaint against a patron or other staff person. The protocol would include immediate health care, counseling, and a formal written report.

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<sup>154</sup> Ms. Oikle is the only honorary DERA member. She has never been a dancer but has been instrumental in DERA's activities since its inception.

<sup>155</sup> This includes developing and distributing the *Risky Business* factsheet which lists infections to which dancers, staff and patrons may be vulnerable including, among others, Hepatitis B and C, Gonorrhoea, Chlamydia and HIV. Oikle explains however, that dancing in and of itself does not render dancers vulnerable to these infections, however dancers working environments (which may include sitting on chairs that may have dried semen, vaginal secretions or blood on them, sharing razors or tweezers, engaging in sexual contact with patrons or other staff, and / or vaginal secretions and blood on the 'pole') in addition to the average age of dancers and staff (between their 20s and 30s) renders dancers at a greater risk of infection than the average person (Personal communication).

At the fore of DERA's more recent activism is its work to establish clear labour practice guidelines and to harmonize municipal by-laws. DERA has been involved in on-going consultation with by-law officers to craft laws that address dancers' labour concerns.<sup>156</sup> After considerable discussion, the regulatory agent proposed a by-law that would have required clubs and dancers to obtain licenses (upon the provision of photo identification). DERA took a position against municipal licensing because of the risks inherent in providing governmental bodies and club owners with personal information (and specifically whether or not a dancer has a criminal record). As Sam Smyth explains:

You can't have a drug conviction or a prostitution conviction. If you're a woman who has been convicted of prostitution and you don't want to be a prostitute anymore where else are you going to get a job? I think she should have the right to choose not to be a prostitute (...) But the city says 'we're going to take that choice away from you because we have our moral issues about you being a prostitute. So I don't think that's fair (...) I think it keeps those women down.'<sup>157</sup>

Pam Oikle adds that licensing will be used as a 'tracking device' that it will further marginalize dancers:

If you're going to license people, you have to offer them something for it. People don't get licensed for nothing. There has to be something in it for them. So what do women gain by being licensed. Healthcare? No. Decent wages? No. It's just a way to keep track of the women [working in the industry] (...) I see the ultimate goal as protecting men not protecting women. It's so that the guys that go to the clubs know that they are clean so they know that they are not taking anything home to their wives.<sup>158</sup>

Despite being opposed to licensing, in recent talks with municipal authorities, DERA agreed to endorse the by-law so long as other key concessions are made. First, the city

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<sup>156</sup> DERA, the Ottawa Police Services and Health Services have engaged in on-going cooperative effort with Ottawa's Community and Protective Services Department in developing the by-law.

<sup>157</sup> One of the risks in DERA's approach, as will be developed in the next chapter, is the manner in which it creates sometimes false distinctions between dancers. Specifically, DERA's official position is that one cannot be both an erotic dancer *and* perform sex acts.

<sup>158</sup> Personal correspondence.

would be required to provide information packages to all licensees outlining the 'health and safety'<sup>159</sup> risks and responsibilities of license holders including, for instance ensuring that the stage equipment is disinfected between acts.<sup>160</sup> Second, the proposed by-law would have to stipulate that club owners must keep records of employees.<sup>161</sup> Third, and most importantly, there would be a strict no touching / no lapdancing policy implemented.

The proposed by-law was debated at a municipal committee hearing. DERA and SLSN members as well as other sympathetic community groups presented their anti-licensing views. City council accepted their arguments and removed licensing from the agenda.<sup>162</sup> This is a substantial success for DERA who managed to gain momentum and mobilize around a specific issue and effect real change that will impact dancers' everyday experiences within the clubs. Moreover, the fact a large number of dancers who are not affiliated with DERA attended and did not present arguments in favour of lapdancing, may amount to implicit support for DERA's anti-lapdancing platform.<sup>163</sup>

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<sup>159</sup> It is interesting to note that during prior discussion in the mid-1990s around the health and safety risks of lapdancing, Ottawa-Carleton health officials found that it only posed "a negligible risk in the spread of communicable diseases" (City of Ottawa, 1996: 9-17). Nevertheless, city council relied on the testimony of Dr. Diane Riley who argued that contact dances posed a threat to dancers physical and emotional integrity. Bruckert and Dufresne argue that by accepting ancillary effects arguments, the city effectively established new regulations to ban lapdancing without resorting to moral arguments (2002: 83). That said, these regulations have rarely been enforced in earnest (DERA, 2002).

<sup>160</sup> DERA argues that under Ontario's *Occupational Health and Safety Act* dancers are 'workers', or any "person who performs work or supplies services for monetary compensation" (Section 1, R.S.O. 1990). While being deemed 'workers' would not provide dancers with the same legislative protections as 'employees', the act requires that guidelines and regulations be in place in order to ensure sanitary work environments. DERA argues therefore that the stage and pole ought to be cleaned with a chlorine-based solution between stage shows, an adequate numbers of lockers should be installed in changerooms, toilet facilities should be cleaned regularly, and club chairs should be covered in vinyl material for easy cleaning (2002: 13).

<sup>161</sup> DERA had argued that clubs should produce T4 slips upon year-end. Because clubs rarely provide dancers with proof of income (even for 'housegirls' who are ostensibly club employees) dancers face discrimination in getting loans or other forms of credit and finding an apartment.

<sup>162</sup> City of Ottawa *Notice of Public Meeting and Meeting Agenda* (June 10, 2004).

<sup>163</sup> Personal Communication with Chris Bruckert (June, 2004).

Interestingly, DERA's was not mentioned in the mainstream media coverage of the by-law negotiations (Gray, 2004; Sherring, 2004).<sup>164</sup> Indeed, in keeping with broader historical patterns, the work, sacrifices, and activism of women has been watered down, rendered invisible, and the lessons derived "savagely curtailed" (Chesler, 1988: 6).

At the provincial level, DERA has been lobbying the Ministry of Labour to (re)assess dancers' employment status. Relying on legal arguments made by in the United States that have been successful in having dancers be deemed 'employees'<sup>165</sup> as well as those put forth by CAFE in the early 1980s, DERA argues that clubs and dancers are not independent contractors. First, clubs control the manner in which dancers are remunerated and the manner in which their labour is performed (length of shows, dancers' appearance and the cost for a private dance). Second, at the risk of personal loss, owners make significant financial investments: they supply all the lighting and sound equipment; procure the requisite liquor licenses (and receive all profits from alcohol sales); and they hire doormen to enforce club rules. Dancers on the other hand, "need only to invest a pair of high heels and a skimpy dress to work [in]" (Smyth, 2002: 18). Third, DERA argues that there is employer-employee integration: there is a reciprocal dependence between club owners who require a number of dancers to stay in business and dancers are dependent on clubs to earn a living (Smyth, 2002: 19). As discussed earlier, clubs currently require dancers to pay an 'entry fee' in order to work. DERA argues that the fee system limits dancers' ability to determine the conditions of their labour and coerces women into performing sex acts in order to make money:

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<sup>164</sup> Personal Communication with Chris Bruckert (June, 2004).

<sup>165</sup> While American courts are divided on the employment status of dancers, some judges have found clubs to be employers for the purposes of liability in violating obscenity laws (*Palm Garden v. Oregon Liquor Control Comm'n*, 514 P. 2d 888 (Or. Ct. App. 1973) and responsible for paying social security and unemployment taxes (*Club Hubba Hubba v. United States*, 239 F. Supp. 324, 1965).

[Dancers] have to generate income with individual clients, so there's financial pressure to engage in acts you don't agree to.<sup>166</sup>

Were dancers employees, DERA posits, clubs would be pressured to eliminate the stage fee system and dancers would be paid a steady wage - either by show or by the hour.<sup>167</sup>

Other DERA initiatives are aimed at service provision to dancers. Eventually, DERA hopes to offer workshops on financial planning and a 'buddy system' whereby dancers who want attend or return to College or University can be mentored by selected teaching staff. Further, DERA aspires to open a resource center that caters exclusively to erotic dancers to provide education, peer support, counseling for alcohol and drug addiction, resources for women in abusive relationships (DERA, 2002b). As with the other erotic dancer affiliations I have researched, DERA has experienced difficulties in recruiting members. To date, estimates of membership vary from five to ten current and former dancers, in spite of there being an estimated 750 women currently working in Ottawa clubs. Therefore, one of its on-going projects is to mobilize other dancers through in-club outreach to attend DERA meetings. Having outlined DERA's initiatives, I move to a brief discussion of its sister affiliation: the Stigmatized Labour Support Network (SLSN).

## **(2) The Stigmatized Labour Support Network**

DERA's approach is unique from other dancer affiliations in that shortly after mobilizing the core group, members forged a coalition with service providers, health care workers, lawyers, academics and students, in order to increase DERA's visibility and to help counter the stigma of being a 'deviantized' organization. The Stigmatized Labour

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<sup>166</sup> Sam Smyth, cited in Sayani (2004: 54).

<sup>167</sup> The issues around implementing steady remuneration will be revisited and elaborated upon in chapter five.

Support Network (SLSN) was formed in March 2002 to assist DERA in achieving its objectives and to provide resources for DERA members and other women working as erotic dancers.<sup>168</sup> While SLSN's members come from divergent backgrounds, most advocate the decriminalization of sex work, and all are working toward the destigmatization of erotic dancing. It is a loose affiliation without formal voting structure or membership criteria, and its primary objectives include:

- Advocate for, and advance the labour rights and human rights of dancers;
- Address individual and collective health and safety issues faced by dancers in their workplace;
- Engage in political lobbying and public education;
- Support, participate in, and disseminate dancer-sensitive research; and
- Facilitate access to social services and support for women working as exotic dancers (SLSN *Mission Statement*, 2003).

As with DERA, the SLSN's key spokesperson is Sam Smyth. In many ways, therefore, DERA and SLSN can be viewed as two halves of one organization: the former is exclusive to dancers; the latter is comprised of community groups who are trying to effect changes to the industry. However, the leadership of both organizations is concentrated within one or two key players who ultimately decide the direction and form of both groups' activism. While a detailed examination of the issues inherent to the relationship between DERA and SLSN would no doubt be valuable, it is beyond the confines of this particular research project. Nevertheless, I provide a few preliminary thoughts that might direct future research. As will be discussed in chapter five, DERA's legitimacy as an organization speaking on behalf of dancers is intertwined with broader societal norms and values (Jenness, 1993). Attaining legitimacy can be particularly difficult for DERA because its members are both socially marginalized and stigmatized. SLSN members have a measure of social status (they are professionals and community activists) and as a result could potentially impact the likelihood that the

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<sup>168</sup> While I was not present at its inception, I have been an active member since September 2002.

larger community embrace DERA's discourses (Jenness, 1993). Alternatively, by virtue of its "insider claims-maker" status (Best, 1987) DERA may be seen as a legitimate voice on its own, and SLSN may serve a networking function.

With this background in mind, a more thorough discussion of DERA, its members' views, how it engages in meaning-making, some of the contradictions inherent in its discourse, as well as its potential for being a venue through which dancers collectively exercise agency, is the work of the next chapter. Before moving on however, a few final thoughts are in order.

### ***Final thoughts***

Gerda Lerner argues that without stories of contestations, we internalize oppressive ideologies (1993: 281). While some authors have observed that erotic dancers have organized (Brooks, 1998; Bruckert, 2002; Jarrett, 1997), they sometimes overshadow collective action in favour of more individualistic forms of resistance through discursive strategies. Furthermore, these researchers stop short of providing meaningful analysis of the structure, membership, discourses, and accomplishment of dancer affiliations. Finally, inadvertently no doubt, these writers relegate formal organizing to occasional, sporadic, and uneventful in terms of resistance to oppressive labour structures. This oversight most likely stems from the very real lacunae in historical documentation on dancers' formal organizing.<sup>169</sup> Whether unwittingly or not, the result is that the efforts of erotic dancers are often rendered invisible and the popular conception of dancers' as neither organized nor serious workers is reinforced.

My research indicates that these 'periodic' affiliations are more common than

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<sup>169</sup> Though I note that women's resistance generally, and in its myriad forms (be it individual or collective) has often been ignored by academics (Rowbotham, 1972).

generally understood. In fact, within the last month, an additional Toronto-based dancer affiliation has emerged: the Strippers United Association (SUA). The SUA's goals include providing "insight, options, links to helpful resources, and a common meeting ground" (2004: n.p.) for erotic dancers through meetings, web-based interactions, and political lobbying. While its mandate and website are still at the formative stage, the association has had an official meeting and promises "a brand new approach to solution for the issues that exist in the Adult Entertainment industry."<sup>170</sup> Unfortunately, at the time that I write, there is no existing data on the SUA; the work of documenting their membership, policies, and activism will be left to a future date.

In summation, what I have found, and have attempted to record, is that despite limited resources for formal organizing, erotic dancers have consistently attempted to mobilize collectively in response to particular labour concerns and sometimes in an attempt to fundamentally change their work environments. In conditions that foster individualism and competition among women, groups like EDA, DERA, and others, are attempting to create at the very minimum, co-worker support systems, and more ambitiously highly organized political campaigns to overhaul the erotic dance business. With this in mind, let us move on to a critical engagement with the discourses DERA adopts in its efforts to achieve structural changes within the industry.

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<sup>170</sup>Posted by "Erin," the founder of the organization on the EDA's listserv (June 21, 2004).

## CHAPTER 5

### **'Dancers (Em)powering Dancers': Strengths and Contradictions in DERA's attempts at Collective Resistance**

In the previous chapter, I provided a sketch of the structure and activism of Ontario-based dancer affiliations that have emerged since the 1970s, while placing considerable emphasis on the Dancers' Equal Rights Association (DERA). I now proceed to discuss the strengths, as well as the contradictions inherent in DERA's goals and approaches. Part one of this chapter revisits the theoretical framework for my research: feminist understandings of the agential practices in which women engage despite being located along various axes of disadvantage. My informants reveal their experiences of economic exploitation, managerial control, and making compromises in light of the new industry practices. Nevertheless, they adopt a matrix of informal and collective strategies to resist unfair labour conditions. While my findings resonate with authors who have highlighted the prevalence of dancers' every day tactics of resistance (Bruckert, 2002; Bruckert and Parent, 2003; Frank, 2002(a), 2002(b); Pasko, 2002; Ronai Rambo and Cross, 1997; Wood, 2000), this research emphasizes my informants' commitment to more formal, collective means of providing dancers with meaningful choices within their work environments.

Part two is intended as contextual background to the ensuing discussion. It consists of an overview of my informants' social location, how dancing provides flexibility, an energized-atmosphere, and personal and financial rewards. It also examines some of the individual tactics my informants have adopted to subvert the less appealing, and often exploitative, aspects of their labour. Finally, it reveals that DERA members, rather than relying solely on small-scale acts of defiance, have turned to

collective forms of resistance, which they feel are required to effect specific structural changes in the erotic dance business. Part three details the labour practices around which DERA members have mobilized. Namely, the eradication of *de facto* mandatory lapdancing, and the implementation of some form of steady remuneration for all dancers. It addresses how my informants frame issues of agency and collective identity, and examines DERA's legitimizing tactics and exercises in meaning making. Two primary recurring themes emerged from my informants' narratives. First, with the normalization of contact dancing, my informants experienced economic exploitation and felt pressured to 'do more' to earn a living. As such, my informants favour adopting industry standards that will 'weed out' (Christina) dancers who perform lapdances. Second, DERA members argue that without a steady form of income, management is in a position to exercise control over dancers; specifically, organizational practices in clubs leave dancers with little opportunity than to lapdance in order to earn a living. For this reason, they advocate that dancers should be considered 'employees' at law.

As will be evidenced below, without doubt, DERA has managed to provide a space in which dancers can feel empowered, has successfully increased dancers' concerns as labourers, and has been instrumental in crafting less intrusive legislative regulation of industry workers. However, in its objections to lapdancing DERA sometimes overlooks other relationships of privilege and exploitation that further complicate women's decision to engage in certain labour practices. That is, its 'discourses'<sup>171</sup> produce and reproduce hierarchies among women occupying different

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<sup>171</sup>The term discourse has been adopted by a variety of disciplines and is largely influenced by the writing of Foucault who argues that one of the most productive ways to think about discourse is not as a collection of signs or words but as "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (1972: 49). As such, Foucault's concept of discourse is "something which produces something else (an utterance, a concept, an effect), rather than something which exists in and of itself and which can be analysed in isolation" (Mills, 1997: 17). Throughout this chapter, I rely on this foucauldian understanding of 'discourse'.

social locations. A related contradiction is that DERA members tend to, like other first-person accounts of the industry (Atkinson, 1995; Beasley, 2003; Burana, 2001; Eaves, 2002; Mattson, 1995; Tracey, 1999), glorify the earlier eras of dancing while neglecting the disadvantages inherent in past labour practices (Bruckert and Parent, 2004; Jarrett, 1997). Because of the contradictions imbedded in my informants' understandings, part three is an attempt to ground their narratives in broader material and social contexts and to engage in a "probing analysis of the relation between the two" (Sangster, 1997: 317).

To this end, Dorothy Smith cautions that while researchers' should privilege the voice of their informants, we should not "rely upon them for an understanding of the relations that shape and determine the everyday" (1987: 110). That is, in an attempt at teasing out DERA's discourses around the work of erotic dancers, and how organizing dancers can assist them in subverting unfair labour practices, I am at times fairly critical of their approach. For this reason, I return to my epistemological and methodological assumptions. Through the use of Feminist Standpoint epistemology, I have centered the voices of my informants while acknowledging that they occupy both dominant and subjugated social locations. Further to this point, as an ethnographic inquiry, I am documenting and critically engaging with the activities and experiences of a particularly marginalized and stigmatized group of workers: erotic dancers. I adopt what some feminist theorists and activists call the principle of "challenge and conflict." Accordingly, conflicts among women in assumptions and strategies for change are accepted as inevitable, and theorists and activists must strive to provoke one another in a respectful manner which broadens both academic and grassroots understandings (DAWN, 2003). Nevertheless, this chapter concludes with a discussion around how DERA has been highly successful in negotiating alternative models of agency, empowerment, and resistance for erotic dancers.

Lastly, a note on my methodological tools. The data below is gleaned from a number of sources. The core findings stem from six semi-structured interviews with key informants conducted over an eight-month period.<sup>172</sup> As discussed in chapter four, the record of dancers' collective strategies is a valuable addition to women's history generally, and the history of erotic labourers in particular. The interview transcripts produced from this research therefore operate as a means of archiving the oral history of a particular nodal moment in time: the formal organizing of Ottawa-area dancers. These interviews are supplemented by my observations as an active participant of the Stigmatized Labour Support Network (SLSN), critical engagement with previous research on the erotic dance industry, and feminist agency theories. With this in mind, let us revisit the theoretical framework that gives shape to my findings.

### ***Part One: Negotiations within Limits - Revisiting Feminist Frameworks***

As discussed in chapter two, the theoretical pillars for this research are feminist analyses that center women's exercise of agency within oppressive social structures. Erotic dancing, as *women's work*, should be located within broader social, cultural, economic, and political structures: my informants make choices that may reflect their shifting positions along varying axes of (dis)advantage. Included in these more nuanced understandings is that erotic dancers resist the operations oppressive societal structures and forge spaces within which they exercise agency. While my research also indicates that dancers adopt 'everyday' strategies, the centerpiece of my work is how, and under what circumstances, marginal labourers have formed coalitions to collectively resist changes within their immediate work environments.

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<sup>172</sup> My five primary informants are DERA members - dancers and former dancers. My sixth informant is an honorary DERA member, Pam Oikle, who has done out-reach in Ottawa-area clubs.

In presenting DERA's assumptions around how to improve dancers' working conditions, I argue that the association sometimes overlooks the insight of more recent feminist understandings of marginal women's labour. Simply put, there is no unified experience of exploitation encountered by dancers because divergent social locations render some women more vulnerable than others. DERA, through its strategic use of discourse, while unintentionally perhaps, further marginalizes some segments of the dancer community. My project is to draw upon contextualized feminist theories that highlight some of the conditions of constraint overlooked by DERA. Such a framework might enable DERA to collectively respond to changes in the erotic dance industry without reinforcing existing hierarchies among women. Before engaging that discussion however, it is helpful to locate my informants, how they experience their labour, some of the individual tactics they adopt to subvert the more unpleasant aspects of their work, and why they believe that organizing dancers is a means of crafting better working conditions.

### ***Part Two: Contextualizing the Discussion - Locating my Informants***

In terms of providing context to my analysis of DERA's approaches, what follows is a brief sketch of my primary informants, how they experience their labour, and why they see the value in collective forms of resistance.

#### **(1) Some Demographics**

On the whole, these data reflect similar findings as the ethnographic accounts set out in my literature review. In general, the backgrounds of erotic dancers (whether their upbringing, religious education, sexuality, geographic / social / economic origins, marital status, educational background and so on) are variegated, and clear-cut conclusions about why women make the occupational choice to dance are not always evident

(Cooke, 1987; Liepe Levinson, 2002). However, there are some similarities within my particular research group. As noted in chapter three, my informants occupy both a space of privilege (as young, white, able-bodied women) and of disadvantage (as stigmatized and marginalized working-class women). My five primary informants are white women between their mid-twenties and early thirties. Three have, or are in the process of obtaining a post-secondary education. Two are in long-term relationships, one is unattached, and two are single mothers.<sup>173</sup> Only two of my informants are currently working as dancers, and few had other work experience prior to becoming dancers. As Julie explains:

You know I never really worked in the real world (...) So I had no idea what the average person earned. I didn't know how much I was supposed to make to have a certain standard of living.

## **(2) Working as a dancer**

My informants reveal that for young women faced with slender work options, erotic dancing provides a means of exercising a certain level of autonomy and feeling empowered. It can equip dancers with good wages, flexible hours, and the ability to pursue other endeavors (such as raising a family or going to school):

I felt very empowered because it gave me the money and the means to leave [an] abusive situation, move out of [my] crappy neighborhood (...) It was empowering because it gave me flexibility. I chose my own schedule; I worked when I wanted to. I got paid significantly more than I had ever made in my life and when I decided to go back to school it really helped me because, I only had to work about thirty percent (...) of what I'd normally work to pay my bills (...) So that gave me an extra three nights a week to study [and] I ended up graduating with honors (Sam).

In addition, all my informants expressed that they enjoyed the attention from men, the

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<sup>173</sup> In addition to five former and current dancers, I also interviewed the only honorary DERA member: Pam Oikle, a public health nurse working with DERA since its inception.

power they felt they exercised over customers, and the sense of feeling beautiful. Julie, a part-time dancer in her late twenties, studying English at the time of our interview, found that she developed a spiritual connection to her work, and particularly enjoyed feeling 'present' in her body:

There's a certain freedom. In the rest of my life, except when alone at home, I can't enter my body fully and that does spill into my outside life and I'm more connected to my body. It's the whole physical activity itself (...) the way you can just fall into this natural connection with your Eros and your desirability.

Her comments resonate with Cornell's (1998) concept of the 'imaginary domaine' whereby individuals require space where their imagination can explore and develop sexual expressions that brings them happiness. Cornell explains that

To even aspire to the self-representation of our sexuate being<sup>174</sup> we need freedom to explore without fear the representations that surround us. This place of free exploration of sexual representations, and personas, is the imaginary domaine (1998: 8).

Working as an erotic dancer remains a highly empowering experience for Julie and a means through which she can shape her own definition of sexuality. However, she is cognizant that this sexual expression is often done within the stringent boundaries of industry standards of femininity. For instance, she recalls running to the bathroom during an exchange with a customer, for fear that she would cough in his face and appear "unladylike." Julie recognizes that stripclubs are locations where racialized and gendered structures operate, however, she sees the aspects of personal expression as overriding the oppressive features of the trade:

It is colonial. You deal with colonial people. It's the whole patriarchal thing with rigid structure so yeah it is colonial (...) but it's [also] linked to Eros and that pushes out the patriarchal rigid puritanical ideas.

Christina too, was proud of the finesse she acquired through working as a dancer:

It teaches you to become a lady, to do your hair, makeup, to walk in the shoes. That combination right there brings up your self-esteem. [This is] especially [true] when the guys are clapping for you and giving you money to see you naked.

Others highlight that maintaining the "illusion of attractiveness" is time consuming, expensive, and can lead to invasive interventions. Sam, for instance, discloses that her preparation-time for a shift (which included both physical and psychological preliminaries) was approximately three hours and included over twenty different 'beautification products'. Society encourages all women to engage in 'work' to attain or maintain beauty, through dieting, cosmetic surgery, tanning and exercise, dental surgery (Gimlin, 2002; Wolf, 1990) and to some degree all women *perform gender* (Butler, 1990). Nevertheless, breast implants and year-round tanning sessions are often considered basic dancer paraphernalia or as an investment (Burana, 2001; Eaves, 2002; Mattson, 1995; Meaghan, 1988; Morley, 2000).<sup>175</sup> Furthermore, informants discuss how individual dancers' ability to work in clubs is limited by club standards promoted by predominantly white, middle class men.

If you're too fat you'll be told to leave. They're racist: if your skin is too dark, you're too black. If you're too white, too many tattoos, your hair 's too short, you look like a dyke. The more you deviate from that ideal, the less options you have (Sam).

A number of my informants shared stories of being embarrassed when criticized about their looks. For instance, Sam who gained sixteen pounds over the course of her

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<sup>174</sup> Cornell defines 'sexuate being' as "the sexed body of our human being when engaged with a framework by which we orient ourselves" (1998:7).

<sup>175</sup> The harms related to intrusive 'beautifying' is well documented (CBC, 2003; Gimlin, 2002). However, the use of cosmetic surgery was not an issue I broached in my interviews and it only emerged from time to time when my informants offered this information. Two out of five of my informants shared that they had undergone cosmetic surgery and four out of five regularly attended tanning salons during the time they worked as dancers. In addition, Mary Taylor (co-founder of EDA) underwent breast augmentation surgery in the early 1990s because she felt industry standards which had "changed from entertainment to foreplay" left her little choice (Leong, 2002).

studies recalls the embarrassment of being "poked in the belly" and told she had to go on a diet if she wanted to keep working.

Despite experiencing industry standards as oppressive at times, other informants emphasize how dancing enabled them to subvert mainstream standards of respectability and a way to escape the rigors of a nine-to-five work schedule. For instance, [REDACTED] who danced throughout her twenties and early thirties comments as follows:

Drugs. Alcohol. Freedom. Those were my big three things. Freedom was the big one. Freedom from anything that makes me go to a job interview (...) The girls are in it for fun. I don't doubt it for a minute.

However, while the lifestyle associated with dancing is ultimately a matter of freedom and fun, some dancers noted that getting "caught up" in it might lead to blurred boundaries and a disrupted sense of self:

You can't get caught up in the lifestyle: drinking, the drugs, the click (...) A dancer that works with [other girls] five or six shifts a week then goes out drinking afterwards, will have a sense of belonging, like 'they offered me a joint', or 'they offered me a line' but if a dancer falls into that it's not a good thing (...) You've got to keep your head about you. Keep your head on (Christina).

Finally, Sam found that, in spite of stereotypes about dancers and addiction, or dancers and hyper-sexuality, they are strong and independent and little different from other women in the same age group:

To be honest I have met a handful of drug addicts and a handful of nymphos but I've also met a handful of drug addicts and a handful of nymphos at (...) school and at the grocery store (Sam).<sup>176</sup>

Indeed, my findings echo the research of Bruckert (2002), Egan (2003), Price (2000) and Wood (2000) who found that *but for* the stigma associated to erotic dancing, it is women's work that resembles other paid feminized service sector jobs. As such, spaces emerge for dancers to engage in everyday tactics that enable them to negotiate customers and management.

### **(3) Individual defiance tactics**

Not unlike waitresses and flight attendants, there is an expectation reinforced by employers and customers that dancers will 'be nice' (Montemurro, 2001). Friendliness, as discussed by other authors in my literature review (Bruckert, 2000; Egan, 2003(a); Pasko, 2002; Price, 2000; Wood, 2000) is the result of "feeling rules" (Hochschild, 1983) which require erotic dancers to engage in emotional labour:

While they work, they are not free to express feelings as individuals; rather, they must first think of themselves as representatives of the organization. So whether a dancer finds [a patron] attractive or unattractive, friendly or rude, [she] must be nice (...) to comply with (informal) 'company policy' (Montemurro, 2001: 293).

For instance, Julie recounts how dealing with customer could be most draining at times:

They try to touch you when you say not to touch you basically. And at the same time you're on friendly vibe so it's very taxing you know? And the ones who are just like crazy and get all depressed on you and tell you sob stories you know and you can't leave.

However, with time and experience, she adopted a more "abrupt and professional" approach: upon receiving the customers' gratuities, she would "just stand up in the middle of a sentence, smile and say 'okay then have a great night'" and walk away. Julie's story echoes past research which has found that dancers engage in every day acts of resistance to negotiate unruly customers and delineate their own personal boundaries (Frank, 2002; Murphy, 1997; Sanchez, 2003). As such, they forge a space through which they can emerge as ethical subjects (Bruckert and Dufresne, 2002).

Informants also engage in 'performative defiance' (Wood, 2000) when negotiating customers who 'cross the line'. In keeping with the findings of other ethnographic accounts, I found that dancers play mimetic games to subvert these unwanted advances (Bruckert, 2002; Dudash, 1997; Funari, 2000). Sam, for instance, explains that she would pat disrespectful patrons on the head and treat them like misbehaving

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<sup>176</sup> However the use of derogatory terms like "drug addict" and "nymphos" unveils her feelings toward dancers whom she deems to be behaving inappropriately.

boys. In adopting the highly erotic disciplinarian persona, she would get the message across that she would not tolerate certain things: "talk to them like puppies and children - good boy, sit, stay - and that really works".

My informants also reveal that they utilize everyday acts of resistance in negotiating managerial control. While a 'fine system' is in place, whereby dancers pay anywhere from \$5.00 to \$30.00 for 'infractions' of clubs rules,<sup>177</sup> dancers often 'protest with their feet' (Bruckert, 2002) when management tries to regulate how they will earn a living. For instance, Heather, who freelanced, recounts leaving the club (despite the 'four hour' rule) if she was not making sufficient income:

Well there were all these rules in the clubs even though you were a freelancer, you had to come in and work four hours which was usually the minimum hours you had to work (...) you couldn't leave before that supposedly, even though I have. If I'm not making any money I'd leave and they'd say 'don't come back' (...). But if you're not making any money and you're not being paid to be there, it's ridiculous to stay (Heather).

Heather had the added benefit of holding another part-time job and being enrolled in a professional program of study, which increased her ability to walk out of a club if she was not content with her work arrangement.

I was never afraid of being fired. I'd just be 'fuck them' and just go work in another club. But I was a freelancer and I didn't depend on this job for my family or for my lifestyle. I always had another job on the side like waitressing or something else so I always had that to back me up.

However, the defiance strategies available to some dancers, are not available to others.

Heather outlined the characteristics that might leave dancers with less options with

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<sup>177</sup> While different stripclubs, even within the same jurisdiction, will enforce different rules, (Frank, 2002; Sasha, 2001), generally speaking, dancers can be charged for the following 'infractions': being tardy; making outside arrangements with customers; going to the bathroom without permission; being late; requesting a song that is too short; not performing a 'super special' (all the dancers getting up on stage simultaneously); refusing to give a customer a free dance at the manager's request; having gained weight; getting into an argument with one of the club's regulars; calling in sick; 'having attitude'; leaving the main floor before being called by the deejay; sitting with one customer for too long; brining in outside food; dancing with their back to a customer; taking a nap when intoxicated or exhausted; and removing their footwear. Interviews with Christina, Heather, Julie, Sam, and [REDACTED]. See also: Cooke, 1987; Enck and Preston, 1988; Randall, 1997; Weagle, 1999.

which to maneuver within oppressive work conditions: scheduled dancers, older women, single mothers, and women with little formal education:

I know that some girls are really afraid because they're on schedule or maybe they don't have any education or another job or they don't have anything to fall back on, they're worried about supporting their families, they would be afraid of losing their jobs. So I think they keep lapdancing as long as the owners want it to go on. Because they think if they fight it then they'll lose their jobs.

To this end, while Heather's individual resistance is an effective means for her to achieve personal goals, it is contingent upon the level of 'cultural capital' she possesses. Furthermore, her ability to 'protest with her feet' undermines collective attempts to eradicate the fee system because club rules are not perceived as a common threat to dancers' livelihood. As former labour organizer and dancer Rebecca Cooke argues:

The more immediate concerns of preserving relationships and nurturing your own back yard are considered higher priorities than the vague legal jungle of justice and rights (1987: 98).

I have found that my informants are cognizant of the disconnect between everyday acts and collective strategies, and have determined that, with the shifts in industry standards and practices, individual acts alone are insufficient to effect broader changes in industry practices that they would like to see implemented.

#### **(4) Shifts in the Industry and the Need for a Collective Response**

My informants' work experience spans over a decade. As such, they have all witnessed, first hand, the changes within stripclubs organizational practices since the 1990s. As discussed in chapter four, most Ontario clubs have implemented a policy whereby all dancers are required to pay an 'entry fee' of anywhere from \$10.00 to \$30.00 before they can earn money through interactions with customers. Management promotes the idea that they rent out the venue in which both freelancers and scheduled

dancers<sup>178</sup> sell titillation and company; the fee amounts to payment for access to that venue. In addition, clubs have substantially decreased the number of dancers they keep 'on schedule' and to whom they give a weekly salary,<sup>179</sup> others have entirely stopped paying dancers without giving any forewarning.<sup>180</sup> For instance, Christina explains:

They just stopped putting me on schedule. Like I was a regular girl with four shifts a week (...) Then [one day] I go into work and there's no more schedules (Christina).

She experienced this as intrusive and destabilizing:

It's the control, where they can take you on, put you off take you on, put you off. And they have the control to do that. It's not stable.

As a result of these changes in industry practices, stage shows have essentially become advertisements, and dancers' only source of income is through private interactions with clients. All my informants expressed that with the advent of lapdancing, they either left the business, saw dramatic decreases in the amount of money they earned, or made personal concessions to maintain their same salary. They emphasize the economic motives that position women who want to work as erotic dancers with little alternative than to lapdance:

I think a lot of girls were forced into doing it, a lot of them don't want to be doing it, but everything has changed so much. The new girls that are coming into the clubs that's all they know (...) It just means the girls are desperate. They compromise themselves, they make their money, and they get caught up in that lifestyle (Christina).

It's a harsh reality. They really don't think they have a choice - if they want to make money. In a strip club right now you have to get touched if you want to make money (█).

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<sup>178</sup> Recall that the distinction between a scheduled dancer and a freelancer is that the former received a weekly wage, must work eight hour shifts, and can, if she has a good working relationship with the manager, negotiate which shifts she would like to have. The latter works according to her own schedule, so long as she meets the basic hourly requirement (usually four hours per shift) and receives no wage from the club. Usually both freelancers and scheduled dancers pay deejay fees and all are subject to fines for breaching club rules.

<sup>179</sup> Scheduled dancers only represent about one quarter of all women working in Ottawa-area clubs (DERA, 2002a).

<sup>180</sup> Some Ottawa-area clubs have outright stopped putting dancers on schedule. This is essentially a marketing tool: they argue that their dancers are so beautiful that they will be more than well compensated by patrons, and they are so inherently excitable that they would dance for free (Sam).

Christina, one of the few DERA members who is still working as a dancer, has personally seen a very real decrease in her earnings over the last few years. The shift before our interview, she had only managed to earn \$20.00 in an entire night. As a result, she expresses feeling pressure to 'up the ante' of her performances

I made \$20.00 last night. From one of my regulars (...) The rest of the night it was 'maybe later' or 'No, no I'm waiting for this girl' (...) Because now people are like 'I got this from this girl' so she's now a sex trade worker because she gave sexual favours for money. 'So this girl who is on stage for money, she must be a sex trade worker also'.

Similarly, Heather, a freelancer, left the business when it became evident that she could not longer sustain the same income without providing contact dances:

I tried [not lapdancing] and it's really hard. And any girls that continue to work there and want to make money will do something more, something extra for it then what they used to do before.

DERA members feel that, in order to respond to these changes in organizational practices and industry standards, dancers will have to work together so that they can make choices regarding which labour practices they are willing to perform. More specifically, DERA's primary spokesperson, Sam Smyth, argues that getting organized can assist individual women in gaining the support needed to resist the stresses of their working life, overcome feelings of powerlessness, and fight for better treatment by club owners and managers:

There are strengths in numbers. It gives a big sense of empowerment (...) A lot of women don't even know they have rights, so major education is important. [DERA aims to] educate each and every single dancer on what their rights are, what they can say no to, and eventually set up standards and guidelines that reflect the dancers.

A major hurdle however, for stigmatized and marginalized workers trying to organize, such as erotic dancers, is the ability to meet societal standards of legitimacy. What follows then, is a discussion around the legitimizing tactics DERA adopts to meet its goals.

### ***Part Three: DERA's Legitimizing Tactics***

Legitimacy is intertwined with societal norms and values; it is a primary resource for any organization, including bureaucratic, service-oriented or economic organizations. Attaining legitimacy can be difficult for organizations whose members are also labeled 'deviant' (Jeness, 2000). To this end, these 'deviantized' organizations (meaning 'deviant' in membership rather than organizational structure) both challenge socially constructed legitimacy, and work to galvanize their own culturally-sanctioned authority (Jeness, 2000; Meyer and Rowan, 1977; Weber, 1947). Strategies of legitimation ultimately impact organizations' goals (Meyer and Rowan, 1977), their prospects for long-term survival (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978), and the likelihood that the larger community will reproduce its discourses (Jeness, 2000). DERA has adopted two primary legitimizing tactics: (1) the strategic use and production of often conflicting discourses, and (2) affiliations with established community members and the creation of a sister organization - the Stigmatized Labour Support Network (SLSN). As discussed in chapter four, a detailed examination of the relationship between DERA and SLSN will be left to future researchers while the ensuing discussion will focus on the former.

As evidenced in earlier sections of this research, DERA has been successful in increasing its visibility and mobilizing community members around dancers' labour and human rights issues. However, not unlike other organizational efforts by marginal workers (Byoung-Hoon and Frenkel, 2004<sup>181</sup>; Gow and Simard, 1999; Jeness, 1993) its discursive tactics serve to maintain existing hierarchies among dancers. Ultimately, I argue that DERA should make use of the more contextual understandings that dancers "make choices, albeit under restrictive, highly gendered conditions" (Price, 2000: 4). To

this end, the association might be better positioned to strategize a collective response to changes in the industry while also challenging the broader structures that render some women more vulnerable to exploitation. With this in mind, I outline in the following sections some of the discursive strategies used by DERA.

### **(1) 'Dancers Empowering (some) Dancers': Reinforcing Hierarchies Through Discourse**

DERA's letterhead '*dancers empowering dancers*' exhibits what Jenness (1993: 116) calls tapping into the 'of and for' discourse and taking advantage of the group's 'novelty capital' - real dancers speaking out on their own behalf. However, some of the underlying assumptions revealed in DERA's understanding of the nature of erotic dancing reinforce pre-existing hierarchies among women. For instance women with physical (dis)abilities are explicitly excluded from the occupation: "obviously people in wheelchairs can't be exotic dancers because they can't dance" (Sam).<sup>182</sup> There are however, more implicit relations of privilege inherent to how DERA members define erotic dancing.

Unwittingly or not, in utilizing its 'novelty capital', DERA members use a good / bad girl or Madonna / Whore script to circumvent dancers with whom they do not want to be associated. Briefly, in its archetypal form, the good girl / bad girl discourse

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<sup>181</sup> For instance, Byong-Hoon and Frenkel (2004) found that in manufacturing industries, regular production workers often use discursive practices and other forms of moral exclusions to discriminate against contract workers.

<sup>182</sup> Contrary to this assumption, women with physical disabilities can and do dance. As Morgan Seeley, a graduate student working in the area of (dis)ability and body image explains however, "the different ways that people with disabilities move is sometimes frightening or weird, repulsive to people, because we have been taught such strict rules around what looks normal" (personal communication). Sam's assertion that erotic dancing is 'obviously' limited to able-bodied women represents and reinforces the mainstream conception about women, (dis)ability and sexuality: women with (dis)abilities are asexual, inherently un-sexy, and incapable of sexual expression.

distinguishes between those women who uphold Victorian standards<sup>183</sup> of womanhood (propriety, chastity, and motherhood within marriage) and bad girls ('dangerous', sexually available, and unruly).<sup>184</sup> The Madonna / Whore dichotomy not only reflects ostensible behaviour or appearance of certain women, but it highlights relationships of power and reinforces false dichotomies between women as victim and women as agent (Pheterson, 1987 Maglin and Perry, 1996). While good girls are afforded better social and legal protections because they uphold certain standards of propriety, they are simultaneously subjected to more restrictions and surveillance. Bad girls, on the other hand, suffer social stigma and marginalization but are generally framed as unruly and free from oppressive control. Moreover, this discourse is imprinted on particular bodies: working-class women and racialized women (Razack, 1998) and often steeped in assumptions of Anglo-Canadian superiority (Dumont, 1997).<sup>185</sup> However, we see that the meaning attached to these dichotomies varies with contextual setting. In the stripclub for instance, 'dirty' dancers are those who 'do extra' (whether by allowing more contact with patrons or engaging in sex acts) in order to make a living. 'Clean' dancers, on the other hand, are those who implement, and to a certain extent, police no-touching rules.

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<sup>183</sup> The dichotomy dates much further back in history. In Greek society, 'whores' became bad girls / sinners with the growth of Christianity and Protestantism later because they subverted the ideal of the good wife and mother. With the Victorian era, ideals of social purity and morality clashed with abject poverty for working-class women and racialized women involved in the sex trade (O'Neill, 1996; Pheterson, 1986; Razack, 1998).

<sup>184</sup> The good / bad or clean / dirty girl distinction permeates popular culture; witness books such as Keesling's (2001) *The Good Girls Guide to Bad Girl Sex* and CBS's drama series *Bad Girls Do*.

<sup>185</sup> As Karim (2003) explains dominant discourses operate in hegemonic (Gramsci, 1971) manners that influence Canadian public perceptions of those who 'belong' *versus* those who do 'not', namely Anglo-saxons *versus* everyone else, including French-Canadians and Québécois. During the decades that immediately followed Confederation, the tenets of assimilation of *all peoples*, including First Nations and the French, dominated public and social policies within English Canada. Furthermore, the English-speaking community still enjoys, both in Canada and around the world, hegemonic, unilateral, privilege (Moffat, 2004). It should not go without notice, that as a French-Canadian, I am implicated in reinforcing Anglo-privilege through my everyday choices, such as writing this thesis in English.

DERA utilizes discourse in a manner that positions its members as 'clean dancers' in opposition to 'dirty dancers'. This distinction is a means by which DERA can argue for the implementing of more stringent industry standards, and to return to the 'golden era' (Jarrett, 1997) of striptease entertainment rather than the 'lapdance for fee' model. My informants tend to glorify past labour practices without providing an analysis of the exploitative conditions that were prevalent at that time, though this is not unique to DERA. For instance, STELLA member Josée, who danced throughout the 1980s writes:

I have found that working conditions were much better at the beginning of my career (...)  
At least we did not have to pay a fee to go to work like the girls have to today (2000: 11)  
[My translation].

While it is true that dancers were not required to pay stage fees, owners and managers were known to request sexual services from dancers before permitting them to work in their club (Bruckert, 2002).

As will be explained below, it seems clear from my informants' narratives that particular women fall into the 'dirty' dancer category; in a sense they argue that the presence of these dancers in clubs thwarts DERA's attempts to bring the industry back to a purely visual form of entertainment. I have broken down the 'dirty' dancers into three categories: (1) women who engage in lapdancing; (2) Québécois / Franco-Ontarian dancers; and (3) immigrant women working in the industry. The ensuing discussion deconstructs the manner in which the good girl / bad girl script operates in DERA's narratives and how it operates to reinforce hierarchies among dancers. Ultimately, DERA advocates that if better standards were enforced, the 'dirty' dancers could be "weeded out" to the benefit of those women who want to engage in "good old clean dancing" (Christina).

## 1.1 Entertainers versus Lapdancers

First, my informants maintain the distinction between 'entertainers' and 'sexual service providers'.<sup>186</sup> Erotic dancers' labour involves creating and reproducing fantasy through visual entertainment while 'prostitutes' provide hands on services or 'sex acts'.<sup>187</sup> Permeating this discourse is that lapdancing is sex work, that women who lapdance are should not be permitted to work in clubs:

Lap dancing is a form of prostitution (...) an exotic dancer, [who] engages in lapdancing in my eyes, is a prostitute, not an exotic dancer (...) Lap dancing is not a legitimate form of exotic dance. Exotic dancers have talent and can dance (...) You don't have to be talented to lap dance. It's just about letting a stranger grab or suck your body parts. It's not art in any fashion of the word (Sam).

With lapdancing you have a girl grinding her bum into his groin to the point sometimes of ejaculation and that is a sexual favour because sexual tension is relieved (...) That's not dancing. I'm a dancer and I dance. I don't sit on your lap so you can get off (Christina).

A sub-theme that emerges, is that manner in which their labour is currently organized, stripclubs have (de)professionalizing the industry. DERA argues that because under the 'lapdancing for fee' model of erotic dancing, clubs receive a fixed amount of money from each dancer per shift, they now have less incentive to be discriminate in whom they allow to work:

Clubs used to be a lot pickier with girls when there wasn't any lapdancing. [At] certain clubs you'd get turned away if you weren't tanned enough, if you didn't fit the bill (...) The girls there looked like supermodels back then (...) They [have] turned girls away for having too many tattoos. But now the girls pay them money and they make money off having those girls there (Heather).

Accordingly, the 'quality' of the labour force has also decreased, and clubs no longer uphold the standards of the 'entertainment' industry:

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<sup>186</sup>The prostitute / dancer dichotomy has been reinforced by other dancer affiliations. For instance, in Funari's *Live Nude Girls Unite!* (2000), a documentary about San Francisco peep show workers who unionized, labour organizers, not unlike DERA members, accused sex workers of 'invading' the clubs, bringing in lapdancing, and dismantling industry standards.

<sup>187</sup>'Prostitution' is not limited to actual sex acts. While there is no statutory definition of what exactly it amounts to, caselaw indicates that 'prostitution' refers to lewd acts for payment for the sexual gratification of the purchaser: *R v. Bedford* [2000] O.J. No. 887 (Ont. C.A.).

In Ottawa, some of the women that they're allowing into the club are just 'woof' you know what I mean? They're not attractive; they don't take care of themselves. They drink to the point where they can't stand or walk. I've seen myself as you're going to the bathroom somebody's hugging the toilet bowl. And I kid you not, in the past month; it's two new girls (Christina).

In a different line of argument, while not invoking the 'entertainer' *versus* 'lapdancer' script per se, Julie argues that lapdancing is counterintuitive to the art of the 'tease':

I think [lapdancing] is unnecessary and demeaning and potentially harmful. It negates the point of exotic dancers. Exotic dancing is about the liberation of libidinous energy and so a lap dance (...) if it includes genital contact (...) locates that energy too much in body, instead of allowing imagination to be unleashed.

She also indicated that she would not associate with certain women for fear of being 'branded' a sex worker rather than an entertainer:

I don't befriend the girls who do prostitution in the clubs because I don't want to be associated with them.

The sex workers' rights movements have long decried such hierarchies, as the

International Committee for Prostitutes Rights (ICRP) comments:

Pornography models, strip-tease dancers, sexual masseuses and prostitutes euphemistically called escorts often avoid association with prostitution labels and workers in an effort to elevate their status (...) Efforts to distance oneself from explicit sex work reinforce prejudice against prostitutes and reinforces sexual shame among women (1987: 40)

The ICRP has consistently called for alliances and solidarity between women within the sex industries and between women outside the sex industries. They argue that this is a means of affirming the dignity of all women and 'talking back' to the stigma hoisted upon erotic labourers. However, at least one DERA member challenges distinctions between women because they seem moot given the changes in industry standards. [REDACTED] argues that while *in principle*, the labour processes of an erotic dancer - the exchange of visual titillation for money - differ from those of a sex worker - the exchange of sexual services for money - *in practice* this distinction is disrupted. Given the shift from stage

shows to lapdancing, or from an entertainment venue to a service industry, the conflation of the 'sex' and 'skin' trades<sup>188</sup> may not be so questionable:

A lot of the dancers who are involved in breast touching and butt touching and digital penetration (...) And they're all right with that. They're perfectly happy with that because they think that's what the deal is. They don't classify themselves as skin trade or even sex trade workers. But you know what? Someone touching your ass or digitally penetrating you, you're in a sex trade okay.

## 1.2 English versus French Dancers

Second, a form of cultural elitism is manifest in some of my informant's narratives; it operates in subtle ways such as comments by dancers that are informed by a sub-text that some women are ethically inferior to others. When discussing sex acts in clubs, Heather suggests that women working in Québec have more fluid boundaries and are somehow less concerned about lapdancing:

I don't think there should be lapdancing anywhere. But it's going to be in Québec and it will be for a long time and I don't think it's going to change. I think their rules are different.

In fact, while DERA is officially opposed to lapdancing in Ontario bars, it simultaneously encourages patrons who request that service, to frequent clubs in nearby Gatineau, Québec:

So those girls will go to the Québec side where it's legal and 'legit' to be lapdancing and the dancers who want to get the minimum wage, get the benefits, do actual shows and continue on in the erotic business will stay in Ontario (Christina).

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<sup>188</sup> As noted in my introduction the term skin trade has been used to refer to the to individuals who engage in labour that aims to produce a visual sexual stimulation while sex trade refers to individuals who engage in sex acts. My informants have mixed feelings about the term. Christina felt is encompassed how she defined her own labour:

'Skin trade' is showing off all of your skin - from you ankles to the tips of your ears. That's what the business is about. Look at my beautiful skin. I treat it with oils, make it soft and it sparkles in the light. It's got that nice soft touch to it (...) And 'sex trade' is obviously for the ladies of the night. They take their customers and do private sexual things together and that's not what dancers do.

Sam does not agree with using the term skin trade first, because she is "not trading her skin" and second, because she feels it will be used to encompass both sex workers and erotic dancers. Similarly Julie states that she as "no physical or visceral connection to it", while Heather is indifferent to the term, unless it means associating dancers with 'sex workers'. Finally, ██████████ feels that skin trade is appropriate to describe the work of erotic dancers.

The bars in Gatineau have always been busy (...) There's always been lapdancing there, in the (...) more dirty clubs, where girls do a lot more. I think that people keep going there for its reputation - attractive women, champagne dancers and (...) they have porn stars who are features (...) so they have really explicit shows (Heather).

Furthermore, it seems DERA locates the advent of lapdancing within Québec clubs:

"lapdancing began in Québec and has since infiltrated almost all Canadian clubs"

(2002a: 5).<sup>189</sup> The word 'infiltrated', meaning 'to saturate' or 'permeate', carries certain undertones and hints that French-speaking dancers' morals are somehow inherently more permeable than those of the Anglo-majority in Ontario.<sup>190</sup> In drawing distinctions between French-speaking dancers who *do* lapdance and English-speaking dancers who *do not*, DERA is, given the reality that almost all Ottawa dancers perform this service (Julie), DERA is essentially creating a 'false community'<sup>191</sup> or the illusion of a non-lapdancing majority. Further, in reinforcing the idea that dancers from Québec are different from dancers in Ontario, DERA, perhaps unwittingly, pits dancers against dancers which may ultimately undermine its collective goal: to provide dancers with better working conditions.

### 1.3 'Canadian' versus 'Immigrant' Dancers

A third way that the clean / dirty dancer dichotomy gets played out in DERA's discourses is by distinguishing the labour practices 'Canadian' dancers from those of 'immigrant women'. DERA has publicly stated that it "has no problem with foreign

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<sup>189</sup> Upon extensive research, I was unable to determine the jurisdiction where lapdancing first became available, however there is considerable evidence that Southern Ontario clubs have promoted contact dancing for over a decade: *R. v. Petrozzi* (1987), 35 C.C.C. (3d) 528; *R.v. Traynor* [1987] O.J. No. 1943.

<sup>190</sup> While it is true that Hull / Gatineau, Québec has an "abnormally large concentration of bars" and that French-speaking Québécois and English-speaking Ontarians have historically had "distinct cultural attitudes towards drinking in bars" (Brosseau and Cellard, 2003: 1), rather than locating dancer's choices within that context, DERA's discourse suggests that Québécois dancers are a monolith who all enjoy lapdancing. In fact, several Montréal-based dancers have been vocal about curbing *de facto* mandatory lapdancing (STELLA, 2000).

women upholding Canadian standards for exotic dancing" but it does have a problem "when they do not uphold standards" (2002c: 2). What is meant by 'Canadian' standards is unclear, but the language is not too removed from racialized accounts of Black, Latin America and Aboriginal women's unruly sexuality as compared to white women's Victorian propriety (Hill Collins, 2004; hooks, 1992; Monture, 1995). Bannerji has argued that such everyday acts of racism are highly relevant to tracing how race, class, and gender have been constituted in Canadian society:

An adequate description of the smallest racist incident leaves room for reference or contextualization to slavery, colonization, imperialism; exploitation of surplus value and construction of the labour market through gender, 'race' and ethnicity; nation-states to organize and facilitate these processes and practices; and concomitant reifying forms of consciousness (1995: 84).

As such, what is implicit in DERA's statement is the self-representation of Western women as civilized, educated, modern, and having control over their bodies as opposed to ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound 'third world' women who 'compromise' their morals (Maklin, 1999; Mohanty, 1991: 36).

The creation and reinforcement of hierarchies between 'clean' and 'dirty' dancers (which can at times be read as white dancers *versus* dancers of colour / dancers from the North *versus* dancers from the South / English-speaking dancers from Ontario *versus* French-speaking dancers from Québec) highlights the privileged position in which most DERA members are located in relation to other(ed) women working within the industry. As in other forms of employment, racism permeates the service sector generally (Creese and Stasiulus, 1996) and the strip trade in particular (Brooks, 1997,

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<sup>191</sup> As McCold and Watchel argue, "where there is no perception of connectedness among a group of people, there is no community" (1998: 72).

2002).<sup>192</sup> Kempadoo (2002) argues that as with other segments of the sex and skin trades white women work in higher paid, more comfortable environments, Asian women and Latinas form a 'middle class' while Black women "are still conspicuously over-represented in the poorest and most dangerous sectors of the [industry]" (2002: 211). One of my primary informants reinforces Kempadoo's claim and recognizes that the conditions governing racialized dancers are more restrictive than for white women. Pam, a registered nurse, and in-club outreach worker argues that systemic racism and cultural discrimination operate within clubs, and that racial and cultural backgrounds intersect with linguistic (dis)advantage to create unique obstacles for some groups of women trying to work in 'nicer clubs'. She explains how, generally speaking, Ottawa-area clubs can be broken down into three 'strata'.<sup>193</sup> The lower end bars are "really filthy" and managers and dancers "seem to be able to get away with being more raunchy." She found that there was a higher incidence of drug and alcohol dependence and that she has seen "girls sniffing coke and smoking joints" at customers' tables. The dancers in these clubs tended to be older women, many were racialized women and especially Francophone women of colour<sup>194</sup>:

Your girls from Haiti, Saint Lucia, and Jamaica you'll see in the lower end clubs and the blond blue eyed statuesque dancers are going to be in the upper end clubs. It could be a function of two things. One: race. The other thing is language. The upper clubs are primarily English and your lower end clubs are primarily French (...) There tends to be a lot of Francophone girls in the lower end clubs (Pam).

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<sup>192</sup> In contemporary Canadian society, racialized women are generally more likely than white women to work in the service sector and part-time, unstable, temporary work, and on a whole Racialized women earn lower wages and live in poverty; this is commonly referred as the 'double wage gap'. Racialized immigrant women face a number of additional challenges such as linguistic barriers, non-recognition of their credentials and qualifications, and lack of access to transportation and childcare (Statistics Canada, 2003; UNPAC, 2004).

<sup>193</sup> She prefaced her statement, however, with a caution that she could only speak about clubs in which she had entered (seven of the nine clubs in the Ottawa-Carleton region).

<sup>194</sup> A similar argument was put forth by Dragu and Harrison (1989) who refer to a member of the Montreal vice-squad's findings that young dancers were concentrated in 'good' clubs while older dancers most often worked in 'seedier' establishments.

The 'middle of the road' clubs hire dancers who are "pretty well together" and who are more likely to work sporadically or "who aren't going to stay in the business anyway." Other informants confirm that 'upper end' clubs had more stringent standards for dancers and favoured white, English-speaking, blond women with large breasts (Heather). These clubs also tend to have better upkeep of amenities like changerooms and champagne rooms (Christina). However, Pam adds that as a segment of the underground economy, erotic dancing can be an attractive occupation for some racialized women, especially those who enter the country as migrant workers:

It's an easy business for the girls from [developing countries] to get work. Especially if they're on a visitor's visa and they're not legally here. It's an easy way for them to go to work. They don't have to provide anything; they just show up (...) They don't have to declare it. They can send money home (Pam).<sup>195</sup>

In addition to the more insidious forms of racism, racialized women face overt discrimination within the workforce. Several informants recount how clubs place limits on the number of Black, Latina, Asian, and Aboriginal women who can work during a given shift. In fact, one scheduled Black dancer was denied entry into a club because there were 'too many' Black women working that night:

One Black girl that was well known to all of us and to the bar, was turned away. She was the regular Black girl. But we already had three Black girls there and we had one Indian girl and one Oriental girl [out of about twenty dancers working that night] (Christina).

#### **1.4 Extrapolation**

Alcoff (1991) has warned that persons from privileged locations trying to speak on behalf of other(ed) peoples are "discursively dangerous" because they run the risk of heightening pre-existing oppression (1991: 32). As noted in chapter three, on the whole my informants exhibit both subjugated and dominant characteristics. However, the most

vocal DERA members have the 'cultural capital' to make more meaningful decisions regarding their labour practices. DERA's two main spokespersons have a post secondary education, are no longer working in the industry, and met the industry standards (young, white, blond, English speaking, and attractive) when they worked as dancers. As Pam explains,

DERA represents the women who have the option of getting out of the clubs altogether. They are certainly more educated and have greater aspiration than their counterparts and they are working towards an end goal, which is to be out of the clubs. That puts them in a different category than some of the other women.

In adopting a 'clean' *versus* 'dirty' dancer script, DERA advocates for more stringent club standards that will serve to expulse the 'seedier' elements from the industry. To this end, while attempting to work toward dancer empowerment, DERA potentially alienates and further marginalizes some segments of the occupational population. Sam Smyth, DERA's executive director explains that were changes to be made to hiring protocol, restrictive standards enforced, and lapdancing banned, some dancers would be "unable to work" in clubs. However, she justifies her position nonetheless, by invoking an idealized conception of working conditions and the nature of dancer-manager relationships in the 1970s and 1980s:

Twenty years ago before the standards went down, those women wouldn't have got their foot in the door anyway.

While Sam acknowledges that by reinforcing industry standards, DERA will be further marginalizing older, 'overweight' women, she ultimately believes that they are primarily responsible for increased sex acts in clubs and thereby affect the ability of women, such as herself, to earn a living wage as a dancer:

It is a tricky situation you know, I feel bad for the women who don't have any other options but because they are an overweight fat woman (I mean that within the dancing context). An overweight older woman who comes into my working environment and does

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<sup>195</sup> Pam's comments reflect a more complex understanding of migrant workers than those framing the issue within the traditional 'traffic of women' discussion, and attempt locate the problem within broader political, economic, and social trends world wide (Bruckert and Parent, 2002).

lapdancing is taking away my money (...) I'm not going to lower my standards and engage in sex acts to make money, so why is she allowed to break the law and make money when I don't break the law and I go home broke (...) Like I feel bad for her but I still have to pay my bills. So [it's really about] survival of the fittest.

While DERA's intentions of *empowering* dancers are noble, in its current configuration, DERA may only be capable of empowering *some* women; those who, due to their race and cultural privileges, are not as vulnerable to exploitation as other(ed) women. As such, DERA's approach ignores the stratification among dancers. Indeed, some dancers, who also occupy a space of privilege in clubs, may see lapdancing as a feasible way to make additional income and would likely oppose a total ban. Others may be located along axes of disadvantage which give them less opportunity to make meaningful choices in terms of which labour practices they will engage in.

In short, DERA's assertion that better standards will keep lapdancers out of clubs, lacks broader analysis of the precarious situation of a number of women who do not "fit the bill" to borrow from Heather. The determinants of who qualifies as beautiful reflect broader systems of disadvantaged based on race and gender. Racialized women, women who are deemed overweight according to often restrictive standards of beauty, women who have been determined to be too 'old' to still be attractive, and women for whom English is not their first language, face complex obstacles when trying to find work in stripclubs. Perhaps were DERA to adopt a more contextualized feminist understanding around industry standards it might be better equipped to question whether it serves to further marginalize certain groups of dancers. Moreover, DERA members might be able to think through ways that it could assist dancers in strategizing to challenge these standards. To this end, I agree with Katherine Frank (2002b) who calls upon dancers, as well as academics writing on the industry, to adopt a "feminist politics of stripping" which locates industry standards within broader gendered social relations:

Because many men are taught to devalue and even despise the aging female body with its stretch marks, varicose veins, aging breasts, and cellulite-marked legs, a feminist politics of stripping needs to be sensitive to the fact that the sex industry as it now exists reinforces male privilege and entitlements to the detriment of women's practical and emotional investments in their non stripper bodies (2002b: 202).

Moreover, not all dancer and sex worker organizations have taken DERA's approach.

For instance, Anna, a former dancer and labour organizer in Montréal, writes that blaming individual dancers for the increased exploitation in clubs will not lead to any dancers' empowerment; instead it will further alienate certain women:

The introduction of lapdancing into clubs is a complex and heated matter that has more to do with a changing industry (how the market for visual sexual excitement has changed since VHS porn and internet have made it so readily available) and how our attitudes towards sexuality as a whole has changed. Hanging the blame for changing of bad working conditions on (... ) hookers, is not what I call empowerment (2000: 24).

Ultimately, the 'clean' / 'dirty' dancer distinction that DERA adopts has likely much more to do with identity management than an inherent disdain for, or discrimination against, certain women.<sup>196</sup> Identity management can simultaneously galvanize collective responses by disenfranchised women while creating and reinforcing exclusionary hierarchies. Elias and Scotson's (1965) concept of the Outsider / Established assists in illuminating why DERA dancers often attempt to distance themselves from dancers they deem 'dirty'. The Outside/Established model was developed as a means of understanding social inequality. It is premised upon the notion that the social techniques of superiority and subordination are interdependent. One's position as Established / Outsider depends, among other things on one's capacity to enter into, and the duration of, their belonging to a specific group. Those who are Established engage in "praise

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<sup>196</sup> The desire for collective identification, and the exclusionary practices adopted to maintain it, should not be read as unique to erotic labourers'. For instance, the gay and lesbian rights proponents have at times created and reinforced ruptures in the movement by excluding alternative understandings of the relationship between sexual identity and sexual practices; feminist movement has been vulnerable to excluding more marginal voices for the sake of upholding the concept of 'women'; and the labour movement has marginalized certain workers in order to maintain a measure of solidarity.

gossip" toward themselves and "rejecting gossip" toward the Outsiders. For instance, while Christina decried stripclubs' standards as being too lax, she provides the caveat that her club at least continues to 'filter' dancers:

They've turned girls down at the door. Like 'Sorry you're too big' or 'Sorry you're not attractive enough' or whatever. So I like working [there] in the sense that they're not going to allow just any girl in stilettos to walk in (Christina).

This is likely a form of identity management, which reinforces Christina's sense of being an 'entertainer'. By positioning herself as being proud of her appearance and skills, she protects her 'good girl' persona. This type of self-praising gossip is rendered all the more meaningful given the reality than my informants revealed that they have "made concessions" as dancers and experienced a disrupted sense of self as a result. For instance, Julie admits her conflict over lapdancing and explains how she has 'split' herself from it, with the understanding that at the core of her being, she is not like the other(ed) dancers who engage in lapdancing:

I make concessions (...) You reach this point where it simply doesn't bother you and you wonder what ever really did bother you. It doesn't shock but it doesn't make you happy. But you split yourself from it. (Julie).

Heather, who as noted above, had the ability to find other employment because of her post secondary education, questions whether lapdancing affects dancers' self-esteem:

I sometimes think about how girls can let themselves be touched for money. I wonder what it does to them inside and if it actually bothers them (...) I just wonder about what goes on in their mind and what kind of problems they have. Because I know that I would be really screwed up if I was [lapdancing].

Nevertheless, positioning DERA members as Established is a successful strategic collective move. That is, organizations are dynamic and use myriad strategies, which shift according to context, in order to achieve their goals (Adamson et al, 1988). By excluding women who may be labeled 'dirty', DERA legitimates those who do not engage in lapdancing. No doubt, as evidenced in DERA's role in directing by-law

discussions, differentiating themselves from women who engage in lapdancing has proven to be a powerful legitimizing tactic and has assisted in mobilizing community groups and municipal council around the labour issues of erotic dancers.

With this in mind, a few members have challenged DERA's 'survival of the fittest' (Sam) approach and exclusionary practices and argue that the association must become more representative. In the next section I examine the internal and external challenges that DERA faces in its attempt to organize dancers. Internally, DERA's might be required to revisit its discourses that serve to exclude a large proportion of dancers. Externally, DERA faces structural barriers, such as the nature of the occupation, and the exercise of managerial power.

## **(2) 'We never had the girls in the first place' - Issues around Representation**

I move now to examine how DERA's adopts traditional feminist discourses around empowerment and equality rights. The strategic use of this language enables DERA to present itself as speaking for all dancers. However, in practice, DERA has had difficulty recruiting members. In discussing issues of DERA's ability to be a representative voice, it becomes apparent that in establishing for whom the association speaks, DERA reproduces existing hierarchies among women.

While DERA is attempting to speak on behalf of all Ottawa-area dancers, for a variety of reasons, it has experienced trouble in recruiting members. Paper membership has never been above ten, and a more accurate estimation is about five permanent, active members:

Getting girls organized and together is difficult enough and we're trying so hard with DERA to get girls to come. And we haven't been that successful really. Because we only have a small group (...) We're probably ten or so in all. But girls that actually show up at meetings and stuff like that it's even smaller. It's pretty small (Heather).

DERA's primary recruitment strategy is through word of mouth, though they have also put up posters up in clubs and have attracted attention through their 'Burlesque night' fundraisers. Some dancers have expressed interest in sitting in on support group sessions or becoming DERA members, but they infrequently attend meetings:

A lot of time they don't show up or they always have excuses. Even some of the regular girls that we have come to DERA meetings often come up with a lot of excuses about why they're not going to come. I don't know. It's kind of discouraging (Heather).

Overall, my informants highlighted three main hindrances to mobilizing erotic dancers. First, they are a diverse group of women who experience their occupation as part-time or short-term and therefore favour the *status quo* to the pains of collective organizing to change labour structures. Second, DERA's goals - and the eradication of lapdancing specifically - may not resonate with the broader dancer population. Third, dancers have experienced managerial backlash for getting involved with DERA and many women prefer not to be associated with them for fear of losing their jobs. Each of these dilemmas will be elaborated upon below.

## **2.1 Segmented and Highly Independent Women**

First, because dancers are highly independent and autonomous, and for the most part view themselves as self-employed, attempts to collectively lobby around labour issues may not seem relevant. My findings support the research of other writers (Bruckert, 2002; Cooke, 1987) who have found that for many dancers, the energy required to organize does not seem worthwhile, given the level of engagement needed to effect changes:

It's difficult for them to make a commitment (...). A lot of dancers are like that. It's difficult to approach dancers at work because a lot of them [are] just there to make money and they don't want to talk about, or get into this stuff at work. They just want to make their money and do their thing. **Maybe** they don't want to be bothered? (Heather).

For a number of dancers, particularly those who see their labour as a pleasant, short-term, and lucrative, maintaining the *status quo* is more important than getting involved with DERA, advocating broader changes within the industry, or assuming the "persona of the working-class militant" (Sangster, 1997: 313). As ██████ explains

The girls don't care. They don't care. This is the way it is. I'm not going to be here very long. Don't care. Don't want to know. Don't know. Don't even want to talk about it.

This may be due to the perception from dancers that they stand to earn a better income through gratuities from lapdancing than through minimum wage and table dances (Heather). To this end, dancers need incentives to get organized. For instance, Christina argues that were clubs to eradicate lapdancing, dancers would need to receive something in return - namely, increased income:

If they got rid of lap or touch dancing, I think that regular non-touch dancing should be upped. Dancers should get a raise (...) A lot of the \$20.00 dancers are not going to want to go down to \$10.00 a song - that's a fifty percent each song and that's always going to be going through their mind. No how much money they're making but how much money they're losing, how much they could be making (Christina).

Similarly ██████ argues that employee status is a possible enticement, though likely only 'further down the road':

They need to give the girls something tangible to hang on to (...) Inevitably that will be employee status, somewhere down the road.

Indeed, DERA's official position is that providing dancers with employee status is fundamentally a means of subverting stigma. While acknowledging that dancers are difficult to organize by virtue of their stratification and independence, DERA sometimes neglects how this will complicate their efforts to achieve employee status. The contradictions and complexities inherent in that strategy will be elaborated upon in the latter part of this section.

## 2.2 DERA's Aims May Not Be Representative

A number of my informants have expressed that a second stumbling block to mobilizing dancers is that DERA's goals and policies do not resonate with the broader dancer community. One factor may be that the most vocal DERA members no longer work in the industry. Heather, for instance, is keenly aware that because of this, the group risks becoming 'out of touch' with dancers' day-to-day work experiences:

We need to know more what [it is] they want, what the girls want. Sam and I aren't in the clubs anymore. We need girls who are actually working in the clubs right now so that we know exactly what's going on, what they need, and what they want.

Similarly, ██████ points out that:

We never had the girls in the first place. One of the things I [asked] Sam not too long ago was 'What are you doing if you're not speaking for all the women?'

██████ refers to DERA's primary motive for organizing: to decrease transgressions of dancers' physical boundaries by customers and reduced economic exploitation by club owners. In working to effect the changes it desires, DERA has had to adopt traditional radical feminist discourses by emphasizing the violence that occurs in clubs. Indeed, as noted above, its explicit *raison-d'être* was to stop the escalating violence and oppressive work conditions that resulted from the *Pelletier* decision:

[The Supreme Court] created absolute chaos in the exotic dance business by reducing the dancers' standards of exotic dance to the lowest common denominator. This has opened the floodgate to increase the exploitation of exotic dancers in Canada. Within one month of this decision DERA was formed to take back the power and stop the insanity. Exotic dancers have the right to be free from the risk of harm and exploitation while in their work environment (2002: 1).

In addition, Sam is in favour of banning pornography from stripclubs:

Get rid of pornographic material in clubs ... I don't think any other woman in any other working environment is subjected to watching *porn* for 40 hours a week. There's lots of studies that show that porn affects men but what is the effect on a woman where she has to watch it when she's working at a club because she has no other options and she can't ask them to turn it off because she's a trouble maker if she does.

Paradoxically, the 'secondary effects' arguments adopted by DERA are the same as those outlined in chapter four, which were adopted by some radical feminists who would shut down stripclubs altogether (*R. v. Butler; R. v. Mara*)<sup>197</sup>. Essentially then, DERA's discourse is one of *shared victimization* which emphasizes what hooks calls a 'mutual support' model of feminist solidarity. bell hooks criticizes this approach because it demands that women "avoid confrontation" and amounts to "a suspension of critical judgement" (1984: 63). To this end, DERA's official position is that lapdancing has led to increased physical vulnerability for all dancers, in effect dismisses the lived experience of many women working in clubs. For instance, ██████████ argues that sexual assaults rarely occur when working, dancers adopt strategies to establish and maintain their personal boundaries:

[A guy crossing the line] against my will? That doesn't happen. It doesn't happen. You know why. Because I rule. You're paying me. You know that I'm going to kick you in the head with a spiked heel if you fuck me up. I'm not kidding you. Your digits do not touch me, not if I don't want you to.

As an alternative to the mutual support model, bell hooks argues for a feminist solidarity which is more political and has the potential to include rather than further exclude certain women:

Women do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity (...) We can be sisters united by shared interests and beliefs (...) united in political solidarity (1984: 64).

Intuitively, ██████████ is trying to implement a "feminist solidarity" approach. She warns that DERA's leadership must acknowledge what she calls their "academic push" as well as their own biases. Furthermore, she argues that DERA must seek out more marginal voices in order to be more representative. In particular, she has identified that DERA's homogenized narratives can distort the experiences of a number of dancers, and particularly dancers who perform sex acts:

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<sup>197</sup> For a thought-provoking critique of this approach see: Cossman, 2003 and Valverde, 1999.

What about the girls who do like to suck cock or do like it a little bit and are willing to compete at any level sexually to do that? [DERA] is not speaking for those girls, they're really not (██████████).

However, a change in DERA's policy on sex acts in clubs does not appear to be forthcoming given that at a recent 'burlesque' fundraiser in an Ottawa club, organizers immediately expelled a woman who had 'crossed the line':

One girl was caught doing extra stuff (...) We kicked her out. We said 'see you later' because she was actually causing problems" (Heather).<sup>198</sup>

What is clear then is that DERA's goals do not resonate with the entire dancer population. While its platform of speaking on behalf of dancers has been a successful legitimating tactic for the group, it remains that DERA's approach, which taps into radical feminist discourse of shared victimization, may well be a hindrance to engaging the broader dancer community in collective strategies of resistance.

### **2.3 Fear of Reprisal**

A third dilemma DERA faces in terms of being a representative voice, is that dancers do not want to be associated with the group for fear of reprisal by owners, such as losing their jobs or getting 'blacklisted' from clubs. This concern is not unfounded. For instance, a dancer (who is not a DERA member) who performed at the burlesque fundraiser was blacklisted from her regular club because her involvement was perceived as a desire to unionized dancers (SLSN, 2003). As discussed in chapter four, historically key players in dancer affiliations have been blacklisted from clubs for trying to organize dancers.<sup>199</sup> Sam Smyth, DERA's key spokesperson has not been immune to

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<sup>198</sup> DERA has also considered implementing a fine system for dancers who did not follow the rules they set out for the show, in effect reproducing the very policies they denounce.

<sup>199</sup> Furthermore, in 2000, Amanda Musselman, an Ottawa-area dancer was found dead shortly after publicly opposing *de facto* mandatory lapdances. The dancing community rumoured that her death was meant to send a message to others (Sam). The media coverage intimated that the timing was "likely coincidental" and any link between the two events remains a speculation because the death is still unexplained (Sayani, 2004).

club's opposition to her activities. In fact, she had secured a venue for dancer outreach in one Ottawa-area club, but was subsequently told (after unsympathetic media coverage of the industry in which she was cited as arguing for cleaner work environments and better working conditions for dancers) that she was no longer welcome.

In response, DERA has tempered its approach and aims at appeasing club owners and managers. DERA's strategy thus far has been to present their association in a manner which is "as innocent and non-threatening as possible" so that when members enter clubs, the owners see them as "just trying to help the girls so they'll be happier and healthier and they'll be better workers" (Sam). Similarly, Christina wants DERA to remain "not too intimidating to owners." However, Heather reveals more militant aspirations: "We actually want the girls to come out [to meetings] and basically destroy [the clubs]. We are kind of plotting in a way." Ultimately, it seems that with this notable exception, DERA's position is one that favours good relations with management over broad-based dancer solidarity.

This is most evident in DERA's abandonment of its earlier drive for unionization. As will be discussed below, many of the demands DERA would make of clubs owners - steady wages, no lapdancing, and benefits for employees, will require broader collective action and likely the protection of a union. To this end, DERA's approach to management, may not be effective in protecting dancers' right to organize as workers,<sup>200</sup> nor to convince dancers that DERA has the ability to safeguard that right.

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<sup>200</sup> For instance, in *Dumore v. Ontario (Attorney General)* [2001] 3 S.C.R. 1016 the Supreme Court of Canada upheld workers right to freedom of association.

## 2.4 Extrapolation

DERA has adopted a discourse that positions itself as speaking for all Ottawa-area dancers. However, without canvassing a diversity of voices, DERA's activism may remain directed at improving working conditions for women who already locate a space of privilege within clubs. In order to truly speak as a collective of dancers, DERA might consider broadening its membership base. However, I have indicated in this section that there are a number of hurdles to organizing dancers and getting them involved with DERA. I have found that the segments of the dancer population who are highly independent or who view their work, *in its current form*, as an enjoyable and viable means of making a living, are difficult to integrate into DERA's model of organizing. These dancers do not respond to DERA's 'shared victimization' position, and unless the association looks toward means of reinforcing solidarity among dancers, its efforts will likely continue to be exclusionary.

In the next section, I examine an additional legitimizing strategy adopted by DERA: framing erotic dancers as exploited workers. The association has determined that this tactic is necessary given the fact that, as discussed above, dancers experience a very real fear reprisal from club owners if they do get involved with the organization. DERA therefore puts into sharp relief managerial authority and argues that if dancers were employees they would be entitled by law to organize in response to changes in their labour practices. What follows is a review of the association's arguments that favour employee status, a steady remuneration, and the eradication of lapdancing in order to effect a 'level playing field' among dancers. By framing particular segments of the dancer community (those who do not want to lapdance) as exploited workers, DERA is attempting to rally dancers around the working conditions that its members would like changed. However, as with its other discursive tactics, ultimately, DERA's approach

may further alienate the majority of the dancer population, and may not be sufficient to effect changes within the industry practices or standards.

### **(3) Subverting Stigma: Equality Rights Discourse and Employees Status**

Stigma, as Goffman (1963) explains, is any attribute that sets people apart and discredits them of social acceptance. Within the sex and skin trades, it has always been the (female) service providers who have borne the brunt of the stigma associated with the exchange of sex for money (Chapkis, 1997; Leigh, 1987; Pheterson, 1987; Shaver, 1993). As with other women working within the industries characterized by commodified sexuality, dancers' master status is that of "sexual outlaw" and their occupation is the prime component of their identity (Parent, 1994; Sanchez, 1997). Nevertheless, while stripclubs are legitimate enterprises, it remains that erotic dancers are not granted the same status. Informants experience this (de)legitimation as an offshoot of broader social stigma against dancers, and as a result suffer discrimination and injustices.

For instance, 'stripping' was not something dancers felt comfortable putting on their resume because of judgement from potential employers (Sam).<sup>201</sup> Despite this, some dancers have managed to individually maneuver within these conditions of constraint. For instance, ██████████ encourages dancers to take creative license in drafting their curriculum vitae to account for the time spent working as a dancer:

You can't put that on your resume, so say you were a waitress, say you were married and you didn't have to work, do whatever you have to do, but you have to have some transferable skills.

Stigma was also experienced in terms of how workplace policies differ for dancers in comparison to women working in other service sector jobs, particularly when they try to exert the legal right to be free from discrimination:

But some clubs tell a girl she's too fat when she's 15 pounds underweight. Like this girl was almost anorexic and she got fired for being too fat. And in any other context that is illegal and you'd have recourse. My friend is a cashier and if she's accused of stealing \$20.00 she knows there's somewhere she can go. She has a voice and someone will be an advocate for her. That sort of thing doesn't happen in stripping. You like it or you lump it (Julie).

Fundamentally DERA focuses on how stigma plays out in terms of dancers' capacity to invoke their rights as workers. To this end, it draws upon some of the insight of feminist analysis that centers labour. For DERA, the primary means of combating stigma would be to apply basic labour standards to the erotic dance industry, in an effort to promote dancers' formal equality with other workers:

So if they can apply [labour standard] to other groups of workers, they should be able to apply them to dancers as well, but I believe they'd rather not acknowledge exotic dancers as workers because [society] doesn't want to believe that (...) women are being exploited and there's exotic dancers in the community (...) Because we're labeled as bad women, they'd rather ignore us than help us (...) They don't even [support] giving us the same rights as every other worker. It is really frustrating (Sam).

### **3.1 Achieving Equality: Dancers as Employees**

In attempting to craft better working conditions, DERA has adopted a pragmatic approach couched in rights discourses likening their argument to traditional liberal feminists which call for equality in law and opportunity (Dobrowolsky, 2000; Strong-Boag and Fellman, 1997). As Carol Smart has noted:

Rights constitute a political language through which certain interests can be advanced. To couch a claim in terms of rights is a major step towards a recognition of a social wrong (...). To claim that an issue is a matter of rights is to give the claim legitimacy. It is also the case that to pose an issue in terms of rights is to make the claim popular (1989: 143).

DERA taps into to rights discourses around issues through language of equality, the

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<sup>201</sup> Sam went through a lengthy human rights complaint because she was fired from her job with Youth Services Bureau when her employer found out she worked as an erotic dancer.

need for greater governmental intervention, and labour protections:

Every exotic dancer deserves the same treatment as every other Canadian worker (DERA, 2002b: 4)

If the Federal and Provincial governments ensured that the rights of dancers were not violated on a daily basis, there would be fewer problems at the Municipal level (DERA, 2001b: 1)

As mentioned in chapter four, DERA has identified a number of key tactics for improving dancers' labour rights. Specifically, it draws a direct correlation between changes in the industry and decreased incomes. For instance, a number of my informants explained how they have suffered financially because some patrons refused to follow the fee for service conventions. Julie recalls spending an entire evening sitting and conversing with one patron because he had agreed that he would pay her for her time at the end of the night. In the end, however, he:

put his coat on and says 'good night'. And I said 'aren't you forgetting something' and he said, 'when you were in the washroom I tried to use the bank machine and it didn't work and so, sorry'. And he turned around and walked out of the club and I was speechless. And had I had more presence of mind I would have called a bouncer but I was just speechless at my lack of judgment.

Sam adds that clients, who are aware of dancers' lack of steady remuneration, use this knowledge to extort additional services:

It's like waitresses working for tips only. This puts them at greater risk too because they don't have a paycheque at the end of the week so they're depending on the clients. And once the clients figure out that the women aren't getting paid, they know that they can take more advantage of them because that's their bread and butter.

My informants suggest that the most viable way to combat this type of economic exploitation is by challenging dancers' lack of employment status, and providing dancers with a steady remuneration for their work.

### **3.2 Hierarchies and Contradictions**

A number of contradictions emerge in DERA's invoking of equality rights and employee status as a means of protecting dancers. First, as discussed above, many dancers are highly independent and prefer the status of entrepreneur to that of

employee. As Bruckert (2002: 106) explains, some dancers (and working-class women generally) adopt an entrepreneurial self-definition as a means of reinforcing their autonomy: they work when they want, and where they want. Heather, for instance, enjoyed working as a freelancer:

I was always a freelancer. It's the flexibility because when I was going to school full time I could work weekends. I could work Friday and Saturday and make a whole bunch of money and I didn't have to work a full time job while I was going to school.

For this reason, she argues that dancers may well prefer to be considered independent contractors to club employees, though not necessarily within the current labour structure. Heather favours a contractual arrangement with clubs, whereby dancers are their 'own boss' and free to negotiate all terms of their work agreement with management:

I should be able to come and go. If I only feel like working two hours then fine. I can make \$200.00 and then leave.

Other dancers deny that they are either employees or independent contractors, and instead see themselves as 'underground' workers:

You know what would be a very valuable statistic, how many girls actually claim their tampons, their lipstick. They don't classify themselves as contractors. It's all under the table work. Like 95 percent of them (██████████).

To be sure, there are benefits for women who work in the underground economy. As noted earlier, some women, due to their status as migrant labourers, could potentially lose their jobs were clubs to hire dancers as employees. Other women use the precarious nature of their employment status to claim social assistance in addition to dancing as a means of making a living wage. Finally, many dancers would be loathe of the tax implications of being employees, and the resulting deductions from their weekly pay.

However, a contradiction lies in dancers' "complex labour location" (Bruckert, 2002: 11) while they are essentially self-employed; their labour is regulated by club owners and management. Stripclubs, like any other business, govern the organizational

practices that will be most profitable to owners and to other stakeholders (Montemurro, 2001). To this end, managers exercise some control over the manner in which dancers earn a living. 'Control' in an employment context, according to Richard Edwards, is the ability for managers to obtain a desired profit maximizing behaviour from workers through direction, evaluation, and discipline (Edwards, 1979: 17). As outlined in chapter four, basing their arguments on those made by American legal scholars, DERA's position is that clubs exert control by: implementing a stage fee system; charging dancers for breaches of 'club rules'; pre-determining the cost of private dances; and by exercising the ability to 'fire' dancers who do not meet industry standards.

Therefore, in spite of the fact that some dancers prefer to frame themselves as entrepreneurs, DERA's official position is that dancers are employees or alternatively 'workers'<sup>202</sup> and have the right, at the very least, to some form of steady remuneration. DERA argues that employee status is a means by which they can exert more control and have more meaningful choices within their workplace: they will no longer feel pressured to lapdance, be making a better wage, and have access to protective employment legislation. As Sam explains:

Say the owners had to pay all the women minimum wage, they wouldn't pay all those women. They'd pay like 25, or more realistically probably like 15. So that means 35 women are out of work for the night. But those 15 who are getting paid x amount of dollars, divided by 15 instead of 50 so all those women go home really happy not having had to compromise their morals, not lapdancing because they don't have to. They have a choice.

These choices, while not overtly stated, would be limited to specific dancers: namely, conventionally attractive (according to industry standards), young, white women who will

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<sup>202</sup> The distinction between employee and worker ultimately lies in the scope of protective legislation that would apply to dancers. As discussed in chapters one and four, employee status is a source of both statutory and common-law protection. Being an employee has implications for taxation liability, eligibility for employment insurance and other benefits, as well as the applicability of collective bargaining procedures (Fudge et al, 2002; Glasbeek, 2002).

refuse to engage in lapdancing:

It's one of those situations where the needs of the few and the needs of the many. You know, all these women need to work but if the standards are the way they used to be, half of those women wouldn't be allowed to walk into the clubs now (Sam).

Another dimension to steady remuneration, according to [REDACTED], who invokes the dancer as entertainer script explained above, is that performers would have more incentive to put on better shows:

I'd pay girls per show. I'd pay girls for good shows (...) if I'm not getting paid, where's my incentive? (...) Pay the girls, have ten girls doing good shows.

She emphasizes that a formal agreement between clubs and dancers is required, though not necessarily to protect dancers, but as a means of ensuring that industry standards are maintained:

Only hire women who are employees or contractors that we sign a contract with. Hire professionals because with all the ambiguity, the standards are lower. Anybody can go in and dance.

Others felt that steady earnings would permit dancers who are part of the underground economy (working 'under the table') to make a living wage and not have to claim social assistance to supplement their income:

if they're getting decent wages then there's less likelihood that the dancers will commit fraud. [If] the dancers out there on disability, or on social assistance (...) knew that their rent would be paid by them just doing their job, not providing sexual services but just doing their job, then why would they be on social assistance and have the stress of worrying about that (Christina).

This calls to mind however, why women (and single mothers in particular) have to claim social assistance and work within the underground economy in order to make sufficient income to support themselves and their families. As noted in chapters two and four, since the 1960s feminists have argued that inequities within the work force cannot be examined within a vacuum. Instead, women's employment has to be located within broader societal structures that reinforce the feminization of poverty and women's overwhelming responsibility for childcare other forms of unpaid labour. Upon review of SLSN minutes, DERA's research papers, and my own notes from attending lectures by

key DERA spokespersons, these underlying issues were not addressed. It seems that broader legal, political, economic, and social discrepancies lived by women, and particular segments of women, specifically, working-class, racialized women, women with limited education and formal training, must be confronted before the erotic dance business can be regulated in a manner that does not further marginalize or stigmatize dancers.

In an entirely different vein, Pam feels that minimum wage and employee status may not necessarily alter working conditions, but at the very least it would alter dancers' self-conceptualization and increase their self-esteem:

How important [employee] status is, I don't know. But at least it's something. They have nothing right now. They have no recourse if they get fired, if their cheque is withheld [in the case of scheduled dancers], if they're treated poorly by a customer. Even it's not the minimum wage per hour that we all think of as having the status of employee. But it would give them some of what I would see as basic human rights (...) So even if it just affects that, I think it's a huge victory.

Julie also locates employee status within the broad concept of fundamental human rights:

[Employment status] is a human right. People should have the right to better themselves and to have access to basic services and to have more resources and to be compensated for their labour adequately.

In addition to basic remuneration, Julie and other informants, who look upon the *Lusty Lady* experience<sup>203</sup> with favour, have considered other benefits that should be extended to dancers: supplied childcare, paid vacation time, group benefits, and hourly wages which include the time needed to prepare for a show (makeup, costume, and travel).

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<sup>203</sup> As noted earlier, the *Lusty peepshow* dancers not only unionized to effect widespread changes in their work environment (dismantling two way mirrors, trying to eradicate discriminatory hiring practices, increased hourly wages - including pay for prep time -), they eventually formed a co-operative and bought out their club.

The complexity lies in the fact that dancers fear reprisals from club owners were they to join DERA, let alone a formal union. Sam, who assessed dancers' labour options in her honours' thesis writes:

Owner's continu[ously] destroy any attempt of union organization. They have simply replaced workers in the past and they are more than willing to do this again in order to maintain the current working relationship for it is financially beneficial to them (Smyth, 2002: 21).

It is for this reason, as discussed above, that DERA has moved away from its original pro-union position. As an alternative, my informants favour a professional association. DERA would endorse and is researching into ways to effect provincial licensing of dancers through the creation of a professional association:

[DERA] would be open to discussing licensing at the provincial level as long as they were looking at it within the context of labour and also addressing occupational health and safety, the *Pay Equity Act*, the *Labour Relations Act*, the *Employment Standards Act*. If they're going to apply all those things then it might be worth our while to pay \$100.00 a year to have a license, if [it means that] we're going to be guaranteed the rights of every other worker in Ontario.

A number of contradictions emerge however. First, a provincial licensing body does not amount to a union, and may not be in a position to require clubs to enforce legislation like the *Labour Relation Act*, which regulates relationships between unionized workers and employers (England, 1998). Second, informants reveal that one of the primary aims of such a provincial body, would be to uphold standards in clubs:

We could have an association of dancers set the standards and agree on what would be sufficient grounds to fire somebody. A dancer that no longer fit the criteria would just have to understand that that is the nature of the business (Julie).

As discussed earlier, the standards that DERA wants to uphold may well exclude the majority of dancers, and particularly those who are located along varying axes of (dis)advantage. A related point is that forming an occupational association is a means of legitimizing dancers by subjecting them to a regulatory licensing regime. History has shown however, that regulation aimed at licensing erotic labourers ultimately further marginalizes the very women it purports to protect (Lewis, 2000; Sangster, 2001;

Shaver, 1994; Smart, 1992). Third, dancing remains a highly stigmatized occupation, and elevating its status to profession' may exacerbate class biases and reinforce hierarchies among dancers. As Chapkis writes:

Not only would such strategies fail to address the stigmatization of those unable or unwilling to be 'credentialed', it inadvertently reinforces class prejudice by assuming that professionals alone deserve social courtesy and respect (1997: 194).

Finally, given that dancers are already reticent to join DERA because its definition of dancing overtly excludes them from group participation, or because they fear of reprisal from clubs, it seems unlikely that they will pay a yearly fee to form part of an occupational group that may not represent their individual concerns. Put differently, as Samantha, co-founder of the sex-workers' rights group COYOTE states:

They don't see what they're doing as an identity; it's just a temporary job. You're not going to get them to attend a demonstration; most of them don't even want anybody to know what they're doing. And it's all really risky (cited in Chapkis, 1997: 206).

### **3.3 Extrapolation**

Despite the desire for steady wages and greater benefits, DERA has abandoned its initial push for formal unionizing (Sam). However, employee status alone may render dancers more vulnerable, and the benefits sought out by DERA will likely require the intervention of a union.<sup>204</sup> That is, my informants do not engage in critical debate around the nature of the employment contract, which is often inherently oppressive, as Glasbeek explains:

Seeing the employment contract for what it truly is - one that legally subjugates the worker - satisfactorily explains why (...) workers are not treated as the legal, and substantive, equals of [their employers] (2002: 82).

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<sup>204</sup> There are other approaches DERA might adopt in order to mediate between full employment rights and the flexibility of entrepreneurship. For instance, courts have shown a willingness to include more independent contractors as employees by creating an "intermediate" status between the two (*Marby v. Avrean Int' Inc* (1999), 44 C.C.E.L. (2d) 76. These workers are entitled to rights such as reasonable notice before termination (Langille and Davidov, 1999)

For instance, if DERA is not successful in having lapdancing banned under the by-law, and dancers were deemed employees, club owners could potentially stipulate in employment contracts that lapdancing is a central part of the job description.<sup>205</sup> Furthermore, with an official record of earnings, clubs will have to deduct pension costs from dancers base wage, which for the time being at least, will reduce dancers' income. Finally, as employees, dancers could lose the ability to set their own hours and the mobility to leave clubs that support economically exploitative labour practices. To this end, not all dancers want to be defined as employees or even as workers; despite their precarious location in the labour market, they prefer the benefits of being part of the underground economy.

This leads me to conclude that employee status alone may not be sufficient to safeguard dancers' labour rights, and DERA may be required to revisit the notion of forging an alliance with a union. Labour lawyer Harry Glasbeek (2002), while critical of traditional employment relationships, remains convinced that unionizing is fundamental to ensuring that marginal workers' rights are enshrined in law.

In sum, DERA faces two overlapping hurdles in advocating that employee status will subvert stigma and foster formal equality. First, for a variety of reasons varying from flexibility in work schedule to circumstances that leave women with few options but to work in the underground economy, many dancers prefer to identify as entrepreneurs. Second, for those who would prefer to be employees, many of the safeguards that DERA wants implemented, may well require the support of more traditional labour organizing, such as a union. This in itself raises a number of concerns, as outlined in the discussion around a professional organization, including getting dancers involved and convincing them that formal labour organizing is a worth while endeavor. Moreover,

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<sup>205</sup> Interview with Rosemary Warskett (May, 2004).

it may also be vulnerable to what Chapkis (1997) refers to as a 'credentialing' that further exacerbates divisions among dancers.

#### ***Part Four: Assessing Successes and Future Challenges***

Feminist political economist Anna Jonasdottir distinguishes between two streams of feminist organizing. Those who emphasize common interests of women - or acquiring the conditions to make meaningful choices - and those who emphasize individualized needs and desires - the consequence of choices - (Jonasdottir, 1988: 57-58; Talpade Mohanty, 2002). She argues that a combination of both perspectives would better serve women's struggle for economic, political and social justice. The former is historically grounded and can be 'objectively' defined. These are the systemic material and historical basis for claiming that women workers have shared interests (1988: 63).<sup>206</sup> Determining individual needs and desires however, is much more subjective and involves recognizing the contradictions among diverse workers' consciousnesses (64). This fragmentation may well work against organizing around common interests. Jonasdottir's (1988) distinction is helpful in understanding some of the contradictions inherent in DERA's approach. While it looks toward formal organizing as a means of expressing dancers' common needs (economic security, meaningful options regarding whether or not to engage in certain labour practices, and cleaner work environments) it simultaneously reinforces existing hierarchies among women based on cultural background, race, and class that ultimately militate against collective action. The common interests that DERA members have identified include instituting a regular wage system for all dancers (freelance or scheduled), eradicating lapdancing from stripclubs, and implementing standards for cleaner work environments. DERA members

collectively mobilize around these issues and emerge as agents crafting more meaningful choices for themselves within their work environments in an effort to ultimately change the conditions of their working lives. In so doing, however, DERA primarily engages in what hooks (1984) calls shared victimization tactics rather than looking toward broader dancer solidarity.

Drawing upon my theoretical framework, I have argued that DERA should approach the choices made by dancers to engage in certain practices as choices made within broader conditions of constraint. This would allow for a more nuanced understanding of the fact that choice *qua* choice does not amount to agency when made in the face of unpalatable options. However, it also highlights that despite the fact that dancers are located within marginal legal, social, economic, and political spheres, there is a potential for dancers to engage in collective acts of resistance. The challenge for DERA is to foster an approach that includes the broader dancer community in an effort to change the industry structures that hinder dancers' abilities to make individual choices while working.

### **Final Thoughts: Revisiting the concept of 'Dancers Empowering Dancers'**

Despite the contradictions highlighted throughout this chapter, I argue that DERA's efforts to organize dancers, remains at its core, a successful attempt at furthering dancers' sense of empowerment. That is, I maintain that despite some of the risks involved in collective resistance - such as reinforcing pre-existing hierarchies among women - DERA members are using their knowledge and experiences in unique and productive ways. According to Nelly Stomquist (2002: 22-23), there are four

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<sup>206</sup> For instance, the desire for paid childcare and pay equity in light of the long standing gendered discrepancies within systems of production and (re)production (Armstrong, 1997).

dimensions to empowerment: the cognitive (a critical assessment of one's reality), the psychological (the fostering self-esteem), the political (the ability to mobilize in response to oppressive structures), and the economic (the ability to generate a living wage).

Following Stomquist, I argue that DERA is, despite my critical engagement with its legitimizing tactics, actively trying to foster greater empowerment for dancers. First, DERA members have successfully managed to make sense of their working lives and have cleared a space for the circulation of new ideas about the nature of erotic labour.

As Julie comments:

I think DERA is a wonderful organization and I think it's really neat all the people I got to meet and how much I've learned and how much my perception has shifted and grown.

Second, it has succeeded in mobilizing women from diverse backgrounds - middle-class lawyers and professors, students, community groups and a few highly committed dancers - to lobby around labour concerns as some dancers define them. For instance, DERA's radical feminist discourse has been helpful in forging links with the Ottawa feminist community and in particular an outreach program being administered by Sam Smyth and run out of the Ottawa Rape Crisis Center. To this end, it has managed to somewhat overcome the traditional lack of integration between erotic labourers and informal feminist networks. Third, DERA and SLSN members are cognizant that changing dancers' working conditions will require a long-term commitment, which they are prepared to make:

Both Sam and I have ...decided that we're dedicating the next 20 years of our lives (██████████).

I was there for the inception and I'll be there for the long haul. And I think at this point it wouldn't be fair to pull away from the table and even if we stopped going into the clubs altogether, I mean just knowing the history of the project and all that sort of stuff, I can still bring that to the table as well as the health perspective. So yeah, absolutely in for the long haul (Pam)

It has also successfully lobbied city councilors and was instrumental in removing the licensing of dancers from the municipal agenda. Fourth, it continues to fervently oppose

*de facto* mandatory lapdancing in Ottawa area clubs and to pressure clubs to implement policies that will ensure safer working conditions. Fifth, and finally, while it has not yet managed to secure steady incomes for dancers, which it believes will provide dancers with more meaningful options within clubs, DERA continues to promote its vision of more just working conditions for dancers through public education.

Nevertheless, my informants anticipate some initial backlash from dancers were DERA's aims of employee status and eradication of lapdances achieved:

The girls who are in the work force now are going to hate us. They're going to hate us. Not all [of them]. But it's going to be very hard for the frontline girls (...) the average 'I don't know, I don't care, all I want to do is buy my own pair of boots' kind of girl. If I'm taking that away from her, which is what's going to happen first - and which has to happen - she's going to hate us [REDACTED].

There will be an adjustment period, where it will be awkward or quiet and the girls will be broke for a while (Christina).

However, they remain convinced that with time, the broader dancer community will come to accept and support their efforts, guard DERA's reputation jealousy, and express confidence in its leadership:

If a girl tries to knock down whatever it is that DERA is trying to do or if they have a negative point of view, I'd say I'm sorry but I'm just trying to help the ones who want the help. And I'm not going to stand by idly when I can actually do something or say something that can improve the conditions of our working environment (Christina).

Twenty years down the road we'll be sitting around the table thinking 'thank god she did that work' (...) No one is monitoring [the industry], no one is doing anything, nobody is taking responsibility, except for Sam. So kudos. [REDACTED].

Finally, and most saliently, my research participants are persuaded that organizing through dancer affiliations like DERA is a strategic means of resisting economic exploitation in clubs and that the task ahead remains to convince other dancers about the possibilities of dancer solidarity:

If they knew about all the possibilities? I mean some of them have probably already thought about it and thought it was hopeless. But if they knew what we're working on and if they knew that they might make minimum wage and have sick days and have all these rights. If they knew ... they might participate more. They might show more of an interest. If we could get them there and show them what we're working on and what might happen in the future.

## CONCLUSIONS

*Women's collective acts of resistance have played, and continue to play, a vital but often unacknowledged role in humanising social, political, and economic policies (Roy, 2004: 1).*

Feminist scholars have emphasized the need to conduct research on small grassroots organizations as a means of putting women's everyday lives and experiences at the core of our analysis of women's broader economic, social, and political location (Purkayastha, 2004). To further this feminist aim, the overarching goals of this research are twofold: first to record, and second to critically engage with, efforts by Ontario-area erotic dancers to organize in response to shifts in industry standards and practices.

Given erotic dancers' marginal status, and the often hidden nature of the erotic dance industry, a history of dancers' collective strategies of resistance is neither readily accessible, nor documented at times. For this reason, the data I have collected to create a historical record of dancers' formal and informal affiliations have been cobbled together from multiple sources including: semi-structured interviews, academic and autobiographical accounts of the erotic dance industry, and participant observation through my work with DERA and SLSN. In this endeavor, I am guided by recent feminist theorizing around erotic industries that adopt a prism of agency within constraining social structures. This has enabled me to understand that erotic dancing can be liberating and empowering; however in other circumstances, particularly when dancers cannot exercise meaningful choices regarding their labour practices, it can be exploitative and disempowering. When it is the latter, it tends to exacerbate already unpalatable conditions for particular segments of women: racialized women, older women, single mothers, and women without formal post secondary education.

My findings have revealed, however, that in spite of these conditions of constraint, erotic dancers adopt myriad strategies of individual and collective

resistances Building upon the work of other ethnographic accounts of erotic dancers' work experiences, I have acknowledged the importance of small scale / everyday acts of resistance, while centering organized / collective resistance. That is, I have found that within the erotic dance business, individual defiance tactics adopted by dancers are successful in the short-term and an effective means of achieving personal goals. However, they are not sufficient to effect the broader structural changes that dancer affiliations strive for, nor do they substantively disrupt oppressive power relations. In focusing on these collective strategies, my work compliments other feminist ethnographic accounts, and supplements the existing studies on working-class women's resistance.

The centerpiece of my research aimed at teasing out the complexities and contradictions inherent to these collective strategies. Specifically, I grappled with the legitimizing tactics adopted by the Dancers' Equal Rights Association (DERA) with whom I have developed a long-term working relationship. In chapter five, I detailed the labour practices around which DERA members have mobilized, namely, the eradication of *de facto* mandatory lapdancing and the implementation of some form of steady remuneration for all dancers. I also addressed how my informants frame issues of agency and a collective 'dancer' identity. The methodological assumptions that framed this discussion include a respect for the voices of my informants, with proper recognition of the complexity of their experiences, in addition to an engagement with broader feminist analyses of DERA's use of discourse.

My theoretical and methodological signposts enable me to draw two broad conclusions from my research data. First, in its objections to lapdancing, DERA often overlooks other relationships of privilege and exploitation that further complicate women's decision to engage in certain labour practices. Second, in framing dancers as

exploited workers, DERA neglects that many of the goals it seeks to achieve may well require some form of union backing. However, interwoven in these conclusions is a third: despite the risks inherent in organizing, such as further marginalizing some segments of the dancer population, DERA and other dancer affiliations, *do* have the potential to change industry practices that position women in constraining work environments. However, their ability to do so in a truly collective manner, one that does not position dancers against dancers, will require a more self-reflexive approach that interrogates broader social inequities. What follows is a discussion of my two primary conclusions; keeping in mind the broader overarching finding that fundamentally, DERA, and other dancers' affiliations, should be understood as successful attempts at empowering dancers, and creating spaces for the exercise of more meaningful choices within conditions of constraint.

### **(1) Reinforcing exclusions**

In ascribing the 'good girl' referent to its membership (young, white, English-speaking women), DERA implies that women who do not possess the same cultural capital are 'bad girls' who should be removed from the erotic dance industry. Paradoxically, most of my informants admitted to lapdancing albeit cautioning that they 'split themselves' from that labour practice, or engaged in it for economic reasons. Therefore, DERA constructs a *false* community of non-lapdancing dancers, on whose behalf it claims to speak. To this end, DERA's use of legitimizing discourses of empowerment in fact reproduces existing hierarchies among women occupying different social locations and further marginalizes a large segment of the dancer population.

However, in highlighting DERA's potentially dangerous tactics, I am keenly aware of Susan Bordo's warning not to succumb to "feminist paralysis" in an effort to subvert dynamics of inclusion and exclusion (1990: 138). For this reason, while I

engage in a critical inventory of DERA's claim that it speaks for all dancers, my analysis is not meant to negate the work DERA has engaged in. There is considerable evidence that DERA's approach has been successful in crafting more meaningful options for some dancers through their coalition-building with community members, galvanizing a legislative debate over the erotic dance industry, and ultimately playing a leading role in removing licensing from the municipality's agenda. This is further evident in its on-going activism toward the eventual eradication of *de facto* mandatory lapdances in Ottawa-area clubs. As such, DERA's methods cannot simply be dismissed as essentialist; instead they can, and should, be respectfully challenged by academics, activists, and other women within the industry. To be sure, it behooves the broader feminist community to engage with dancers in order to strategize ways to effect dialogue around issues of power, privilege, and resistance. In fact, as Mascia-Lees and Sharpe (2002) explain, activists and academics must struggle to find more meaningful ways in which they can truly engage one another in order to alter the economic and social systems that constrain women:

With the collapse of absolutes and blurring of positions, should we not seek a sense of good-enough irony that does not try to win debating points or simply to raise consciousness but to respect the truths on all sides, even when they are contradictory, and still struggle to find a way to act (2002: 202).

Perhaps DERA would better serve the needs of the broader dancer community by questioning the assumptions about women embedded in their activism, and to forge what Drucilla Cornell calls "new forms of organizing and solidarity" that do not "pit feminists against each other, white middle-class women against women of colour", or sex workers against dancers (2000: 11). To this end, it is my hope that my informants' involvement in this research provides them, as well as myself, with a venue to make links between personal experiences and broader societal structures, and thereby critically assess DERA and SLSN's approaches and assumptions.

## (2) Marginal workers and Unions

Building on the points above, a second finding that emerged is that, despite its labour rights approach, DERA overlooks the value of forging alliances with more traditional labour organizations, such as unions. As discussed in chapter five, DERA's reticence to engage with unions seems predominantly the outcome of a desire to maintain good relationships with club owners and managers. The task is further complicated by the nature of the industry structure itself, the highly competitive work environment, and the stratification of workers (Bruckert, 2002).<sup>207</sup> Nevertheless, these barriers are not insurmountable. Indeed, other dancer affiliations have seen the value and remain committed to forging solid alliances with unions. As Tora Brawley, dancer and organizer of the Alaska Dancers Union (ADU) in Anchorage, comments:

Without the protection of a union and a union contract we have no control over our working conditions, no recourse if we [are] mistreated. We do all the work, but the owners make all the rules and all the profits. We knew a union could change the power imbalance (EDA, 1998: 17).

Brawley and other dancers, deejays, and doormen from the *Showboat Showclub* in Alaska formed a union and launched a legal challenge against the club for interfering with its labour organizing. The *Showboat* had blacklisted anyone suspected of being involved in the burgeoning union. Nevertheless, the ADU successfully reached a settlement and secured \$40,000 from the club for back pay and lost wages during the lockout. Further, the International Union of Sex Workers (IUSW) in England has successfully unionized four table-dancing clubs where codes of conduct and grievance procedures have been introduced (Lopes, 2003). Additionally, Australian dancers

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<sup>207</sup> Furthermore unions have a history of white privilege and male bias, though over the last decade, there has been a real shift in union leadership and membership and some unions such as the CUPW has overtly feminist aims (Interview with Rosemary Warskett: May, 2004). In addition, despite their past shortcoming, the labour movement in the West has managed to achieve greater economic well-being for racialized groups and women than any other social institution (Brislin and McDermott, 1993; Field, 1983; Conaghan, 2002; Warskett, 1993, 2001).

recently unionized and negotiated a pay scale whereby all dancers' receive a base salary which varies depending on the amount of labour involved in their performances (Australian Industrial Relations Commission, 2002). DERA's seeming ambivalence toward unions is particularly unfortunate given that at least one major national union has expressed serious interest in organizing dancers in the Ottawa-area. In 2003, I approached Angèle Cadieux, a labour organizer for the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC) which has worked with STELLA in Montréal. Cadieux expressed considerable interest in getting involved with DERA. However, when I broached the subject at a SLSN meeting, the matter was dismissed because DERA's executive director felt that much more additional work was required before the Associations "could even think about unionizing" (SLSN meeting, 2003).

Unions can be a powerful lobbying force, they can enable workers to have input into the rules and codes of conduct at work, provide employees with a means to counter unilateral management action, and ensure access to due process (through grievance procedures).<sup>208</sup> Further, unions can negotiate retroactive pension plans, child-care and tuition allowances, substantially increase wages or modify entire wage structures, implement fringe benefits, and influence the way in which the erotic dance business is run as a whole<sup>209</sup> (Freeman and Medoff, 1984; Frost and Taras, 2000; Gunderson and Hyatt, 2000). These are all changes in dancers' labour structure that DERA would endorse. However, I argue that before taking additional steps to further these aims,

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<sup>208</sup> The grievance procedure is an alternative to the formal court system; it is less costly and less time-consuming. Few non-unionized workplaces offer employees grievance procedures. Instead, disputes are kept 'in house'. While non-unionized workers can take employers to court, this is unlikely if the employee wants to preserve the working relationship. This is exacerbated in the case of many erotic dancers, who already occupy a marginal location within broader employment structures.

<sup>209</sup> Canadian critical political economists have long argued for extended social protections to the self-employed (and the service sector in particular) and more meaningful access to union protections (Albo, 1990; Fudge and Vosko, 2001; Glasbeek, 2003; Vosko, 2000; Warskett, 1993).

DERA, and by extension all Ottawa-area dancers, would benefit from a thorough legal analysis of dancers' employment status (or lack thereof) and what demands they are entitled to make if supported by a union.<sup>210</sup>

### **(3) Final Thoughts, Questions for Future Research**

Despite some of the contradictions I have highlighted in DERA's approach to organizing dancers, I remain confident that through dancer affiliations such as this one, marginalized and stigmatized women have managed to carve out a space where they can emerge as agents and advocates. Through the networks they solidify, dancers are collectively lobbying for women's autonomy. They are filtering and mediating their social world. Most importantly they are, in effect, trying to rewrite their working conditions. Fundamentally, dancers' organizations advocate that women should be entitled to exercise occupational choices without social or economic penalties. As working class women striving toward acquiring the conditions for meaningful choices, their experience is highly relevant to understanding strategies for struggle and action of other marginal and stigmatized workers. Ultimately it seems that broader legal, political, economic, and social discrepancies lived by all women, and particular segments of women (specifically working-class, racialized women, women with limited education and formal training), must be confronted before the erotic dance business can be regulated in a manner that does not further marginalize or stigmatize dancers. To this end, a number of questions for future research emerge: Can dancer affiliations effectively subvert the "stigmatic assumptions" (Bruckert, 2002: 100) imprinted upon their occupation? Are there strategies that can enable these organizations to effectively "decenter" the law (Smart,

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<sup>210</sup> A labour lawyer counseling DERA has, on a number of occasions, suggested that DERA put forth the factual framework so that she can challenge dancers' lack of employee status before Ontario Labour Board (SLSN meeting, 2004).

1989) and secure their labour rights without having recourse to formal employee status? Is dancer solidarity possible or even likely, given the stratification of workers? Further research should also examine the global trends that influence, shape, and maintain structures of oppression and how they are implicated in erotic dancers' efforts to organize. Finally, how, in light of the constraints identified, can a more inclusionary approach be developed, which takes into account the choices women make in light of circumstances of constraint, enable dancer affiliations to better mobilize dancers? What also remains to be seen is whether DERA will attempt to engage in a broader discussion around the manner in which they will effect social and legal protections for dancers. These questions aside, it remains that despite their sometimes exclusionary approaches, and even without formal union backing, informal coalitions or alliances such as DERA, can, and have been successful in securing more economic stability for dancers.

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## Appendix A

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Organizing Resistance: The Case of Erotic Dancers</b> <b>INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE</b> <b>PRIMARY INFORMANTS - GROUP 'A'</b></p>
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### 1. Constructions of work in the erotic dance business

- What is an exotic dancer?
- Is an exotic dancer the same thing as a sex worker?
- What does the work of an exotic dancer entail?
- How do you feel about the term 'erotic dance' to define the erotic dance industry? How do you feel about the term 'erotic dance' vs 'exotic dance'?
- Why?
- How do you feel about the term 'skin trade'?
- Why?

### 2. Legal Regulation of the erotic dance

- How do municipal by-laws operate in terms of the strip club?
- Where do you get information on the legal status of stripping?
- How does the current legal regulation of the erotic dance affect erotic dancers?
- Have you ever been in conflict with the law?
- What are your views on licensing of the erotic dance?
- What are your views on decriminalizing prostitution?
- Is lap-dancing legal?

### 3. Labour Issues and Organizing

- How / When did you get involved with DERA
- Does DERA represent the voice of erotic dancers?
  - If so, why? If not, why not?
- What are some of the challenges to organizing dancers?
- What are of the potential benefits of organizing? What are some of the potential pitfalls?
- Are there conditions in the exotic dance business that you would like to see changed?
- If unionizing is an option, would you endorse it?
  - Why? Why not?
- If informal organizing is an option, would you endorse it?
  - Why? Why not?
- Should exotic dancers be considered employees?
  - Why? Why not?
- Are there advantages or disadvantages to being salaried workers?

### 4. Health and Wellbeing Issues

- Do you feel that working as an exotic dancer has limited your options in terms of access to services, finding an apartment, getting legal information?
- What would be your ideal workplace scenario?
- How long did you work / have you been working within the strip trade?

## Appendix B

<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Organizing Resistance: A Case Study of Exotic Dancers</b> <b>INTERVIEW DISCUSSION GUIDE</b> <b>SECONDARY INFORMANTS - GROUP 'B'</b></p>
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### 1. Constructions of work in the erotic dance business

- What is an exotic dancer?
- What is your understanding of the work conditions of exotic dancers?
- What is your understanding of the labour concerns of exotic dancers?

### 2. Legal Regulation of the erotic dance industry

- Do municipal by-laws operate in terms of the strip club?
- What is the legal status of lap-dancing?
- Do you have concerns about the way exotic dancing is regulated presently?
  - Why? Why not?
- What are your views on the licensing of the erotic dance business?
- What are your views on by-law enforcement?
  - Should by-laws be standardized throughout the province?
  - Why? Why not?
- What are your views on decriminalizing prostitution?
- Is lap-dancing legal?

### 3. Labour Issues

- What do you see as some of the labour issues that are of primary concern to exotic dancers?
- If unionizing is an option, would you endorse it?
  - Why? Why not?
- If informal organizing is an option, would you endorse it?
  - Why? Why not?
- Are exotic dancers considered employees?
  - Should they be?
  - Why? Why not?
- Are there advantages or disadvantages to being salaried workers?

### 4. Role of Community Activists and Support Networks

- Were you approached by DERA or other dancers to assist in their efforts to organize? If so, how and when?
  - If not, under what circumstances did you connect?
- What do you understand your role to be in the exotic dancers' efforts to labour organize?
- Are you concerned with the appropriation of the exotic dancers' voices by community groups?
- Do you see community group involvement as a manner of 'legitimizing' the concerns of exotic dancers?
  - If so, do you think this is problematic?
  - If not, please explain.
- Do you intend to participate in this project in the long-term?
  - If so, why?
  - If not, please explain.