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Abstract	This essay investigates the political economy of sexuality through an interpretation of sex shows for foreigners in Bangkok, Thailand. Reading these performances as both symptoms of, and analytical commentaries on, Western consumer desire, the essay suggests the 'pussy shows' parody the mass production that was a hallmark of Western masculine identity under Fordism. This reading makes a case for the erotic generativity of capitalism, illuminating how Western post-Fordist political economy of the post-1970s generated demand for these erotic services in Asia and how Western heterosexual masculine desire is integrated into global capitalist circuits.
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3 **Post-Fordist Desires: The Commodity Aesthetics**
4 **of Bangkok Sex Shows**

5 Ara Wilson

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21 **Introduction**

22 [I]t is precisely when production no longer seems to offer an identity that it
23 projects itself onto each and every aspect of experience. (Virno 1992, p. 217)

24 Capitalist modes of accumulation have always been intertwined with modes of
25 intimacy and pleasure (and always in conjunction with local and broader post-
26 colonial histories, state practices or governmentality).¹ One of the favoured
27 examples of the intertwining of political economy and sex is prostitution. As many
28 able analysts have shown, for example, the increased supply of sexual services in

1FL01 ¹ For one sustained analysis of the effects of capitalism on intimate life, see Zaretsky (1986).

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29 the global south is a product of national and transnational political-economic forces.
 30 This essay also explores the political economy of sexuality through the case of
 31 commercial sex, but it shifts the focus of much discussion of this trade by rethinking
 32 the relation of markets to desire and by investigating the demand-side of a
 33 historically specific category of commercial sex through a focus on sexual
 34 entertainment associated with the category 'sex tourism' in Southeast Asia.

35 The relation between markets and desire has remained surprisingly unexamined
 36 in discussions of sex work, even in those casting a critical eye on commercial sex.
 37 Prevailing economic thinking (e.g. neoclassical and neoliberal thought) character-
 38 ises the abstraction of markets as benign vehicles. Markets are venues for realising
 39 wants, needs, and desires. While anyone invested in actual marketing understands
 40 that desires can be fostered and created, orthodox economic logic predicates the
 41 market on the priority of desire: desire precedes the market. This presumed relation
 42 of market to desire also underpins arguments that the ability to purchase sex
 43 restrains men from pursuing non-consensual outlets for their desire (i.e. rape).
 44 Perhaps surprisingly, much feminist discussion about sex work accepts this
 45 conventional economic understanding of the market, that is, that markets exist to
 46 realise preexisting demands. This acceptance is as true for writings from the pro-sex
 47 sex worker rights perspective as it is for feminist critiques of prostitution. The
 48 premise of preexisting desires realised on an enabling market explains why so little
 49 in the vast commentary about sex work truly investigates the male consumers of
 50 heterosexual sex work.²

51 This essay, therefore, turns to the political economy of desire in commercial sex
 52 work. Rather than describe the political economic context for the sex industry in
 53 Thailand, I instead ask how political economy generates the erotic desire that
 54 becomes the demand for those services. Moreover, rather than use prostitution in
 55 Thailand (or Russia, or Cuba) as a racial and gendered symptom of global
 56 capitalism's destructive force, I instead explore what global sexual services reveal
 57 about the erotic generativity of capitalism, specifically during the post-1970s era
 58 associated with globalisation, and focusing on the West.

59 Many critical scholars have countered the neoclassical portrait of benign markets,
 60 arguing that capitalist markets are hardly mere vehicles for desires and documenting
 61 the ways that markets shape the very desires they promise to fulfil (and which are
 62 presumed to preexist the markets). Social historians examining the rise of consumer
 63 commodities in fashion, social life, or wedding rings, offer notable examples of a
 64 counter-narrative about markets and desire (Benson 1986; Ingraham 2008; Peiss
 65 1986). Turning to sexuality, this approach argues that political economic conditions
 66 generate subjectivity and desire. Capitalist markets encroaching new spheres or

2FL01 ² Bernstein (2007) offers a related discussion of political-economic transformations of sex work in a
 2FL02 study that addresses both sex workers and customers. Other studies of male customers of heterosexual
 2FL03 services are Garrick (2005) and O'Connell Davidson (1998). Far more research on male consumers of
 2FL04 commercial sex can be found in the health-related research spawned by HIV/AIDS, but for the most part
 2FL05 these studies assume a drive/outlet model of male sexuality (Vance 1991). Interestingly, in studies of
 2FL06 women who act as the consumers in erotic relations involving material exchange, female desire for such
 2FL07 services is not naturalised, but investigated and seen as contingent. On female consumption of male erotic
 2FL08 services, see, e.g., Ebron (1997). One anthology that covers both male and female clients of heterosexual
 2FL09 erotic services is Kempadoo (1999).

67 intensifying commodification within existing spheres do not simply realise or
68 liberate existing erotic desires but produce new modes of sexuality.

69 This essay investigates the ways that transnational capitalism generates
70 ‘Western’ men’s desire for the sexualised nightlife of Bangkok. (By Western, I
71 am speaking here of an identity, but also a conjunction of racial associations,
72 economic conditions, and geopolitical location, which cohere in the eyes of Thais
73 and tourists, and which gain expression in the sex trade in Thailand.)³ What
74 produces the desire to watch women use their vaginas in a performance that includes
75 pulling out razor blades or projecting objects from that cavity? Such shows are
76 paradoxical. Many customers do not pronounce them ‘sexy’ yet they are a staple of
77 the most prominent sexual service zone for first-world foreigners in Thailand.

78 I read the performances of working women in well-known exotic shows
79 symptomatically, as indications first, of specific meanings adhering in the desires of
80 their audience, and second, for what these erotic performances say about the
81 production of those desires. My reading therefore strategically highlights, from a
82 range of potential motifs, the economic themes within these performances in order
83 to reconstruct the construction of one mode of racial and gendered post-Fordist
84 desire.

85 Sexual Economics

86 Within the burgeoning critical scholarship on sexuality, investigations of the
87 political-economic dimensions of sexuality remain relatively limited. Analysts of
88 sexuality have brought less attention to the ways economic domains construct
89 sexuality than they have to examining the effects of gender and racial discourses,
90 state practices, or science and medicine. At the same time, the way much Marxist
91 scholarship has linked capitalism and sexuality has relied on a limited conception of
92 sexuality that is usually out of step with queer and feminist theories. Much Marxist
93 discourse relies on an unexamined trope of ‘seductive’ power to critique
94 commodities, for example: “commodities borrow their aesthetic language from
95 human courtship; but then the relationship is reversed and people borrow their
96 aesthetic expression from the world of the commodity” (Haug 1986, p. 19). In
97 ‘Things to Do with Shopping Centres’, cultural critic Meaghan Morris (1988)
98 criticises the reliance of critiques of capitalism on a model of seduction, which, she
99 demonstrates, is gendered.

3FL01 ³ ‘Western’ is predicated on problematic geopolitical constructs that reify region and identity, typically
3FL02 in Eurocentric ways (e.g. Grewal and Kaplan 1994). Nonetheless, the category of Western is salient both
3FL03 to the subjects of this essay, and I argue, to its analysis. The well-known Thai word *farang* glosses as
3FL04 Westerner. The commercial sex trade for foreigners in Thailand is differentiated according to the
3FL05 nationality or regional identity of the consumer, with the result that there are zones associated with a
3FL06 Western clientele, others with East Asian visitors, and different venues for Thai men. Analytically, the
3FL07 term Western offers shorthand for significant global patterns, namely in the distribution of capital,
3FL08 mobility, and privileges to recognised subjects of Europe and its settler societies (which are racialised as
3FL09 white but can include individuals of colour). This essay explores how this general context, intersecting
3FL10 with sex/gender systems of heterosexual masculinity, generates particular modes of sexual consumption
3FL11 in Thailand.



100 Others have argued against economic reductionism in studying sexuality. In their
 101 introduction to a special issue of *GLQ* on globalisation and sexuality, Elizabeth
 102 Povinelli and George Chauncey assert that many analyses of the cultural/subjective
 103 dimensions of globalisation (including sexuality) focus on charting economic
 104 conditions without exploring subjectivity: “as if an accurate map of the space and
 105 time of post-Fordist accumulation could provide an accurate map of the subject and
 106 her embodiment and desires” (Povinelli and Chauncey 1999, p. 445). If it is difficult
 107 to map the relation between material conditions and subjectivity, it also remains
 108 challenging to demonstrate the productivity of discourse, despite the wide influence
 109 of Michel Foucault’s approach to sexuality. Ann Stoler notes this difficulty even in
 110 the pronounced case of the erotics of colonisation: “The production of new sites and
 111 strategies of colonial control engendered by the discourse on sexuality is easier to
 112 identify than the production of the ‘incessant’ spirals of pleasure and power that
 113 Foucault would suggest it allowed” (Stoler 1995, p. 184). That is, it is easier to
 114 show how discourse regulates sexuality than how it generates it.

115 Resources for a study of sexuality in political-economic terms of course do
 116 exist.⁴ Notable examples of sexuality as an effect of economics—albeit in different
 117 ways—include Rubin’s (1975) classic work on ‘the traffic in women’, D’Emilio’s
 118 (1993) study of capitalism and gay identity, and the Marxist critiques of queer
 119 theory by Hennessey (2000). Looking outside a self-consciously queer genealogy,
 120 one finds studies that attempt to explain how sexual practices transformed in step
 121 with, and because of, economic shifts. For example, in ‘Coitus Interruptus and
 122 Family Respectability in Catholic Europe: A Sicilian Case Study’, Schneider and
 123 Schneider (1995) explain the class-based rise of the embodied strategy of coitus
 124 interruptus during a specific moment in Italy. Changing conditions “induced a
 125 profound change” in sexual practice without “a clear institutional vehicle or
 126 ideological program” (p. 177) and before the professionalisation of science (p. 192).
 127 Their study, like D’Emilio’s explanation of gay community, does more than induce
 128 sexuality from a map of political-economic structures because they describe the
 129 processes that generate modes of sexuality.

130 The scope and depth of the economic transformations of the past three decades
 131 have altered conditions for intimacy, identities, and practices. The shifts I speak of
 132 are associated with transformations from first-world economies centred on Fordist
 133 principles (mass-production and centralisation, organised capital) to a more
 134 integrated global economy characterised by globally dispersed and flexible
 135 production, niche marketing, and disorganised capital, which has been called
 136 post-Fordism. This period is also characterised by the ascendance of consumer
 137 capitalism and by the massive restructuring of national economies promulgated by
 138 neoliberal policies. If the post-Fordist period describes a new landscape for social
 139 life, as many argue, what is its sexuality? How is a transnational capitalist
 140 infrastructure conditioning new modes of sexuality?

141 The question of how a new economic time creates the sexualities to accompany it
 142 has empirical and analytical dimensions. The empirical dimension involves
 143 identifying modes of sexuality that have transformed or emerged in the past few

4FL01 ⁴ A superb exploration of the sex/economic interplay can be found in Bedford and Jakobsen (2009).

144 decades. For example, the rise of the ‘pink dollar’ of gay tourism has developed a
 145 geography of gay-friendly neighbourhoods, cities or even countries, which often
 146 advertise themselves to gay markets. An ethnographic laboratory for such changes
 147 can be found in the former command economies of China, Vietnam, the USSR and
 148 Eastern Europe, and Cuba: after these planned economies were opened to global
 149 capitalist markets and privatisation, forms of commodified heterosexuality
 150 emerged.⁵ Analysing these new or transformed modes of sexuality requires a
 151 conception of relations between markets and (sexual) desires.

152 As Povinelli and Chauncey (1999) assert, mapping global capitalist conditions
 153 does not produce an adequate analysis of emergent sexualities. Marxist philosopher
 154 Jason Read proposes that contemporary critical thought is “unable to grasp the
 155 transformations of politics, culture, and the economy by new intersections of
 156 production and the production of subjectivity” (Read 2003, p. 7). What authors like
 157 Povinelli, Chauncey and Read suggest is that new economic realities require
 158 reconceptualising the relation between, broadly speaking, economics (material
 159 conditions) and culture or subjectivity. Helpful here is a political-economic analysis
 160 that views capitalist production as the production of subjectivity. This approach
 161 locates subjectivity *within* the operations of capitalism (and not only as an
 162 externality that helps to reproduce capitalism, as women’s domestic labour
 163 reproduces the worker). That is, in this current economic moment, subjectivity
 164 (knowledge, desire, affect) has become itself productive, not merely co-opted by
 165 capitalism (e.g. in marketing urban fashions), but immanent to it (e.g. in immaterial
 166 labour) (Read 2003, p. 10). Much of this work, however, neglects discussions of
 167 sexuality, gender, or feminist and queer theory (see Quinby 2004).

168 A prescient example of an approach that does incorporate erotic desire is WF
 169 Haug’s book, *Critique of Commodity Aesthetics* (1986), original published in
 170 German in 1971. His work considers “the fate of sensuality” in the expansion of
 171 consumer economies. He describes commodity aesthetics as “a complex which
 172 springs from the commodity form of the products and which is functionally
 173 determined by exchange-value”, and which includes both “material phenomena”
 174 and “sensual subject-object relations” (Haug 1986, p. 7). Because Haug’s work on
 175 the relation of commodity and desire sees subjectivity “at once as a result and a
 176 prerequisite” of capitalist functioning (p. 7), it is useful in examining post-Fordist
 177 economies as a condition for sexuality.

178 Below I offer an illustration of how first-world post-Fordist economies and
 179 transnational markets generate sexual desires, by arguing that they generate the
 180 demand for sexual services that classical economics presumes to precede the
 181 markets that serve them. To map this political economy, I engage Marxist thinking
 182 about commodity production, industrial manufacture and post-industrial culture.
 183 However, unevenly, I attempt in this essay to consider the interplay of commodity
 184 exchange and erotic desire in the late twentieth century moment of

5FL01 ⁵ Discussions of post-socialist sexuality include media and scholarly attention to women trafficked from
 5FL02 the former USSR and Eastern European countries as well as discussion of the re-emergence of sexual
 5FL03 services in China or Cuba. I know of no systemic analysis of transnational, post-socialist sexual cultures
 5FL04 but case studies of specific contexts are emerging. For one analytical discussion of transformations from
 5FL05 socialist conceptions of sexuality to post-socialist modes in China, see e.g., Zhang (2007).



185 deindustrialisation in the West, a period that only intensified processes Haug
186 identified as underway in 1971.

187 **Pussy Shows**

188 I am sure a girl who thinks about herself so much...could never accept the fact
189 that many Western Men just don't want a BOSSY, MASCULINE WHITE
190 GIRL who says the sex is free, after you have taken her to dinner 10 times, and
191 obeyed her every command. (Mango Sauce 2004)

192 The cardinal example of the intersection between global markets and sexuality is the
193 commercial sex that has proliferated in the third world and former second world
194 during the last three decades of global restructuring through 'sex tourism' and
195 trafficking in women, which is often called sex trafficking. As I noted above,
196 commercial sex is often assumed by participants and critics alike to be a venue for
197 preformed desires, even where commentators recognise the historical construction
198 of the workforce and infrastructure for prostitution. I examine the production of
199 demand for transnational sexual services in relation to political-economic and
200 cultural transformations, highlighting changing labour and consumer markets in the
201 transition from first-world Fordism to post-Fordism. Commodification, the term we
202 most associate with women in global sex work, is a key motif in these shows, in
203 ways that suggest an anxious reworking of Western masculinity under late twentieth
204 century reformulations of productive and consumer economies.

205 Go-go bars and exotic sex shows are a well-known part of tourist economies in
206 Thailand. They are cited in guidebooks, blogs and popular fiction about Thailand
207 (e.g. Burnett 2003, pp. 38–39), all of which convey the institutionalisation of these
208 sex shows in Bangkok.

209 Along with the sex, a variety of, well, vaginal gymnastics, are displayed.
210 Shooting ping pong balls across the room, smoking cigarettes, tricks with fruit
211 and live fish, writing letters and drawing, and stunts with razor blades all top
212 the list of popular sex shows. (Shugart 2002)

213 Such vaginal performance was also (problematically) popularised through a
214 caricature of a Filipina in the Australian movie, *The Adventures of Priscilla,*
215 *Queen of the Desert* (1994).

216 Go-go bars developed to cater to American GIs during the 1960s–1970s US
217 military involvement in Indochina, and have remained a form of commercial sex
218 particularly oriented to Western male consumption (Wilson 2004). The structure of
219 the go-go bars, like that of massage parlours, is designed for the visitors' visual and
220 visceral consumption of an ample selection of staff demarcated by numbered tags.
221 In the go-go bars, women dance at a pole on a stage in rotation: each woman will
222 dance a set of three songs at a pole, moving to the next pole at each musical change.
223 Thus there is a constant rotation of dancers on the stage while the other women
224 mingle about the bar and, along with the wait staff, encourage customers to order
225 drinks. This arrangement offers entertainment and consumer choice, and also

226 suggests the commensurability of the workers, who are mostly under 25 and mostly
227 from the northeast of Thailand, the poorest region of the country.

228 Thailand's sex industry for foreigners, and the particular form of the sex shows,
229 developed over the 1980s—a time when many Asian economies, including
230 Thailand's, were undergoing rapid industrialisation accompanied by dramatic rates
231 of economic growth. The shows that developed during this time became a staple of
232 the tourist industry, and are advertised outside the bars by 'touts' carrying signs
233 announcing the line-up: 'pussy pingpongball', 'pussy smoke cigarettes', 'lesbian
234 show' or 'sex 69 show'.⁶ In the 'pussy' shows, workers use their vaginas to perform
235 a variety of improbable actions, like emitting a string of razor blades or shooting a
236 dart. In the sex shows, the pair moves through a variety of positions, in some cases
237 on a motorcycle that is lowered onto the stage with the workers on it. The shows
238 have been described as a kind of a circus (Manderson 1992, p. 17; Van Beek 1988,
239 p. 190); their spectacular quality is the draw.

240 I have often heard that these shows are not 'sexy': watching a woman open a
241 bottle with her vagina does not necessarily strike all foreign viewers as arousing.
242 The rote quality of the sex shows is apparent. Yet their popularity and role in this
243 trade suggests that they carry significant meanings for customers. The desires these
244 shows elicit may differ from the promise of immediate heterosexual gratification.
245 Nonetheless, the shows offer evidence about the desires and subjectivity of their
246 audience, in ways confirmed by customers' discourses as well.

247 Go-go bars and the sex shows abound with economic motifs. Often said to
248 'commodify women', these venues actually thematise commodified mass produc-
249 tion and service work. Mechanisation, manufacturing, and money are motifs that
250 pervade the world of the go-go bar and the heterosexual relations it occasions
251 (including courtship and romantic relationships) (Wilson 2004). The theatrics of
252 these commercial sites illustrate the meanings of commodities, by highlighting
253 exchange value, the meaning something has on the market, over use value, its worth
254 in actual practice.⁷

255 Post-Fordist Desire

256 'Pussy shows' may advertise the effectiveness of women's bodies, and presumably
257 their sexual availability and skill, and thereby suggest or promise use value. The
258 promise of use value, Haug suggests, is key to the commodity's exchange value and
259 is not equivalent to the literal presentation of use value. (Razor blade is not
260 immediately equivalent to coitus.) It is the "aesthetic promise of use-value" that
261 motivates a person to buy a commodity (Haug 1986, p. 144). The commodity
262 aesthetic of these performances also offers a performance of commodification.

6FL01 ⁶ "The stories you've heard about the sex shows are all true and have to be seen to be believed", a
6FL02 guidebook tells us: "It is not a place for the squeamish or those with feminist leanings" (Van Beek 1988,
6FL03 p. 192).

7FL01 ⁷ My discussion of exchange value obviously draws on Karl Marx' famous pages on this subject in
7FL02 Volume I of *Capital* (Marx 1990). Other economists in a classical tradition discussed the difference
7FL03 between use and exchange value, including Thomas Malthus. See, e.g. Gallagher (2005).

263 'Pussy shows' parody the manual labour and machinery that comprise an
 264 industrialised commodity economy. The women's vaginal performances present
 265 precise manual skill of no clear productive use. Such displays mimic deskilled
 266 manual labour, like the repetitive pulling of a lever that uses bodily actions and
 267 machinery that cannot be applied to other efforts. The 'pussy shows' present women
 268 as both machine and operator, with vaginas that both produce and manipulate
 269 objects.

270 Another component of these performances is their props: darts, bottles, ping-
 271 pong balls, pens, cigarettes—or in the case of sex shows, the setting: a motorcycle, a
 272 phone booth. All of these items are mass-produced commodities. They are not
 273 prostheses, at least in the sense of a replacement of a body part. While organic items
 274 are sometimes involved—a snake, an egg—in the context of a commercial show
 275 surrounded by coloured lights and pop music, even these natural objects can take on
 276 a commodity form. The pussy shows present the woman's mechanised vagina
 277 manipulating or producing commodities, and the woman as machine and labourer.

278 Thus, Bangkok's sex shows symbolise commodified labour in service and
 279 manufacturing. They dramatise, parody, and perhaps even celebrate the value
 280 services, goods, or human bodies achieve in the market through the mechanisation
 281 of the Asian female body, with images of a sharp and dexterous vagina. Tellingly,
 282 these shows proliferated as industrial manufacturing was exported from the
 283 industrialised first world to sites like Thailand, in a broad shift that replaced first-
 284 world working class male labour with that of third-world women. As Virno argues,
 285 "it is precisely when production no longer seems to offer an identity that it projects
 286 itself onto each and every aspect of experience" (1996, p. 271).

287 The bar's symbolic micro-economy of machines in operation, goods for sale, and
 288 exchange relations foregrounds Asian women's bodies, while obscuring the role of
 289 the male customers in commercial sexual exchange. Yet, through a symptomatic
 290 reading of these spectacles, we can trace the home cultures and economies of the
 291 customers backwards from this third-world feminine embodiment. The commodity
 292 spectacles of the bars dramatise the transformations of masculine embodiment in the
 293 hyper-commodified, deindustrialising, consumer economies of the West, particu-
 294 larly with respect to the changing economic and political positions of first-world
 295 working- and middle-class men that accompanied global restructuring. Sex workers'
 296 bodies symbolise and eroticise these transformations and allow men control over
 297 commodity exchange; at the same time, customers' practices and discourses about
 298 this industry betray their anxieties about heterosexual masculine identities in
 299 relation to economic restructuring. I am not speaking here about the specific
 300 working identities of the male customers of these bars. (From self-depictions in
 301 letters to women, business cards in workers' possession that I saw, and other
 302 research, it is clear that the customers range from military of different ranks to
 303 skilled labourers in the Middle-East to white-collar workers to government and
 304 NGO staff.) Rather, I am speaking about shifts in definitions of masculine
 305 subjectivity in relation to production, particularly industrial production.

306 The theatrical performance of parodied mass production represents the demotion
 307 of manufacturing which characterised post-Fordist shifts in the industrial world. In
 308 the go-go bar, who controls the machines? Who manages the workers? Whatever his



309 economic location at home, the male customer secures this command. Go-go bars’
 310 visual and operational structure places customers in managerial positions in control
 311 of the economy. Seated around the periphery of the bar, they enjoy management’s
 312 panoptic gaze on the workers. They have the ability to choose a woman and to
 313 request (although not to force) the terms of the engagement—they can take the
 314 woman for a short-term encounter or away for the evening or longer. The satires of
 315 industrial production through Asian women’s bodies devalue the conventional
 316 working-class man’s factory work and satirise the factory labour of women in the
 317 global factory while elevating the position of men’s consumption and management
 318 in the global marketplace. The bars allow customers to enjoy the spectacle of
 319 exchange value, or to transform exchange value into use value. As guidebooks and
 320 customer discourses attest, male clients are quite aware that it is their financial
 321 advantage in the global marketplace that gives them this local power: “Money is the
 322 only thing that makes such beauty available to the ordinary guy,” writes one
 323 customer advocate (Todd 1986, p. 13). In this way, the symbolism of the go-go bar
 324 eroticises market exchange, and celebrates first-world men’s (relative) power in the
 325 international marketplace.

326 Commodity Erotics

327 The pussy shows represent the aesthetisation and eroticisation of commodified
 328 labour and the mechanisation of the body. Haug’s work on commodity aesthetics
 329 argues that erotics is not merely metaphorical, but is central to commodity exchange
 330 itself. Sexuality creates value for modern capitalism “in the form of aesthetic
 331 abstraction”: “Here it is not the sexual object which takes on the commodity form,
 332 but the tendency of all objects of use in commodity-form to assume a sexual form to
 333 some extent” (Haug 1986, p. 55). In this vision, it is not that the sex shows
 334 commodify women per se, but that they in fact illustrate capitalist processes more
 335 broadly, in which “exchange-value transforms itself into sexuality” (Haug 1986, p.
 336 56). Desire is an integral part of capitalism, because items produced for the
 337 market—for their exchange value—are designed to stimulate desire (Haug 1986, p.
 338 55). Rather than accept the desire for sexual services in Thailand as preexisting, this
 339 approach suggests examining how conditions for this desire and the subjectivity
 340 associated with it developed, while also seeing subjectivity “at once as a result and a
 341 prerequisite” of capitalist functioning (Haug 1986, p. 7). This means tracing “the
 342 moulding of sensuality” with commodity production and the expansion of exchange
 343 value (Haug 1986, p. 7).

344 The shift from Fordism to post-Fordism (terms which best describe transforma-
 345 tions in the industrialised world) is characterised by the extension of capitalist
 346 modes of value in two ways: first, their global extension across space, and second,
 347 their incorporation of social realms that had been somewhat external to capitalism,
 348 such as the general realms of subjectivity, knowledge, desire (Read 2003, p. 149).
 349 These tendencies are related, as the incorporation of affect, relations and desires
 350 also underwrites capitalism’s geographic expansion. It is not that capitalism did not
 351 previously involve ‘external’ social realms, as socialist feminist explorations of



352 patriarchal and capitalist relations have shown. But now, analysts like Hardt and
 353 Negri (2004) argue, subjectivity is subsumed within capitalist production itself: “the
 354 production of subjectivity ceases to be a supplement to capitalist production, both
 355 necessary and exterior; it migrates into the centre of production itself” (Read 2003,
 356 p. 149).

357 The commodified labour of sex shows not only extends exchange value into
 358 social relations, but also eroticises commodity production and exchange value in
 359 themselves. It is a mode of commodity aesthetics, dramatising the way commodities
 360 elicit desire through the symbolic promise of use value. Literal and aesthetic
 361 commodification are bound together in this trade. Customers use wages (the
 362 commodification of labour) to actualise desires; in the case of the sex shows, their
 363 own commodified labour produces the desire to witness the eroticisation of
 364 mechanised mass-manufacture.

365 Jason Read suggests that capitalism’s incorporation of extra-economic social
 366 realms produce subjectivities and desires that conscript people into compliance. In
 367 particular, wage labour creates “the interiorised ideal of independence and
 368 flexibility” (Read 2003, p. 156). In this view, white males’ historically commodified
 369 labour and its transformation within post-Fordist conditions of flexible labour enlists
 370 their compliance with capitalist regimes. The freedom their wages bring, and the
 371 erotic pleasures it allows them via market relations, subordinates the terms of their
 372 own commodification. In the Western consumption of sex performances, and in the
 373 geographic and social extension of capital in the post-Fordist era, these economic
 374 processes are indivisible from gendered, raced and national processes as well.

375 **Commodity Value**

376 My symptomatic reading of pussy shows argues for a more complex understanding
 377 of the place of commodification in the transnational sex trade and also attempts to
 378 understand capitalism in relation to the social processes of gender and post-
 379 coloniality. First-world male customers’ attitudes towards commodified exchange
 380 are not always those of celebratory consumption. Consider this comparison of
 381 Patpong, the best-known lane of bars, with Soi Cowboy, from an underground
 382 guidebook:

383 If Patpong is a wringer, a mechanical contraption that lures you in so that it
 384 can extract to the last penny every bit it can, the Soi Cowboy is by contrast a
 385 relaxed atmosphere where...you can still...get to know people who will really
 386 act glad to see you again if you come back. Drinks are cheaper, girls ask less,
 387 and one is treated like a person rather than a commodity. (Todd 1986, p. 29)

388 Some years later during my fieldwork, I heard a customer repeat this sentiment to
 389 his buddy: Here in Soi Cowboy, he said, “you don’t feel like a commodity”. It
 390 would be easy enough to dismiss customers’ complaints of being commodified as
 391 self-serving inversions of the actual material conditions of the bars, but there is
 392 other evidence that customers’ anxieties about commodification are manifest in the
 393 sex trade and its surroundings.

394 While women's commodified labour is the cornerstone of Thailand's sex
 395 entertainments for foreigners, some men use bars to find interactions that seem less
 396 commodified and more human than what they feel able to achieve at home. Thai bar
 397 workers provide a kind of attentive service that implies authenticity and humanity,
 398 in contrast to commercial sex and according to many customers, to the routine
 399 gender relations found in the industrialised world. A mainstream guidebook writes
 400 of Thai sex workers: "these are not the hardened pros of the Reeperbahn or 42nd
 401 street" (Van Beek 1988, p. 190). Through their poverty, attentive service and racial
 402 and cultural difference, Thai sex workers offer the possibility of other, non-market
 403 narratives, ranging from pre-capitalist rescue fantasies to contemporary images of
 404 dating movie stars.

405 At times, customers form longer relations with a worker, ranging from a few
 406 nights to on-going romantic courtship. When the men leave the country, they often
 407 seek an epistolary relationship. These relationships enable the men to construct
 408 identities acceptable to themselves and to avoid seeing themselves as johns, tricks,
 409 or 'punters' (Garrick 2005; O'Connell Davidson 1998). But typically, when
 410 relations shift from commercial contract to romance, money and exchange become
 411 problematic. One English man wrote to his girlfriend, whom he had met in a bar:

412 I don't know if you love me. Many times I think you only want me for my
 413 money. I remember you say to me 100 times 'Buy me television.' Even when
 414 you came with me to the airport you said to me many times 'give me money.'
 415 (Walker and Ehrlich 1992, p. 45)

416 Among these men's expressions, however, inchoate, are criticisms of excessive
 417 market capitalism, of rising greed and materialism, as market relations increasingly
 418 supplant other social interactions; of the commensurability between people and
 419 commodities; and of the intensified competition they experience not just with first-
 420 world white men, but also with white women and people of colour, and with
 421 workers in other regions of the world. Anxieties about contractual relations and
 422 mass production take gendered, racial and corporeal forms. In customer discourse,
 423 western (particularly white) women embody the problems of capitalist market
 424 society, from their material demands to their large bodies and irritating verbosity. In
 425 the quotation above (the tone of which is typical), Kevin explains Western men's
 426 lack of desire for "bossy, masculine white girls". Claw, the pseudonym of a poster
 427 on a British resident of Thailand's blog, notes that Western gender relations
 428 transformed after the 1950s: "Face it, Western Women have lost any semblance of
 429 femininity [sic]. They had it together, about 50 years ago" (Mango Sauce 2004).
 430 His chronology corroborates my emphasis on economic transformations.

431 It would be easy to quote at length from texts by Western men describing their
 432 preference for Thai women: bald misogyny, proud sexism and white supremacy are
 433 routine in these discourses. The adjective most often used to describe white women
 434 is 'fat'.⁸ (To be fair, posters are often as vitriolic with each other—often through

8FL01 ⁸ It is possible to read the emphasis on fatness in these critiques of white women through an economic
 8FL02 lens as well. Fatness, particularly in women, indexes poverty or lower class status. Susan Bordo, for
 8FL03 example, analyzes the emergence of the fit, hard body in the 1980s in relation to shifts in career patterns

435 homophobic insults—as they are about white women). Putting aside the blatant
436 misogyny and racial/national discourse of these websites, I am interested in
437 considering the place of economics in their subjectivities and desires.

438 When it comes to snaring a man, Thai girls leave their western sisters at the
439 starting gate. It's not just their cheeky charm and good looks. The killer punch
440 is how they make a man feel valued.... In other words, they show him that
441 they value him warts and all (even if they don't). They may only be after his
442 money but, if a guy is happy, he probably doesn't care. (Mango Sauce 2003)

443 One economic theme in this discourse is value. Threading through male consumers
444 of Thailand's erotic services is rage at white women's perceived unfair advantage:
445 that is, rage at what is seen as an unjust market advantage in sex, romance and
446 intimacy. Some quite explicitly taunt white women, asserting that white women in
447 Thailand do not garner the attentions they receive in the West, and describing
448 Thailand effectively as a market in which white men are more competitive than
449 white women.

450 In this discourse, qualities of commodity capitalism are conveyed through
451 women's racialised bodies. Excesses of western capitalism (greed, materialism) are
452 symbolised by white women. At the same time that she symbolises market relations,
453 the Thai sex worker also represents a kind of human authenticity lost through
454 industrial and post-industrial relations in the first world but obtainable through a
455 global market.

456 The racialised femininity and commercial intimacies of the bars dramatise the
457 contradictory status of commodity exchange for customers from the downsizing first
458 world. Western customers are drawn to Thailand for the abundance and even
459 spectacle of commoditised sexuality, which constitutes their power in terms of class,
460 race and gender. But when the extremes of commercial sex have *customers*
461 complaining of feeling like commodities, we can see their ambivalence about the
462 commodification of their desires and identities.⁹ Paradoxically, Western customers
463 resist the downsizing dehumanisation of the global economy through a Western-
464 friendly, commercialised heterosexuality that has been exported around the world.
465 My reading of the exotic dancing suggests that troubling aspects of the restructuring
466 global economy are thematised erotically, through erotic markets.

467 Sex on Economics

468 The post-Fordist period, from the 1970s onward, generated desire for eroticised
469 mechanisation in the bodies of Asian women. Yet the sex industry for foreigners in
470 Thailand has not been static, but has transformed with changing international and

8FL04
8FL05 Footnote 8 continued

8FL06 and job security, as individuals moving from job to job had to project their value and self-control through
8FL07 their resumes and their bodies (Bordo 1993).

9FL01 ⁹ The desire for authentic intimacy is also found in the expanse of 'girlfriend-like' sex work within the
9FL02 post-industrial West (see Bernstein 2007).

471 domestic conditions. Domestically, for example, the trade reflected the impact of
 472 numerous phenomena: the HIV/AIDS epidemic and sexual health programs; legal
 473 changes (particularly bans on nudity and stipulated closing hours); the surge of
 474 internet-based pornography and amateur porn (in which male travelers to Bangkok
 475 videotape and distribute their sexual encounters); and the 1997 Asian economic
 476 crisis. Since the 1980s, more foreign women have come to Thailand, changing what
 477 was a dramatically skewed gender demographic of visitors of the 1970s and 1980s.
 478 In particular, with the rise of ‘medical tourism’ since 2000, Thai government and
 479 business have recruited medical consumers, and the number of foreign women
 480 visiting Thailand has increased (Wilson [forthcoming](#)). These changes have
 481 converged with transnational trends, such as the US-led response to 9/11 through
 482 the ‘war on terror’.

483 With the consolidation of the tourist industry since the 1980s, Bangkok’s sex
 484 shows have become institutionalised as a tourist attraction, an element of the city’s
 485 ‘nightlife’. In this process, sex shows are described as a feature of Thailand. They
 486 are depicted as a kind of national attraction—part of the scenery—and for some, as
 487 an example of national comparative advantage. (Western male discourse is rife with
 488 nationally-based comparisons of sexual services as well as a general East–West
 489 contrast.) These performances are inscribed as a feature of Thailand’s urban culture
 490 that visitors then partake of rather than as a product of foreigners’ desires.

491 This projected attribution resonates with the too frequent focus on sex workers in
 492 discussions of prostitution that leave the male demand for sexual services
 493 unexamined, and hence, naturalised. To counter this tendency, I insist on reading
 494 the sex shows in relation to the desires of customers and to understand those desires
 495 as produced. These odd performances suggest an erotic subjectivity of consumers
 496 that are an effect of the cultural/economic shifts of post-Fordism. Theories of
 497 capitalist subjectivity help us see this desire not only as an effect, reducible to
 498 capitalism, but to consider it as integrated within processes of production. Feminist
 499 and queer theories helps situate a more specific gendered/sexual subjectivity within
 500 capitalist accumulation, remedying the limitations of asexual and gender-neutral
 501 political-economic theories of ‘desire’ in global capitalist markets.

502 In a period of displacement of white male labour by third-world female labour,
 503 the eroticisation of mass production is a symptom of the formation of heterosexual
 504 masculine subjectivity within globalising capital. The sex-show performance
 505 subsumes (parodied) mass production, wage relations and mechanisation to male
 506 erotic pleasure. Through a transnational market, racial sex/gender embodiment may
 507 resist, or at least mock, the subsumption of (first-world, male) humanity within
 508 capitalism.

509 My reading of these performances considers not only the erotic content of these
 510 sex markets—their evident racial and gendered iconography—but also the
 511 economic content: how the *form* and *logic* of markets generate the erotic life of
 512 global capitalism. Pussy shows point to the ways that the changing form and
 513 operations of labour markets in the post-industrial world produce the desires and
 514 subjectivities that customers imagine they are freely realising through global
 515 markets.

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