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Working for Free in the VIP: Relational Work and the Production of Consent

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Abstract

Why do workers participate in their own exploitation? This article moves beyond the situational production of consent that has dominated studies of the labor process and outlines the relational production of labor's surplus value. Using a case of unpaid women who perform valuable work for VIP nightclubs, I present ethnographic data on the VIP party circuit from New York, the Hamptons, Miami, and Cannes, as well as 84 interviews with party organizers and guests. Party promoters, mostly male brokers, appropriate surplus value from women in four stages: recruitment, mobilization, performance, and control. Relational work between promoters and women, cemented by gifts and strategic intimacies, frames women's labor as leisure and friendship, and boundary work legitimizes women's work as distinct from sexual labor. When boundaries, media, and meanings of relationships do not appropriately align, as in *relational mismatches,* women experience the VIP party less as leisure and more as work, and they are less likely to participate. My findings embed the labor process in a relational infrastructure and hold insights for explaining why people work for free in culture and technology sectors of the post-Fordist economy.

Keywords

relational work, labor process, consent, free labor, bodily capital

Why do workers consent to their own exploitation? Previous top-down approaches overemphasize managerial control (Braverman 1974), whereas contemporary labor scholars study workers' participation in their own worlds of work. Labor process scholars emphasize meaning-making in the symbolic interactionist tradition, documenting workplace dynamics at the point of production, as in theories of industrial games (Burawoy 1979), emotional labor (Hochschild 1983), and organizational culture (Kunda 1992). This approach yields rich ethnographic insights into how workers' subjective experiences motivate them to work and, ultimately, make profits for someone else (e.g., Sallaz 2002; Sherman 2007). Such micro studies of the labor process show how managerial control is established through worker consent; or how, as Marx ([1894] 1993) put it, labor becomes subordinate to capital.

But these explanations are incomplete, for most studies of worker control and consent are set in stable work settings and formal

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organizations, such as the factory, the hotel, or the trading room, where people repeatedly work together within the context of established relationships. Yet, despite prevailing models of the labor process, the organization of work is not bound to the shop floor; work spills into the interpersonal realm as workers and management forge powerful, regulating relationships. This is especially evident as labor becomes more casual, and temporary and project-based employment spreads among low- and high-skilled workers alike (Kalleberg, Reskin, and Hudson 2000). For the growing numbers of contingent workers, social ties with supervisors and brokers shape the terms of work (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005; Smith 2001). As studies of informal economies demonstrate, work relationships require ongoing efforts on and off the job (e.g., Hoang 2015; Venkatesh 2006), and such relationships likely have varying effects on worker consent. When conceptualized in relational rather than physical space, the value of labor emerges through personal ties and webs of reciprocity—the very heart of all economic exchange (Mauss 1954).

That people consent to the appropriation of their surplus value poses a classic conundrum for the sociology of inequality: it raises the question of how hierarchies are legitimated, and how domination goes unrecognized and reproduced by those who are dominated (e.g., Bourdieu [1998] 2001). This article advances the puzzle of consent by incorporating new developments in economic sociology around the concept of relational work, that is, the work of matching appropriate relationships to economic exchanges and their meanings (Zelizer 2012). Using the conceptual tools of relational work, I document the central role of social ties and intimacies in compelling people to enter, consent to, and forge emotional attachments in unequal exchanges.

I draw from a particular case of labor exploitation: women's unpaid work in VIP nightclubs. Unpaid women perform valuable aesthetic labor (Warhurst and Nickson 2001) in VIP "bottle service" nightclubs; they are recruited and mobilized by promoters, who are mostly male brokers hired by VIP clubs. These women are not paid wages; they work for free and with a felt sense of obligation to their brokers, who shower them with gifts and perks. Women's "free labor" generates considerable profits for promoters and club owners but is largely only symbolically rewarding to the women. Methodologically breaking from past labor scholarship, I embed the production of value in a relational context by ethnographically following promoters and women throughout the VIP party circuit in New York, the Hamptons, Miami, and the French Riviera over 18 months of fieldwork. This article draws from interviews with 44 promoters, 20 women (called "girls"), and 20 clients (i.e., men who spend money in VIP parties) to show how such value is produced.

Promoters perform relational work to generate value from women's bodily capital (Wacquant 1995) in four stages: recruitment, mobilization, performance, and control. Through relational work, cemented by gifts and strategic intimacies, promoters redefine women's economic utility as leisure and friendship; through boundary work (Lamont and Molnar 2002), women frame their participation as distinct from sexual labor. When the appropriate matches between relationships, payments, and boundaries do not align—when *relational mismatches* happen—women's consent to participate in the VIP economy breaks down. By showing the relational work involved in getting women to work for free, I outline the relational production of consent, foregrounding social ties as central to securing surplus value, and thus expanding prevailing models of the labor process.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

The Labor Process

How does one person manage to capture surplus value from another? In the sociology of work, we find a number of strategies through which owners appropriate surplus. Coercion is not a viable strategy, because as Weber ([1922] 1978) noted, it rarely works for long. Economic incentives are not always effective,

for as Frederick Taylor discovered, raising earnings in the piece-rate system can actually lower workers' efforts (Sallaz 2013). Neither are wages an adequate explanation for surplus value, which is the *unpaid* labor that workers effectively perform above and beyond their compensated labor power; wages alone do not explain why workers often put in more than the bare minimum for which they are paid. An earlier generation of labor scholars emphasized structural determinants of exploitation, such as the sharp demarcation between the work of managers and laborers, deskilling, and large labor supplies (Braverman 1974). Such a picture of conflict and managerial control, however, leaves little room to see autonomy or agency in workers.

Moving beyond models of coercion and conflict, Burawoy's (1979) theory of industrial games focused on the micro interactional mechanisms that produce worker consent. In the factory Burawoy studied, the game of "making out" allowed workers to make choices about when and how much effort to exert. The game produced a sense of social and psychological achievement, and because it dominated shop floor culture, Burawoy concluded that workers' cultural practices led them to consent to their own exploitation, even enthusiastically so. Thus the labor process in capitalist production simultaneously obscures and secures surplus labor, legitimizing exploitation through consent.

An important break with both industrial sociologists and Marxist sociology, Burawoy (1979) bound his analytic lens to the labor process at the point of production—the moments of transformation of raw materials into surplus value—thereby explaining the organization of consent through work activities independent of outside orientations like school, family, and the state. This move, from structure to symbolic interactions, and from ideology to situations, could now explain how workers' motivations emerge from the work process itself.

The theory of games has explained how people are mobilized to perform their duties as factory workers (Burawoy 1979), professionals like lawyers (Pierce 1995), service industry workers (Sallaz 2002), and even the unemployed (Sharone 2013). More broadly, labor process scholars have followed the symbolic interactionist tradition through the shift from hierarchical to flexible organization (Smith 2001), documenting managerial attempts to mold workplace culture to produce consent in blue- as well as white-collar workplaces (Kunda 1992; Vallas 2006).

Throughout the post-industrial decline in manufacturing and the rise in services, labor process analysts have continued to explain consent through processes of meaning-making at the workplace. Studies of emotional labor have examined the control of workers' affect in interactive services ranging from airlines (Hochschild 1983) and amusement parks (Van Maanen 1990) to personal care services (Boris and Parreñas 2010). Similarly, studies of aesthetic labor have examined managerial control of bodily capital, an important component of work in interactive services like retail (Williams and Connell 2010), hospitality (Otis 2011), and restaurants, where workers are recruited and trained to project attractive and sellable personas (Warhurst and Nickson 2001). Across these various sites, sociologists have examined workplace cultures and practices to explain why workers consent to managerial control of their time, bodies, and emotions.

By focusing on the situational construction of consent, and limiting their purview to stable relational contexts, sociologists of work take as their basic object of analysis the accomplishment of work activities, usually at the site of work, be it the shop floor or the shopping mall. This misses how the meanings of work are also shaped through relationships and social ties beyond the accomplishment of work activities.[1] Studies of informal work demonstrate the importance of relationships forged at work sites and well beyond them—for instance, the complex webs of social relations that constitute urban underground economies (Duneier 1999; Venkatesh 2006) and the bonds between sex workers, clients,

and brokers that regulate markets for sex (Bernstein 2007; Hoang 2015). Likewise, studies of freelance workers, such as those in the culture industries, reveal various social infrastructures linking aspiring workers, agents, and employers whose relationships are built on repeated interactions at jobs, agencies, and after-hours bars and other entertainment venues (McRobbie 2002). As the labor market becomes more casual and work moves outside of permanent contracts and stable organizations (Kalleberg et al. 2000; Smith 2001), new models of the labor process and its relational context are needed.

Relational Work

Within the field of economic sociology, relational work is a useful concept to explain how patterned relationships can secure surplus value. Zelizer (2012:149) developed relational work to mean the "creative effort people make in establishing, maintaining, negotiating, transforming, and terminating interpersonal relations." People try to create viable matches between appropriate kinds of economic and social exchanges, thereby overcoming the tension between the "hostile worlds" of intimacy and commerce. To do this, people erect boundaries around a category of social relations, establish a set of distinctive understandings and practices that operate within that boundary, allow certain kinds of economic transactions to happen, and adopt certain kinds of media such that those transactions feel appropriate (Zelizer 2005). Relational work explains how people bring these elements together to create "relational packages" (Zelizer 2012) that include particular discourses and structures of exchange, such as brokerage and gifting (Rossman 2014).

This framework has been usefully applied to understanding how people bridge seemingly hostile worlds like the commodification of sacred goods, for example, trades in human bodies ranging from organs (Healy 2006) and reproductive materials (Almeling 2007) to cadavers (Anteby 2010). Relational work can even explain macro-economic outcomes like inter-organizational relationships among manufacturers (Whitford 2012) and predatory lending practices in the mortgage industry (Block 2012).

Relatively neglected in economic sociologists' research agenda, however, are markets for human labor (Sallaz 2013). When the workplace is studied, it is in the context of understanding the creation of markets, for instance, markets in life insurance (Chan 2009) or financial goods (Abolafia 1996), rather than the creation of worker consent.

Yet relational work has much to offer when explaining worker consent. For instance, gifting, a prominent form of relational work, plays an important role in motivating workers. In economic experiments, workers who receive gifts rather than cash payments put in more effort to uphold their sense of reciprocal obligation (Kube, Maréchal, and Puppe 2012). In economists' alternative strands of labor theory, the labor contract has even been described as a partial gift exchange (Akerlof 1982).

Indeed, the concept of relational work has been fruitfully applied to cases of labor that are morally contested, such as markets for intimate bodily labors like sex work (Bernstein 2007; Hoang 2015). In realms that mix intimacy and money, commercial sex services exist at one end of a spectrum and "pure" romantic relationships at the other; in between are practices involving intimate economic exchanges, from sponsorship (Swader et al. 2012) to treating (Clemens 2006). People perform relational work to frame these dubious exchanges as appropriate, for instance, by matching appropriate payment media to the exchange, and through boundary work, which draws conceptual distinctions and creates symbolic distances between categories of people and practices (Lamont and Molnar 2002).

Relational work is especially useful in the contemporary context of growing contingent labor to explain why people work for no or low pay. "Free labor" has been abundantly

documented among the freelance workforce, notably in culture, media, and technology industries (Frenette 2013; Hesmondhalgh 2010; Neff et al. 2005). Free labor, originally conceived to account for user-generated content on the Internet (Terranova 2000), is unpaid work given freely and endowed with a sense of autonomy (Andrejevic 2009). Free labor occurs when, for example, unpaid fashion models walk on a luxury designer's catwalk hoping to gain status (Mears 2011), tech employees spend hours doing unpaid coding to build their portfolios (Neff 2012), and a journalist writes for free at The Atlantic.com seeking exposure (Christin 2014). Such work may not immediately look like work; indeed, much work overlaps with forms of activity commonly recognized as leisure (Stebbins 1982). Although not employment—a formal exchange of labor for wages—all of these cases meet a sociological definition of work, the "process whereby human beings transform things of the world to create value" (Sallaz 2013:10). Each of these workers marshals a skill set, exerts labor power, and creates a product. They also generate surplus value, because employers gain economic profits through inadequately compensating their efforts, which are understood in these contexts as self-investments and symbolically valuable. However, people who perform free labor are often compensated in the form of gifts, perks, or access to new social networks. Relational work provides a framework for analyzing the web of social connections that render these unequal exchanges meaningful and worthwhile.

Taking these insights from economic sociology, I conceive of the workplace as embedded in a relational infrastructure to explain how workers are recruited, mobilized, and controlled, and why they accept no payment for their valuable efforts. Using core elements of the relational framework—relationships, meanings, media, and boundaries—this article examines, in Burawoy's (1979:30) terms, how relational work "obscures and secures" labor's surplus value.

THE CASE: BOTTLE SERVICE VIP CLUBS

This article uses the case of unpaid women and their paid brokers, called promoters, who attend leisure events and parties catering to the global elite. This clientele is called VIP, "very important people," which is a purchasable status denoting valued consumers. VIPs are highly mobile and have large amounts of disposable income; they get access to a wide variety of "free stuff" by virtue of their prior spending records (McClain and Mears 2012). For example, frequent flyers enjoy elite status with access to airlines' free services like upgrades, airport lounges, and expedited security. VIP customers similarly receive extra care and attention by service workers in luxury settings (Sherman 2007). Because free goods and services comprise what it means to be VIP, these services are a good case for studying the economy of free labor. And unlike airlines, hotels, or other elite spaces, the VIP party scene relies on labor that is not fixed to an organizational space, enabling a relational analysis of work that spills into informal spaces and extra-organizational social activities.

The VIP party scene is dispersed globally, tapping into the world's wealthiest stratum, which is more international and mobile than ever before (Atkinson, Piketty, and Saez 2009). These parties appear in what Sassen (2000) calls "urban glamour zones" in global cities like New York and Miami, as well as exclusive tourist destinations, which are overlooked yet crucial nodes for the global circulation of the business class. VIPs circulate throughout a transatlantic calendar of events and parties from St. Barts in January to St. Tropez in July (Cousin and Chauvin 2013).

In such nodes, VIPs frequent exclusive nightclubs that typically offer "bottle service." Rather than order drinks at the bar, VIP clients rent tables and purchase whole bottles of alcohol, carried by "bottle girls"—attractive cocktail waitresses in revealing clothing—to clients' tables, at prices ranging

from $250 per bottle of Absolut vodka (750 ml which retails for $25) to $5,000 for a magnum-size (1.5 liters) bottle of Cristal champagne (which retails for $750). The average price is $1,500 per table on a Saturday night at such nightclubs (Elberse, Barlow, and Wong 2009). Firework sparklers accompany expensive bottles, a clear indicator of conspicuous consumption (Veblen [1899] 2009). Door personnel screen who is allowed to enter, and at what price, ensuring the bottle service club is an exclusively VIP space.[2]

METHODS

I gained access to VIP clubs from previous fieldwork in the fashion modeling industry, which has substantial ties to party promoters. In my earlier fieldwork, promoters invited me to their parties free of charge with free dinner included; to begin this project, I accepted their invitations and began going out with them in New York.

Over the course of 18 months, I attended 17 clubs and went out with promoters on more than 120 nights, in addition to taking four trips to VIP destinations. I interviewed 44 promoters and 20 women, as well as 20 male clients whose interviews I use as supplemental data. Interviews were recorded and sometimes lasted over the course of several days as extended conversations. Of the 44 promoters interviewed, I accompanied all but eight of them to their parties at least once and as many as 10 times. I sometimes visited three or four clubs over the course of one night. These nights generally began with dinner at 10 p.m. and ended between 3 and 4 a.m., with occasional after-parties stretching beyond 8 a.m. the next day.

During the summer I moved into an apartment rented by promoters; it was a four-bedroom loft in Union Square accommodating nine women, each of whom were allowed to stay rent-free in exchange for going out with the promoter at least four nights a week. I lived in a single room in the loft for a discounted price of $200 per week on the condition that I go out with the promoter at least two nights a week. The loft was chaotic and dirty, and after interviewing the women who lived there, I left by my third week.

Methodologically, I used Kusenbach's (2003) go-along ethnographic method, a hybrid of interviewing and participant observation, by following promoters on their daily and nightly rounds to trace the social architecture of elite nightlife. Daytime observations proved as important as nighttime encounters, as one promoter told me: "There can be no night without the day." Yet, a promoter's day rarely begins before 11 a.m. and often starts as late as 2 p.m. when he wakes up. Promoters generally welcomed my presence, since their job chiefly involves getting women to hang out. In exchange for promoters' participation, I dressed the part and went out with them at night; through my own bodily capital, I was able to maneuver the problem of ethnographic access in studying up (Gusterson 1997).

Reflecting the demographics of promoters, my sample is majority men and just five women. Half of the 44 promoters interviewed were immigrants ($n = 22$). Most spoke multiple languages and could converse with international clients and models. Of the 44 promoters interviewed in New York, just eight were white Americans.

I also accepted invitations to VIP destinations on four occasions: five nights in Miami (March), two separate weekends in the Hamptons (June), and one week in Cannes (July), with most expenses paid by promoters, clubs, and VIP clients. Two trips, to Miami and Cannes, were with a promoter named Santos, whom I met at a club in New York. After explaining my research, interviewing him, accompanying him out, and several text conversations later, Santos invited me to attend his parties in Miami over the month of March, during the Electronic Music Festival. The festival draws music industry personnel as well as clients, promoters, and models from around the world. I paid for my own flight to Miami and stayed for free with four young women in the accommodations Santos arranged for all of us together, in the

guesthouse of a villa on Star Island, rented by a group of Californian mortgage bankers (who paid $50,000 for the weekend rental). A year later, I met up with Santos in Europe, first in Milan for a night out at a club where he promotes, and then I followed him to Cannes for a week, again staying for free in his rental villa with eight other women. Finally, I visited the Hamptons on two weekend trips during the summer season, first with a promoter named Sampson, whom I met on the street in Soho with one of Santos's associates, and again with a group of clients I met through promoters.

Copious amounts of alcohol and sometimes drugs are supplied to women free of charge; I generally held a glass of champagne during the parties but refrained from drinking more than occasional sips, enough to fit in. This made me a rare sober participant, which proved useful; for instance, I could drive home when a promoter was too drunk. Taking notes was easy, as everyone was constantly tapping on their phones, especially promoters, even as they danced inside clubs.

I secured the samples of women and clients from clubs in New York. It was impossible to secure lists of clients or women from nightclubs or promoters, so I built a convenience sample composed of participants I recruited in three ways: through face-to-face meetings at dinners and parties, through promoters, and through snowball sampling. I primarily relied on snowball sampling and introductions from promoters to interview clients. To interview women, I recruited primarily through tables. Each night out, I habitually introduced myself to each woman at the table to find out how she met the promoter we accompanied. At this point in our conversation, I typically would explain my role as a writer working on a project about nightlife. Interviews with women focused on their relationships with promoters and clients and their careers in the scene. Among the 20 women interviewed, their median age was 23. At 31 to 32, I was regularly the oldest woman at promoters' tables, but still welcome because I look younger.

I coded interview transcripts and field notes using the software Nvivo with a coding scheme that emerged inductively in accordance with the analytic strategy of grounded theory (Charmaz 2001). I replaced all names with pseudonyms and removed potentially identifying information.

FINDINGS: THE VALUE OF GIRLS' WORK

In the market for entertainment, a nightclub seeks to create an exciting environment in which customers spend money on alcohol; nightclubs are part of the "experience economy," where goods are secondary to the consumption experience itself (Pine and Gilmore 1999). VIP clubs attempt to mobilize big-spending clients who will pay high premiums on bottle service. Prized clients are called "whales," as in finance and gambling lingo. They have significant stores of disposable income with which to buy bottles. I observed whales spending $200,000 for parades of hundreds of sparkler-lit bottles of champagne brought to their table (known as a "bottle train"). Clubs also value affluent businessmen and tourists, who spend in steadier and smaller amounts of $1,000 to $2,000 a night. Next are "fillers," men who buy drinks at the bar but have some cultural capital, which keeps the club from looking empty. Below fillers, men perceived as having low economic and cultural capital are described as "bridge and tunnel," so-called because they are not recognized as Manhattan dwellers and are barred entry.

To attract VIPs, clubs stage a glamorous platform for them to spend money, with high-profile DJs, chic and expensive-looking décor, brand name alcohol, special events, and restricted access to an exclusive crowd. Their chief attraction is a high volume of beautiful women, similar to women's roles in other areas of the service economy (Warhurst and Nickson 2001). Consistent with past research on nightlife (e.g., Rivera 2010), clubs aim to have more women than men inside. By my count, clubs averaged about

3:2 women to men. However, the quantity of women does not suffice to distinguish the VIP space. VIP clubs seek a high quantity of "quality" women, assessed exclusively in terms of feminine beauty. Exploiting the correlation between attractiveness and status (Webster and Driskell 1983), clubs target women whose bodies correspond to those valued in the high-fashion arena as models. Such women are ubiquitously called "girls." In the VIP scene, girls are young (roughly 16 to 25 years), thin (size 0 to 6), tall (at least 5'9" without heels), and typically although not exclusively white, all of which is gauged visually.[3]

The most valuable girls are working fashion models with reputable agencies, followed by girls who look like they *could* be models, called "good civilians" for their height and slenderness. Below them are "civilians" and "pedestrians," terms to denote women with low conformity to fashion standards; these women are regularly denied entry at the door. The least valuable are short and heavy women, who are discussed with vitriol as liabilities for the reputations of clubs and promoters.

Clubs pay wages to dozens of employees, like bouncers, bus boys, bartenders, and waitresses, but girls are not paid. It is the promoter's job to bring girls to the club, where they are given access to freebies and perks, such as dinners and drinks in expensive restaurants and sometimes all-expenses-paid trips to VIP destinations.

Inside the club, girls are expected to dress in fashionable clothes, wear high heels, and stay at the promoter's table over the course of the night while looking like they are having a good time. They are not expected to speak with or go home with clients, although sometimes they do, if they so desire. Mostly, girls are expected to look beautiful, performing unpaid aesthetic labor (Warhurst and Nickson 2001).

Given their high symbolic capital, models can transform a club into a high-status space, from which profits can be made. Claude, a 27-year-old white male from France who had been a promoter for four years, explained:

> It is the quality of the woman. It's the perfect thing. It's just so beautiful to see and watch. A model is a model. She goes into a club, and she's, like, *flashlight*. She's here, you know. And the guys next to her, they'll be like, "Damn, this club is hot. Get me another bottle."

Without girls, clients are less likely to spend money, and the status and earnings of the club will decline. For example, Thibault, a 40-year-old black Kenyan who had been a promoter for 20 years, has such a reputation for bringing high-quality girls that he believes his team can make or break a club:

> When we bring in the models, and people see us in the club, like a table full of models, it's, like, making the club cool. That's where everybody wants to be, where the models are, where the fashion people are. They'll pay more to be by us, when clients book a table they want to be around us. If we do a place, other promoters want to be there too. If we're not there, and the models aren't there, the crowd is like bridge and tunnel.

Earnings for clubs and promoters are substantial. Clubs can make millions of dollars a year, largely driven by bottle sales. The revenues of one such successful nightclub surpassed $6 million a year, and the firm that owned it had sales of over $20 million in 2007 (Elberse et al. 2009). Depending on their experience and reputations for quality girls, promoters earn between $200 and $1,000 a night, plus 20 percent of what their clients spend on bottle service. A promoter new to the scene will likely begin working as a "sub" for a more established promoter; he will likely be paid per girl he brings out, typically about $10 to $20 per girl. As he develops a reputation among club owners as a reliable source of girls, he will quickly move up the ranks to work either independently or in a two- or three-person team, and, depending on his girls' quality, for higher pay. Girls have no comparable rewards hierarchy.

Conversely, being surrounded by lower-value girls can translate into lower earnings and lower status for promoters and clubs. For instance, Milo, an Italian promoter, worked for high-end clubs with a crowd of good civilians, not models, earning about $600 per night. His own preference is to party with strippers, whom he thinks are more fun and sexually attractive. Surrounded by ostensibly inferior girls, Milo's status suffered, revealed in the ways other promoters distanced themselves from him. One night, Mustafa, a 32-year-old highly paid African promoter, sat across from Milo. Mustafa's table of models was relatively empty as he looked with some disgust across the room to Milo's table, full of girls dancing, and he told me:

> For us, it's quality over quantity. We have two great girls tonight. That's better than Milo. He'll just bring anything . . . girls that look like retarded prostitutes, you know that big boobs, plastic in their lips, you know, cheesy style. That's worse than just one good girl.

Attempting to capitalize on the status of models, promoters regularly talk themselves up by mentioning the fashion work secured by their girls. For instance, the promoter Dre frequently leaned over to me during parties to describe our companions' career successes, "She just booked the cover of *French Vogue*." On the flipside, one of the most common insults to a promoter or a club is to disparage the looks of their girls. One promoter may deride another with sly comments like, "Who's their modeling agency, Instagram?" The perceived quality of girls is one key determinant of the value of a space, and in turn, the economic and symbolic worth of the promoter she accompanies.

RELATIONAL WORK IN THE LABOR PROCESS

Girls' participation in the VIP, like other cases of free labor, may look more like leisure and consumption than work and production. Although not formally employed, girls are clearly working: they utilize soft skills to perform aesthetic labor (Warhurst and Nickson 2001); they exert labor power by showing up and looking good to create a product, the VIP experience; and they generate value, because club owners' and promoters' symbolic and economic profits depend on their labor.

Girls do not share in these profits, nor are they fully compensated for the value of their efforts. Promoters benefit from an uneven exchange relationship with girls by extracting surplus value from them—the very definition of an exploitative relation.[4] Why do girls consent to this arrangement? I analyze the labor process in four key stages of work: recruitment, mobilization to the work site, performance of the work, and labor control. Through each stage, promoters build a relational infrastructure that redefines girls' labor as leisure and friendship. Girls' consent cannot be explained by the organization of activities in the club alone, but must be understood in the context of their relationships with brokers and with each other.

Recruitment

All promoters are constantly recruiting girls. Models are a transient population, most of whom cannot go out as frequently as promoters invite them. During fieldwork, I received at least two invitations by promoters to different clubs each night, every night. This leads to a competitive and strategic recruitment effort, quite distinct from the "girl hunt" that Grazian (2008) defines as interactional posturing among young men in nightlife. Promoters' hunt for girls is a well-organized project of capital accumulation, which they carefully frame as the start of new friendships motivated by mutual interests and fun experiences.

To recruit new girls, promoters tap into friend networks and word-of-mouth introductions, relying on their existing ties to girls to help establish their reputations as worthy companions. When this fails, they hit the streets. Since the expansion of the modeling industry in the 1990s, cities have attracted a glut of young women seeking work as models, work

that is often unpredictable and low-paid (Mears 2011). As models go out into the city streets in search of employment, promoters search for them. Promoters park their large SUVs at busy intersections in New York's Soho neighborhood, home to dozens of fashion offices, waiting for models to walk by so they can approach them and invite them out. One promoter is known for sitting on a bench outside a café on Spring Street. Another sometimes sits outside a frozen yogurt vendor—this food, he reasons, is popular among models.

Some promoters go to models' castings with girls they already know in hopes of meeting new ones. They stalk models in ways that mirror harassment. They find out the landline phone numbers of agency-owned apartments for models and call daily, relentlessly, inviting models to come out. One promoter reported sneaking into apartment buildings disguised as a pizza deliveryman to knock on doors where models live. Promoters also regularly pick up girls at clubs.

Throughout this recruitment process, promoters aim to depict themselves as attractive and friendly. They organize their lives to attract girls. They tend to eat at trendy cafés and walk on particular city streets that afford maximum chances of meeting models. As Thibault explained, "As a promoter, everything that you do, you are working." This includes grooming their own good looks: promoters work out and style their bodies meticulously. Many dress casually in jeans and t-shirts, but upon closer inspection, I recognized their expensive Armani tees, styled with hip jewelry and luxury-brand leather sneakers. Promoters' Facebook pages are stocked with party pictures of beautiful girls in clubs, on yachts, and accompanied by the familiar site of buckets filled with Dom Pérignon champagne.

Promoters thus recruit girls by fashioning themselves as desirable companions. Shadowing them on the streets of Soho, I observed how promoters attempt to construct themselves and their VIP party world as exciting and fun. For instance, I walked alongside two promoters, 21-year-old Trevor with only one year of experience and Jay, his 29-year-old friend and mentor, as they passed a sidewalk café and noticed a table with three models. After some deliberation, Trevor decided to approach them and Jay coached him to come up with a good opener: "Yeah the first line, the opener, is so important, because they're gonna know you're a promoter. You have to overcome that and make them feel comfortable, make them laugh," Jay told Trevor. I went with Trevor to the café—"Sure, it'll help," he replied when I asked if I could—and we walked up to their table. The following exchange ensued:

> "Excuse me, hello. I'm Trevor. This is—um—[pause, forgetting my name] Ashley. How are you guys?" The women unenthusiastically reply hello, and Trevor asks where they are from.
>
> London.
>
> He asks, "What are you guys doing here?" After some awkward pauses, the women reply that they are models. Trevor launches into the pitch: "Well I'm new in town too, and she's new, and I'm new. I'm always looking for friends and people to hang out with. How long you guys in town?"
>
> "One month." They are clearly not interested in talking to him.
>
> "One month. You guys like bowling? We could go bowling. And movies. You guys like movies?"
>
> "Um, sure."
>
> "Okay, I go out too, to clubs and parties and stuff, so let's hang out. You got numbers?"
>
> After two refusals ("I can't remember my American number, sorry"), Trevor ends up with one of the women's phone numbers.
>
> Back at his car, Trevor admits, "That was not my best." I ask Trevor if he would really take them bowling: "Yeah, that's how it works, you have to establish the relationship."

> – Field notes, July, 3 p.m., Elizabeth Street, Manhattan

This was no doubt an awkward exchange, but Trevor clearly intended to draw the women into his social network with his friendly persona while downplaying his economic motives as a promoter. Once promoters establish these friendship relations, they aim to mobilize girls to come out to their parties.

Mobilization

Girls are only valuable if they show up at the VIP party. To mobilize them to come out, promoters use gifting practices to nurture relations of reciprocity and obligation. Promoters offer a number of comps (complimentary goods) free of charge to girls, who can expect at least free transportation, dinner, and drinks, and sometimes also drugs for the night. A night out with a promoter usually begins with a free dinner around 10 p.m., an important step that serves to consolidate the group and thus make a strong visible impression upon arrival at the club around 12 a.m. The club or restaurant pays for the dinner (the restaurant, too, benefits from having tables full of models), and the promoter pays the tip out of pocket. Other times, promoters are paid by individual clients to bring girls out with them for a night. In this case, the client will take the whole group out to dinner. This is indeed a treat in that girls can order off the menu, as opposed to the usual "promoter dinners" that are served family style without any choice of dishes. A promoter's text message invited me to one such dinner:

> Going to dinner then a drink at Club X with a multi billionaire friend. You should come. Order whatever you like :D

In their interviews, seven of the 20 girls mentioned the dinner as a motivation for going out. At dinner, girls regularly praise and photograph the food for social media. One girl posted a picture on her Facebook of our full dinner table with the caption, "all freeee!" Of course, there are no free gifts, as Mauss (1954) established, only exchanges misrecognized as free. Zero-priced goods flow in greater abundance to those who can afford to repay them in some means (McClain and Mears 2012). By accepting free things, girls enter into a reciprocal obligation with promoters. Most of the girls understand the terms of this exchange. After one dinner, for example, a girl sighed as she got up from the table to follow the promoter to the club, saying, "Let's go dance for our dinner."

Their emphasis on free meals suggests girls have limited economic means. This is partially true. Girls come from mixed occupations and class positions. At various tables, I sat beside professionals working in fields as diverse as finance, medicine, and real estate. Many of them were students. Among the 20 girls I interviewed, their family class backgrounds ranged from upper to working class. Eleven were in professional jobs or in school, and the rest modeled or were in between jobs; three earned below minimum wage and relied on parental support. No girl identified herself as coming from a poor family background, and I met very few wealthy girls for whom price was no issue. As one model from Brazil explained, "Of course you can feel it, if you go to the party by yourself and you buy two drinks, you can feel how expensive it is from your own pocket."

In addition to the draw of free meals and drinks, girls are motivated to join a promoter's social network. Nearly all the girls I met at promoters' tables were relative newcomers to the city, and many did not know where or with whom to socialize. They were also young; I frequently met girls in clubs who were younger than the U.S. drinking age of 21 and even younger than the European limit of 18. Accompanied by a promoter, entering a club is usually a simple affair for underage girls. Promoters thus offer girls participation in an elite scene they could not otherwise access given their limitations in income, age, and social networks.

Beyond these nightly benefits, promoters construct webs of reciprocity by showering girls with gifts, favors, and attention during the day, sometimes for weeks at a time in the hopes a girl will come to his party. They offer to drive girls to their castings on rainy days. They invite girls for treated lunches, movies, bowling, amusement parks, and kickboxing classes to establish intimacy:

> It's better if you establish a friendship, so you have to build a relationship, take them to castings, play pool, go to the movies, and *then* get them to go out. . . . It makes them more likely to go out with you if you have a relationship.
>
> – Jay, 29, African American promoter for eight years, from NYC

These gifts aid promoters in strategically constructing intimacies and thereby framing their economic interests in girls as friendship, fun, and leisure, as opposed to labor. A strong discourse of friendship pervades every promoter's discussion of his work; many refer to their girls simply as "my friends."

Promoters' relational work also takes romantic form as they mobilize girls with sexual exchanges. Their text messages frequently include sexual innuendos. For instance, a texted invite for a Tuesday night party:

> I only wanna have sex on days that begin with T: Tuesday, Thursday, Taturday, Tunday, Tonight… Best Tuesday night u can't miss.

Sex is not merely innuendo; promoters regularly have sex with targeted model populations. Their girlfriends are almost always models, who support their boyfriends by helping recruit other models from their networks. Five promoters in my sample candidly described strategic sex during interviews. Duke, a 45-year-old black Haitian who had worked as a promoter for 10 years, said:

> At one point I had the most models at my parties. . . . How can you convince a whole models' apartment to come out with you at night? I'll tell you, you find the popular girl—the most exciting popular girl in the apartment—and you fuck her. Pardon my French. . . . Not the quiet girl, not the dull girl, you go for the popular energetic girl, because she will motivate everyone in the apartment to come out.

Promoters perform a version of sex work by flirting and sleeping with girls for economic gain, like the pimp who must keep the sexual interest of his prostitutes to maintain ownership claims over them, and like the sex worker who performs emotional labor in the "girlfriend experience" (Bernstein 2007). Strategic sexual intimacy poses problems for promoters in monogamous relationships, as they must deflect girls' advances. Sampson (a 27-year-old white American from New York who had worked as a promoter for three years) was married at the time of our first interview, to an ex-model (and "good civilian") who expected his fidelity. She regularly came out with him. However, because Sampson used flirtation to attract and mobilize girls to come out, he faced a dilemma:

> Like the girls will start creeping up on me, trying to touch me and dance on me, I'm like, "I need water or I have to pour shots." I basically just have to keep moving to avoid it. [My wife] gets jealous. When she comes out with me it's hard because I can't flirt as much.

Within a year, Sampson was divorced from his wife of three years; she caught him sleeping with models.[5]

As a result of promoters' efforts to build relations of reciprocity, friendships are forged and often considered sincere. I interviewed two models living "for free" in a promoter's apartment; in exchange, they went out with the promoters four nights a week. The girls deemphasized the exchange of their time for rent, stressing instead their friendships with the promoter:

> *Renee* (21, white American model from Connecticut): I don't look at it as a burden but I look at it as work. Because I know that—

> *Catherine* (19, white American model from Oregon): We're, like, representing them. Like, we understand that we're there to make them look good—
>
> *Renee:* Exactly.
>
> *Catherine:* We understand that we're friends but we're supporting them. . . . It's like work that's not work, though, because you meet *amazing* friends, and we're all just hanging out and it's never work because we're all friends.

Half the girls drew on such discourses of strong friendships with and respect for promoters in interviews. The other half was more ambivalent and expressed affection from a distance, with remarks like, "I think it would be really hard to consider promoters friends. There are certain things I can't share with them." These girls tended to answer with contradictions, like Eleanor, a 22-year-old white American fashion student from New Jersey:

> Even with Bill, who's my friend, a couple months ago, he was doing a dinner, and I brought, like, four or five girls for him. You know, he's my friend, I'll help him out. And, I just really didn't feel like going downstairs to the club after . . . and he starts giving me shit. And I'm like, "Well, I brought you, like, five girls." You know? So it almost makes it weird. Like, you're obligated, I don't know.

These different sentiments from Eleanor, Renee, and Catherine suggest that a felt sense of authentic intimacy depends on how obligations are framed. If reciprocity is too explicitly demanded, the friendship feels inauthentic and more like a work relationship.

Performance

Having mobilized girls to come out, the promoter now needs them to perform the work of being a girl. This includes looking good, dancing, visibly having a good time, and helping him rouse affect to create a good party atmosphere. To accomplish this, promoters must get girls to *want* to do the work. Promoters construct the meaning of "girl" as desirable through flirtation and interaction rituals that create the VIP party "vibe."

Promoters deploy many flirtatious tactics to make girls feel desired, from suggestively dancing to ubiquitously touching, kissing, hugging, and closely posing for photographs with them. Thibault is an expert at getting the most reluctant girls to dance, and Dre regularly puts his hands on a girl's lower back by way of saying hello. Initially unnerving when I entered the field, I came to see these gestures of physical closeness as routine efforts to produce social closeness.

Promoters also try to construct successful interaction rituals that yield *collective effervescence,* an intense social experience understood by Durkheim ([1912] 1965; see also Collins 2004) as a social emotion, the excitement that comes from feeling in close resonance with other participants. In the VIP party, it could be called a "vibe," as Eleanor described it: "I just—I love the whole, like, aura in New York. I love the vibe. I love the exclusivity."

In Durkheimian ritual, collective effervescence results when a group builds up a focus of attention, pumps up a shared symbol with emotional significance, and thereby revels in its own group solidarity. In much the same way, promoters assemble a group of girls at their table and then try to orchestrate a feeling of exuberance.

Indeed, the pleasures of being at a promoter's table can yield intense highs, as described in studies of cultural consumption (Benzecry and Collins 2014). Girls spoke excitedly of being a part of the high-status world of wealth, models, and celebrities. Experiences of elation contain an exhilarating feeling of being in the moment (Durkheim [1912] 1965). These pleasures are spurred on by bottomless glasses of champagne and vodka, and depending on the table, sometimes powders of MDMA[6] and cocaine, which are consumed amid elaborate light and sound systems with famous DJs delivering beloved house and hip-hop beats that inspire friends and strangers alike to shout and dance on top

of tables and sofas, taking selfies that are then circulated among group members on Instagram and Facebook for mutual admiration.

Marshaling emotional labors, promoters fuel the group's energy by pouring shots, making toasts, and dancing. They all boast that their table is the most beautiful of tables in the most exclusive of nightclubs. When I met Santos and joined his table in New York, he immediately told me, "I do only the best parties. Everyone knows me. Look at my girls. They amazing!"

The vibe can be especially strong among tables full of friends, since "letting go" is easier with lowered inhibitions among familiar people. A well-constructed vibe, in turn, intensifies the feeling of intimacy among group members, which was evident at tables run by Vanna and Pablo, the promoters who operated the "model apartment" in which I lived with Catherine and Renee:

> *Catherine:* On Saturday, we call it family night because, it's Saturday night, it's the most insane night for our group. We all just let everything go and *literally* we have just so much fun and everyone in the club, when we start yelling and screaming, they all turn and look at us like, "What the hell?" We get *crazy*. We have so much fun.
> *Renee:* It's like family, for us.
> *Catherine:* Yeah, like the managers come out and hang out with us, we're all friends there.
> *Renee:* The managers love us. Like last night we were hanging out with the managers from [clubs]. Yeah, like, they love having us there.
> *Catherine:* We bring the energy.

Between Catherine and Renee and their promoter friends, the collective effervescence is a cooperative social production: girls join with promoters to produce the vibe in an environment carefully engineered and aided by the intimacies promoters have worked hard to establish. These moments of revelry reinforce the desirability of being a girl, and they fortify the meanings of social relations with promoters as rooted in fun and leisure.

This is not to say that girls are unaware of their economic role in the VIP. Girls understand that their presence at parties makes money for the promoters. However, they do not see their own economic utility as being at odds with their friendships with promoters. On the contrary; on many occasions I watched girls relish in their capacity to generate promoters' profits by encouraging clients to purchase expensive bottles of alcohol, like jumbo-sized bottles of champagne, a practice known as "upselling" (and considered criminal when directly organized by clubs and bars [see Conti 2014]). For example, Catherine and Renee described how they "support" their friend, the promoter Pablo:

> *Renee:* Our friend Pablo had a big client and I would like randomly go over to their table and like take a glass, to help him. Because he has a client, and he knows that I know what he's doing. Like we're all kind of supporting each other.
> *Catherine:* And what we do is we push them to buy it, at the club, so a lot of the times at the club, none of us will be drinking that night, but we'll all take a glass [she raises her hand up in a toast] and be like *Yeah*! And we'll just take it and set it down behind us, or bus boys come and pick it up anyway.
> *Renee:* Or we do dump outs, like you just dump out the glass behind you when nobody's looking.
> *Author:* Does anyone tell you to do this?
> *Catherine:* You pick up on these things, like the first time Pablo probably gave me a drink and I was like no I don't want it, he probably was like, "No, no, no, just hold onto it." Because then you see the bottles come out, and Pablo will be like, "Oh, they're spending so much money, fuck!" [They both laugh.]

Like Burawoy's workers absorbed in shop-floor games, these girls play a game of upselling alcohol to clients, enriching

promoters' profits and having fun doing it. Relational work is a key condition of consent here, because the game of upselling is embedded in a familial-like bond that Pablo constructed with Catherine and Renee. The situational performance of the girls' work is upheld by a long backstory of relationships, in which Catherine, Renee, and Pablo all spoke of each other in terms of deep loyalty, mutual obligation, and support.

Promoters get girls to want to join an exploitative exchange by creating a vibe that strengthens intimacies and constructs the girls' position as highly desirable. When done correctly, promoters' relational work—their efforts at constructing meaningful relationships—produces a sense of girls' autonomous consumption of leisure, when in fact, girls' productive labor is tightly controlled to maximize their value.

Control

Girls' value hinges on their visibility at the party: they must look the part and be seen. Toward these ends, promoters control girls' time, movements, and their looks. Of greatest concern to a promoter is that girls stay at his table for the duration of his working hours, typically 12 to 3 a.m. He does this partially with the comped dinner, which establishes an obligation for girls to stay out for the night, and allows the promoter to then escort them to his table inside the club. Once at his table, they are discouraged from sitting or from leaving. Sitting elicits immediate attention: "Baby, what's wrong?" Promoters sometimes pay small bribes to security personnel to allow smoking at the table rather than outside. Girls who leave the table for too long may cause concern enough that the promoter, or his sub, will go and look for them and perhaps reprimand them for straying.

Girls who want to leave early are discouraged from doing so. When I tried to leave one dinner after the entrée to make it to another promoter's party, a club owner and former promoter stopped me and publicly scolded my manners:

> Whoa, whoa, whoa. Are you doing a dine-and-dash? . . . You can't just leave. You at least have to stay for dessert and coffee, not run out on the bill. Now because you're girls you don't have to pay of course, but you have to stay to the end. And it's New York, you know, so then you have to go downstairs [to the club], have a drink, stay a little.
>
> – Field notes, June, 11 p.m., Meatpacking District restaurant

Embarrassed, I apologized, sat down, and stayed another hour.

For one year, Vanna and Pablo ran a model apartment in Union Square. In exchange for housing, the girls had to stay out until 3 a.m.; if girls wanted to leave early, the promoters simply invoked their rental agreement. Most promoters encourage girls to drink, dance, and participate in the high energy they incessantly produce. When this fails, the promoter can remind girls of their obligation to him, as Jay did when he found out I was headed to another party with a different promoter: "Your loyalty is messed up. I'm insulted," he told me.

Promoters manage and control who joins their table, a practice that reveals the primary importance of girls' bodily capital. Promoters are on constant alert, because girls frequently try to bring friends with them to the free party. When I tried to bring my own friends out, promoters requested their full names in order to check their Facebook pictures to ensure their looks. Promoters were frustrated with girls who brought the wrong kind of friends to their parties, like Sampson:

> Usually if I take them to dinner and she's with a friend, I'm like, "I'm sorry your friend can't come. She can't have dinner." . . . But I'm up front and I'm fast with it. I don't waste time 'cause it would hurt my image. And then girls will start saying, "Hey, if she can bring a friend, I can bring mine," . . . and then my sub will start doing it, and bring a bunch of midgets. So before they even start, I say no.

Male friends are particularly unwelcome, unless they can attract more girls. Male models are sometimes allowed to join a promoter's table for this reason, as promoters think these kinds of men add value. As Jay explained:

> The girl's gotta want to be around you. . . . Like, we figured out that not every girl's gonna want to hang with us. Not every girl is attracted to us, and whatever. So what we do is we have other model boys, or just cool people, hanging around the table to keep everybody there [at the table], you know what I mean?

Promoters also monitor and control girls' bodies, for instance, by telling them how to dress. Dre often included in his invitation texts instructions like, "Dress to impress, Ash," and while he frequently flattered girls' looks, he was noticeably short on compliments on the few nights I came to his parties wearing casual and loose-fitting clothes. Because girls' height is central to conveying their value, they are constantly told to wear high heels, the current fashion being platform heels of at least four inches, such that girls at promoter tables stand above 6' tall. Throughout my stay in Miami, the girls complained that Santos made them wear high heels, to the point that he kept their heels in his car, telling them to change from their sandals before entering a club or restaurant. Sampson also keeps a spare tight black dress and heels in his car, explained his wife, because "some girls can't dress, so he makes them change." Failure to look the part can lead to public humiliation. Hannah, a 19-year-old white American model, recounted a yacht party in Miami organized by Santos, where a girl had an unshaved bikini area. Santos ordered her to the bathroom to "fix it," meaning, to shave. Hannah remarked that this was embarrassing for the girl, but justified: "I mean, if you're on a yacht in a bikini, you should shave." Hannah understood that girls' access to the VIP hinges on meeting strict standards of appearance.

The control of girls' time and movements is most evident on trips with promoters, who decide where the girls can and cannot go, and for how long. Most times out with Santos in Miami and Cannes, I had no idea where we were headed or for how long, and I had no input in the matter. In Cannes, girls' movements were severely limited, because Santos had rented a villa far from the city center, a 50 euros taxi ride during summer season, and he was the only one among us with keys to the house. Promoters carefully control girls as labor in the VIP party, such that girls' participation is often semi-autonomous and only incidentally leisure.

RELATIONAL MISMATCHES

Just as good matches between meanings and practices in relationships facilitate girls' consent, mismatches spoil it and undermine girls' participation. *Relational mismatches* are instances of differing expectations resulting from an interpretive misalignment of relationships, meanings, media, and boundaries. Differences in understandings between participants exacerbate ambiguity (Bandelj 2012) and, I found, they can damage relationships. Such instances were most evident in my data when disciplinary practices, exchange media, symbolic boundaries around sex work, and intimacies with promoters did not align with participants' expectations.

Disciplining Practices

Promoters spend considerable effort to control girls' labor, but these practices must not look too much like managerial discipline, or they risk redefining the meaning of the relationship from friendship to employment. Yet, promoters frequently resort to disciplining girls whom they perceive have violated the implicit exchange terms. The following discussion, as Sampson and his team left the Hamptons and headed back to the city, typifies the discipline promoters use to maintain control of girls:

> *Jay:* That girl was a pain in the ass. I had to go look for her three times, then she brought some random dude to the table.
>
> *Trevor:* Random dude.

Jay: . . . I told her, "No more bringing random dudes to the table!" . . . Then she says, "Ok no more bringing girls to table." I'm like, "No bringing girls?! It's our table, we bring who we want!"

Trevor: And at the end of the night, she was asking us to give him a ride. I was like, "You met him through us, you don't know him from a hole in wall!" . . . My weekend was ruined because of her, headache after headache. I'm thinking not to drive her home. Bet me I won't!

Sampson: No matter how difficult a girl is, I wouldn't leave her out here.

Trevor: I at least make sure she gets to the train station.

Jay: I've done that before. I gave a girl $20 to get home and told her to leave dinner. She was being a pain in the ass. I said, "You will not ruin my dinner. Go get a cab."

– Field notes, July, 2 p.m., Hamptons café

Discipline is a delicate act. If girls are managed too roughly, it threatens the intimacy established through relational work, redefining their relationship from horizontal friendship to hierarchical management. Girls cannot be treated as workers, because their participation has been framed as leisure. One client, who hosts girls and promoters in his weekend Hamptons home, explained: "I say when you are a promoter, it's like herding kittens. You have to do two things: make them purr and hit them with a spray bottle." Both dominance and intimacy must be maintained.

Discipline can escalate to scolding girls and yelling at them. Early in my fieldwork, Santos yelled at me for going to the wrong party with a rival promoter, perhaps the worst violation of loyalty a girl can commit. As it was my first day in Miami and I had gotten lost in the crowd, he accepted my panicked apology. Two other girls staying in our Miami villa were less fortunate. They did not attend Santos's party but instead stayed home; when he returned he kicked them out of the villa, accusing them of disrespect. They apologized but Santos was insistent, and they cried as they packed and left at 3 a.m., each on their phones trying to find accommodations for the night.

As a last resort, girls who are too difficult to control are simply left behind, or the promoter makes them leave, effectively ending their relationship and terminating future exchanges.

Monetary Payments

Offering the wrong kinds of exchange media can curtail a girl's participation. Cash payment is notably absent from promoters' strategies in recruiting, mobilizing, and getting girls to perform. Promoters frequently offer to pay models' cab fare to and from the club (about $20), but this money is always explicitly earmarked for transportation. Only rarely do promoters offer girls payment to come out, about $40 to $80. This strategy is mostly used by less established promoters. It is considered an act of desperation. Payment changes the nature of the relationship between girl and promoter from friendship to economic exchange, and the meaning of her experience transforms from leisure to labor. Sampson, when he was low on girls, offered Hannah $40 a night to come out regularly, which Hannah rebuffed: "I don't wanna get paid because then it's like work, you know?"

One night, I stood with two young models before we entered a club with a promoter. A third model, their friend, walked by on the Meatpacking District street and stopped to say hello, but she had to quickly keep moving, she explained, "I have to go to a different club with my promoter." I asked which promoter, and she explained, "It's George, he pays us. It's $80," as she shrugged her shoulders with a look of resignation, "so, it's work." After leaving, her two friends said: "*Thank God* we don't have to do that!" In fact, all four of us would do the same things on this night—attend a club, drink for free, and dance at a promoter's table—but only one of us would be paid, and looked at with some pity for it.

When I asked an owner why he does not pay girls directly to attend his club, he replied, "That would ruin the fun," a telling statement on the transformative power of money (Zelizer 1994). Gifts to girls and wages to brokers obfuscate what is essentially the exchange of girls' bodies for money (Rossman 2014). When paid, a girl's labor too clearly resembles employment, breaking the illusion of her autonomy and her experience of fun.

Sex Work Boundaries

The presence of money also threatens to cross a symbolic boundary into the disreputable terrain of sexual exchange. Because they go unpaid, promoters' girls are seen as distinct from and superior to escorts and other hired women in clubs, namely the bottle girls who work for the club and carry bottles of alcohol to clients' tables, earning tips ranging from $200 to $800 a night. The job of bottle girl is widely described as a "dirty" job occupied by "slutty" women who are presumed to sell sex for economic gain. Promoters' girls are also distinct from "table girls," who are paid about $100 per night to sit at clients' tables, should clients request girls to sit with them. Both categories of girls are viewed with suspicion for their explicitly paid labor and, hence, their closer proximity to commercial sex. Toni, a 34-year-old white male promoter from Italy, explained:

> Because if you are sitting at a client's table and people see you doing it all the time, you might be a prostitute. If you are with me at my table with all the girls, you are a model. . . . I don't like them [table girls]. They can be slutty.

"Table girls" and the models at Toni's table are engaging in very similar practices—looking good and drinking free champagne at tables—but they occupy very different positions maintained as distinct through the boundary work performed, in this case, with particular exchange media and discourses: the paid girl is "slutty" and the unpaid girl is a high status model (Lamont and Molnar 2002). Girls could monetize their participation by demanding payment for flirtations, but the symbolic boundary separating them from the lower-status sex worker keeps them from doing so.

Promoters sometimes cross this symbolic boundary by too explicitly demanding a profit from girls' bodies. For example, Hannah recalled how Trevor encouraged her to flirt with a client to whom she was not attracted:

> Last time, the clients were two soccer players, like professional soccer players, and Trevor came up to me and was like, "That one likes you, go talk to him. Go flirt with him." I was like, "No! I'm not even attracted to him. I'm not gonna." Trevor was like, "But he's a client, if you do, he'll spend more money. Just go talk to him." I was like, whatever.

Jill, a 19-year-old white Australian model and friend of Hannah's, joined our discussion with a similar affronting story:

> Yeah, like one time like the owners at Club X, they came up to me and were like, "We need you guys to go to that table," like basically saying to go and sleep with the clients. Club X is the worst, it's called Club Triple X, I was like, "If you need girls like that, to sleep with the clients, go and get yourself some escorts." They'll go home with them. But they want to pay us to just go and hang out with them.

Like other girls, Hannah and Jill understood the value of their bodily capital. Girls generally do not know exact revenues, but they are aware that promoters and clubs earn handsome profits ("It's a lot," said Hannah). However, when Trevor explicitly encouraged Hannah to flirt for his profit, it redefined their relationship as primarily about economic gain and framed her partying as a profane prostitution-like exchange: flirtation for money. Girls are likely to see such an exchange as inappropriate, and the promoter who encourages it as offensive, as did Hannah and Jill, who soon after stopped going out with Trevor. Symbolic boundaries differentiate appropriate from inappropriate relations, and they render the exploitative relationship between girls and promoters as acceptable.

Insufficient Intimacies

The relational infrastructure breaks down when the intimacy between girls and promoters feels lacking. Girls expect a fair share of attention by the promoter who has brought her out. In the absence of displays of intimacy and affections, girls are likely to react negatively, feel ignored or bored, and leave. Consider, for example, an evening out with a promoter named Rocco, who showed me the text messages on his phone he received from a girl who had just left his table:

> *I would appreciate next time a hug or high five instead of ignoring me all night. I feel stupid. But it's ok.*
>
> Rocco shakes his head and says, "They all want attention. You see? I have to pay attention to everyone. What about the promoter? Nobody asks me how I am. Nobody cares about the promoter."
>
> – Field notes, June, 1 a.m., Club M in NYC Meatpacking District

The problem of insufficient intimacy is well illustrated in the travails of women promoters. Few women do the job of promoter. I met male promoters nightly in New York, but only after some effort did I track down eight women promoters. I interviewed and went out with five of them, and I identified distinctly gendered styles of relational work that emerge from women's inability to produce sexually charged intimacy with girls.

Because of the predominantly heteronormative culture of the VIP party, women promoters lack the strategies of flirtation and sex that men promoters commonly use to build relationships with girls. This was evident in the distinct ways women promoters recruit and mobilize girls. Women's text invites lacked the kinds of sexual innuendos I commonly saw in men's texts. No female promoter I encountered tried to scout girls in the streets or at castings; this strategy of recruitment characterized "creepy old men" (as one woman promoter termed it) like Thibault, the 40-year-old Kenyan promoter. Picking up girls in the street was too strategic, explained Vanna, a 25-year-old Asian female promoter of three years from Korea, who at the time worked as a model:

> I never, never, never *ever* went up to a girl in the street, or in my own castings. Like, randomly say "Hey" and pretend I like you. Unless, like, we just click while waiting in the casting, then I'll tell you, "Do you go out?" You say yes, and then I'll tell you, "You know, I go out a lot, and if you want, we can hang out."

Rather than violate gendered expectations of the pickup, women promoters recruit girls by drawing from their existing social networks. One woman owned a trendy bakery near New York University from which she invited girls she met as customers. Vanna was a model herself, and two others worked as modeling agents.

Lacking flirtation, women promoters rely on friendships and social reciprocity. For example, Celia, a 29-year-old white woman from France who had worked as a promoter for three years, regularly hosts girls for dinner at her apartment before going to the club. At these dinners, between six and eight girls come for Celia's home cooking, and many bring a bottle of wine or a dessert; afterward, we all pay for our shared cabs to the club, thus negating a sense of economic dependence and fostering instead a sense of camaraderie. Most of the girls at her table explained to me that they came out because of a genuine interest in spending time with Celia. For her part, Celia found the maintenance of these valuable social relationships exhausting. She explained that on her rare days off, she is constantly texting, talking to, and meeting with girlfriends to keep her social ties strong:

> Girls go out with a promoter because they think something [like sex] can happen. For me, it's just friendship. That's all I have. . . . I would not survive without it. I know them, the girls, each of them. And when I text them, I text to say hello first.

Rather than build relationships based on heterosexual interest, women promoters

relied on homosocial bonds. Women promoters even look like the girls from whom they profit; whereas men promoters dress casually in cool t-shirts and sneakers, women promoters wear the obligatory high heels and sexy dresses. To satisfy girls' desires for flirtation and sexual chance, women promoters always had at least one man at their table to hold girls' interest, or they partnered with male promoters to add a heterosexual charge to the night. Generally, however, women promoters tried to engage girls in the interaction rituals of the VIP vibe. The women promoters I interviewed stressed how much fun and energy their crowd brings to the party, an energy produced not through sexualized ties but deeper friendships:

> The club owners like me because I keep it high energy, because everybody knows each other in my table. Have you been to one of those tables where the girls just sit there? Yeah I hate those, like why would you go out if it's gonna be like that? We have fun. I love to dance. I wear all kinds of crazy outfits, and it's just me and my friends all jumping around, dancing, having fun.
>
> – Kia, 20, African American promoter for one year, from NYC

If they lacked close bonds of friendship, women promoters were likely to have difficulty controlling their girls, who tended to wander from their designated table throughout the club. A client noted with some frustration that the girls seemed to have evaporated from Celia's table, heading to another club to join another promoter. This client said to me, as we stood around an empty table: "It's really not cool of her girls. I think they leave because she's a woman. If I was a promoter I would make them stay."

Because the VIP scene is predicated on heterosexual desire, male promoters are able to construct the kinds of sexualized intimacies that compel girls to participate, suggesting that gendered and sexualized contexts affect the success of relational matches and who is best positioned to achieve them.

DISCUSSION

In the VIP, the production of women's surplus value is embedded in intimacies that promoters diligently construct. Relational work involves the alignment of relationships, their meanings, exchange media, and boundaries, in this case, distinguishing girls from sex workers. Gifts, brokerage, and friendship discourses secure and obscure the promoter's appropriation of women's surplus value, redefining exploitation as fun with friends, but only with the correct relational package. The importance of relational work is evident when it breaks down: when exchange media take monetary rather than gift form, when managerial discipline is too explicit, when boundaries separating sex work are crossed, and when relationships between girls and brokers are not sufficiently intimate. In each instance, girls experience the VIP party as less like leisure and more like work, and they are less likely to consent to its unequal terms.

My findings indicate that the success of relational matches hinges on the perceived appropriateness of participants' gender: women brokers in the VIP have limited ways to capitalize on their relationships with girls, whereas men brokers, disproportionately nonwhite and immigrant, stand to gain from them. Other scholars have found that race and class backgrounds set the parameters of exchange relationships, for instance in sex work (Hoang 2015) and dating (Clemens 2006). Further research should systematically consider how gender, race, and other social distinctions shape who can enter into relational infrastructures, and what types of matches result.

The case of women in the VIP has two theoretical contributions, one for labor theory and one for economic sociology's relational turn. First, the case advances theories of the labor process by considering how consent is embedded in a relational infrastructure constructed beyond the point of production. Relationships between women and promoters are made not only at the club, where women perform free labor, but these intimacies also emerge at the sidewalk café, during a ride in

an SUV, and in the guest bedroom of a Miami villa. Hints of the importance of relational work in the organization of production appear in Burawoy's (1979) ethnography of the shop floor. We see glimpses of gifts establishing ties among workers—Burawoy gifts his Christmas ham to a co-worker who in turn helps to make working on the shop floor much easier (p. 52)—and we hear mention of "networks of ties and trust" built up over time among workers (p. 105). Such social ties, my findings reveal, are crucial to enabling the production of consent.

Second, this analysis of women's surplus value yields insights for how economic sociologists can use the emerging relational framework to study inequality. Relational work facilitates exploitative exchange by couching surplus value in nonmarket terms. The trade in organs (Healy 2006), reproductive materials (Almeling 2007), and cadavers (Anteby 2010) are illustrative cases. Operators in these industries use relational work to commensurate "priceless" human goods. Company owners gain vast profits while drawing on cultural discourses of altruism and pricelessness to secure gifts from unpaid donors. Similarly, relational practices in markets for intimate human services facilitate labor exploitation, as when care workers are underpaid on the grounds that their work is altruistic and beyond the market (Folbre and Nelson 2000). In these cases, relational work masks labor processes by constructing symbolic boundaries around work activities as gifts, donations, and intimacy. These scholars have already shown how relational work can obfuscate unequal market exchanges; the case of free labor in the VIP extends this line of argument by showing how relational work is a mechanism for maintaining labor exploitation.

CONCLUSIONS

The case of unpaid women in the VIP has broader implications for understanding why, in growing segments of the labor market, people perform free labor. With changing expectations that work should be self-fulfilling (Donzelot 1991), workers increasingly seek symbolic benefits alongside wages, particularly in culture, media, and technology industries (Neff et al. 2005). Despite the conditions of "bad jobs"—no benefits, endemic insecurity, and debt structures (Kalleberg et al. 2000)—these industries attract people willing to forgo wages for a chance to enter such fields. What kinds of motivations are needed to get people to consent to work for free?

A relational work perspective is well suited to answer this question. Cash is hardly the most important signifier of worth (Zelizer 1994), and alternative payment arrangements should be situated within their relational contexts. In the culture industries, labor is frequently unpaid but framed as the pursuit of one's passions, a hybrid of work and leisure, or what Aspers (2005:99) calls "work-consumption" in his study of fashion photographers. Creative expression, free goods, and other psychic rewards (Menger 1999) are invoked as reasons for free labor among journalists (Christin 2014) and music industry interns (Frenette 2013). In retail services, workers accept poor conditions, and sometimes below-minimum wages, for the chance to be associated with high-status brands, receive in-kind payments of discounted merchandise, and "hang out" with friends on the job (Besen 2006; Williams and Connell 2010). In collegiate sports, unpaid student athletes generate vast profits for universities, partly because their labor is framed as education and their compensation comes in the form of college scholarships, and partly because college athletics are widely celebrated (Benford 2007). In professional sports, teams are promoted by unpaid cheerleaders; the Buffalo Bills cheerleaders have sued the NFL for 800 hours of unpaid labor, for which they were compensated with tickets and parking vouchers. The Bills team makes revenues each year in excess of $200 million and was recently purchased for $1.4 billion, the highest purchase price in the NFL (Powell 2014).[7] All of these fields have idiosyncratic incentives prompting people to work for free—for example, oversupply of workers, skills investments, and exposure—but

they also share the possibility of symbolic benefits that workers pursue in addition to, and even in place of, wages. Relational matches, I argue, construct powerfully motivating symbolic meanings around economic arrangements. Moving beyond the situational production of consent, relational work can explain what compels people to enter into, accept, and even feel good about exploitative relationships.

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Notes

1. Scholars of flexible organizations have moved beyond the narrow confines of the immediate labor process to examine people's motivations to work and the meanings generated in and by work (Smith 2001). Organizational scholars have identified the importance of social relations in flexible production, for instance, by documenting extra-work rituals that socially glue together so-called "participative cultures" (Kunda 1992).
2. With their exclusivity, high prices, and luxurious settings, VIP parties cater to some elites but certainly not all. VIP clients are best thought of as "wealth elites": they have large stores of economic capital but not necessarily cultural status or political power (Savage 2014).
3. When analyzing the production of value process, I use the term *girl* without quotes to indicate women in the VIP arena, reflecting the logic of the field in which women are disempowered in both discourse and practice.
4. As Chuang (2014) finds in her study of China's rural construction industry, labor brokers are also subject to exploitation, debt, and insecurity. Promoters absorb the costs of mobilizing girls at their own expense, and their pay from club managers may be insufficient, late, or withheld entirely, depending on the state of the volatile nightlife economy. Promoters are one level removed from the bottom of an exploitative network providing VIP labor.
5. Nightclubs have been conceptualized as important sexual marketplaces where partners can meet in cities (Collins 2004). In fact, the business of nightlife, at least in the VIP, relies on the sexual work of promoters to mobilize women to clubs.
6. MDMA, or "Molly," is a form of the synthetic psychoactive drug ecstasy, which has properties of both a stimulant and a hallucinogen. Typically ingested by mixing the powder in a drink, MDMA produces feelings of high energy and euphoria.
7. The lawsuit is one of five similar complaints by cheerleaders against the NFL. The New York Supreme Court rejected the Bills's motion to dismiss on grounds that "the minute control . . . exercised over the work of the cheerleaders" qualifies their work as employment (Smith 2014).

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