MORE THAN A CARDBOARD BABE: PROMOTIONAL MODELING AND THE SHAPING OF NEOLIBERAL SUBJECTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the narratives of promotional models or *promo girls* working for liquor marketing agencies in California's San Francisco Bay Area in order to shed light on gendered and sexual embodiment and subjectivity in the neoliberal era. Drawing primarily from the work of Michel Foucault, it aims to de-exceptionalize agency, relocating it in the commodified spaces of everyday life carved out by neoliberalism. The thesis maps crucial aspects of what Lisa Duggan (2002) calls "the sexual politics of neoliberalism," or in other words, the wide array of gendered and sexual subjectivities underpinning the alcohol industry's structure and function. Following Pierre Bourdieu (1984), it explores the raced and classed dimensions of alcohol promotions, arguing that they create a *habitus* of alcohol consumption, and that promo girls' gendered and sexual performances naturalize racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies. Borrowing insights from Lauren Berlant (2007), Adrienne Evans, and Sarah Riley (2014), it investigates promo girls' embodied and subjective experiences, revealing the ways in which they agentically use neoliberal discourses about autonomy, personal responsibility and sexuality to constitute themselves as sexy and responsible subjects. Data is based on ethnographic interviews, critical analysis of marketing materials, participant observation, and importantly, is grounded in the notion that studying female subjectivity within the context of agency is "a political imperative for feminist research" (Evans & Riley 2014, 9). At the same time, the thesis acknowledges the force with which neoliberal discourses of autonomy and personal responsibility work to confound interpretations of what counts as agency in a landscape increasingly saturated by economic rationality and diminishing social protections. Overall, it attempts to illuminate the complicated, co-deterministic tension between structure and agency, and the mutually constitutive relationship between promo girls and neoliberal feminine subjects. Tracing a more complicated vision of agency adds to an understanding of women as active subjects engaging with available discourses about gender, sexuality, and work, rather than passive objects in need of saving.

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Chapter I: Introduction

1.1 “Hey, Shot Girl!”

It’s a balmy summer afternoon in Blackhawk, an affluent suburb in California’s San Francisco Bay Area. I shift nervously in my 4-inch heels. I’m at a posh country club promoting Ketel One, a luxury brand of vodka, with a fellow promo girl whom I will call Christina. It’s about 4:00 P.M., the end of an all-day golf tournament for country club members. I attempt to discreetly adjust my extra-small black polyester cocktail dress, which is slowly creeping up the back of my thighs. “Didn’t I ask for a medium?” I mutter under my breath, beads of sweat forming on my brow as golfers begin to filter into the banquet hall where Christina and I will spend the next several hours serving samples.

We weave through a sea of rowdy, polo shirt and visor-clad men. I’m holding a tray of Ketel One samples, doing my best to balance on exceedingly high heels. The smell of stale cigars and sweat hangs in the air. As my eyes scan the room, I notice a familiar face. It’s Elliot, the district manager of Evergreen Wine and Spirits. Our eyes lock for a moment, and he smiles and nods. “Hey shot girl,” an inebriated man with glazed eyes tugs my arm. “Gimme a shot. And come here and take a picture with me. I want to make my wife jealous.” He and his friends laugh uproariously. I feel anger rising in my chest. I want nothing to do with this man, but I see Elliot watching me from across the room, and we need to take at least five pictures to send to our event managers, documenting our execution of this promotion. I smile weakly. “Sure, do you mind if we take one with our camera too?” He aggressively pulls me towards him, his hand on my lower hip. My muscles tense. Moments later, I feel his hand on my buttocks. He slaps it. Without pause, I leap sideways, almost dropping my tray of shots. “Sir, that is not okay. I’m working.” I try to steady my voice as tears well in my eyes. “I can’t do this anymore,” I think. But what other job will pay me thirty dollars an hour and let me make my own schedule?

For better or worse, I need this. Christina jumps to my side. "That is not okay," she repeats firmly. "We're not here for that sort of thing." He chuckles, unaffected. I'm furious. I make my way across the room towards Elliot, as quickly as my heels will allow. "Hi Elliot," I say as professionally as I can. "I just wanted to let you know that man over the grabbed my butt. He was very rude. He called me a shot girl," I added, motioning towards the perpetrator. Elliot looks at me, a patronizing smile forming on his lips. "Well, you are a shot girl."

1.2 Promotional Modeling – A Broad Overview

The catalyst for this project arises from deeply personal experience. During my sophomore year of college, I was unexpectedly offered a job as a promotional model. Promotional models, or *promo girls* as they are frequently called, are attractive young women who act as spokespersons for a variety of brands of wine, beer, and spirits. Outgoing, sexy, and scantily clad, promo girls frequent bars, nightclubs, restaurants and liquor stores across the United States. They are part of a broader trend of experiential marketing[1], and they use brand knowledge and sex appeal to increase the appeal and sale of alcoholic beverages.

The aim of my research is to find out what promo girls' accounts of working for liquor marketing agencies in the San Francisco Bay Area can teach us about gendered and sexual embodiment in the neoliberal era. I want to explore how promo girls construct their identities and make sense themselves as "active sexual subjects" (Evans & Riley 2014, 8). What kinds of subjectivities does promotional modeling produce? What does its gendered and sexualized character do? How does this central aspect of the practice weave together certain critical mechanisms of neoliberal capitalism?

[1] Experiential marketing strategies facilitate emotional connection between the consumer and brands. Experiential marketing programs strive to link brands, consumer lifestyles, and identities in a way that traditional marketing campaigns do not, so that the brand effectively becomes "an extension or integral part of the self" (Aaker 1996 in Jernigan 2008, 9; Smilansky 2009).

Promo girls are frequently assumed to be one-dimensional sex objects with no agency, and whose sole purpose is to float around bars passing out free shots and titillating men. In these narrow views, which reflect more pervasive views (both popular and scholarly) of women engaging in sexualized labor, agency is only imaginable when it is in direct opposition to the exploitative forces that dominate and commodify women's bodies. Furthermore, such views undervalue women's motivations for participating in sexualized labor, and ignore powerful economic and social pressures produced by neoliberal labor arrangements. Arguments against sexualized labor, such as those made by radical feminists during the 1980's "sex wars" debates[2] (MacKinnon 1989; Dworkin 1981) overstate the force of these pressures, and posit women as passive objects in need of saving rather than active subjects engaging with available discourses about gender, sexuality, and work. Further, they focused their critiques primarily on prostitution, pornography and the act of sex itself, thus foreclosing an analysis of a variety of gendered and sexualized practices in which women participate in the neoliberal era.

I begin my sketch of agency with Karl Marx. In the 18th Brumaire, Marx writes: "Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly found, given and transmitted from the past" (Marx 1978, 595). Although Marx famously argued that alienation is a fundamental aspect of commodity capitalism (Marx 1988, 74), he did not believe that productive forces wholly or necessarily subjugated workers. Instead, Marx situates human subjects as the primary agents of social and historical change. These agents, however, are not fully unconstrained. Rather, they are conditioned by a variety of social, economic, and historical processes. Marx's claim thus illuminates the complicated, co-deterministic tension between structure and agency. As Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley have argued, studying

[2] In the United States, the feminist "sex wars" debates of the late twentieth century centered around disputes over women's freedom and domination in relation to sexuality and sex work.

female subjectivity within the context of agency is "a political imperative for feminist research" (Evans & Riley 2014, 9), and in order to complicate the notion that sexualized labor is necessarily oppressive, we must begin with the premise that women are active participants in the everyday practices that structure their work and their lives, and that they have the ability to exercise a degree of freedom and choice not only in the realm of work, but in activities of sense-making and identity formation.

At the same time, we must acknowledge the force with which neoliberal discourses of autonomy and personal responsibility work to confound our interpretations of what counts as agency. Neoliberalism strategically uses the language of choice (Power 2009) and the incorporation of sexualized bodies and subjectivities (Duggan 2002) to mask structural inequalities. In short, neoliberalism "interpellates the individual as freely able to choose her identity…no matter how constrained she might be" (Evans & Riley 2014, 9). How do we theorize agency, when agency is understood to be compulsory under neoliberalism? As Lauren Berlant (2007), Adrienne Evans, and Sarah Riley (2014), and others have argued– and as I will argue – we need better ways to conceptualize agency that do not rely on top-down theories of centralized power.

Throughout this thesis, I aim to de-exceptionalize agency, relocating it in the commodified spaces of everyday life carved out by neoliberalism. By adopting a Foucauldian perspective on the nature of power and subjectivity, we can more clearly imagine agency not necessarily as emancipation, but as things that subjects *do*: the practices and modes of sense-making in which subjects engage that are bound up in power relations, rather than a liberatory force. As I hope to show, promotional models are more than passive *cardboard babes*[3] – a remark I once received after startling an unsuspecting consumer at a liquor store wine promotion – "you look

[3] *Cardboard babe* broadly refers to cardboard cut-outs of sexy, smiling women used in beer advertisements, often prominently displayed in liquor stores in the U.S.

like a cardboard babe come to life!"

As sexualized labor becomes more visible within the commodified spaces of neoliberal society, understanding women's agency in relation to work, sexuality, and consumption is crucial. I define promotional modeling as a form of sex work, arguing that narrow interpretations of sex work as only pornography, prostitution, or the act itself severely limit our capacity to understand a broad range of commercial practices that hinge on an active female sexuality (Parreñas 2011, 5). By studying promotional models, I want to show that neoliberalism is underpinned by a wide array of gendered and sexual subjectivities. The qualities which define a "good" promo girl are not so different from everyday neoliberal embodiments of girls – qualities which allow the whole system to function smoothly.

Like many others in the alcohol industry, I deliberately refer to promotional models as promo *girls*. I do not mean to suggest that they are infantile. As Alys Weinbaum, et al show, *girl* in Victorian-era English vernacular came to signify working and middle-class women who "occupied an ephemeral free space between childhood and adulthood" (Weinbaum, et al 2008, 9). I use girl to signify "young women with the wherewithal and desire to define themselves in excess of conventional female roles" (Weinbaum, et al 2008, 9). Importantly, girls are also commonly associated with commodity capitalism (Weinbaum et al 2008, 9-10) a crucial point that promotional models illustrate in their gendered and sexualized performances of brand values.

In this introductory chapter, I trace the contours of scholarly literature on gender, sexuality, and sex work. I begin by discussing two historical antecedents to the promo girl: The London shopgirl (Sanders 2006) and the Victorian Barmaid (Bailey 1990) to reveal how shifting labor structures in Victorian-era England opened up new forms of discipline and sexual subjectivity for women. I broadly map the feminist "sex wars" debates, arguing that these perspectives lack

the complexity to account for women's active engagements in with contemporary neoliberal discourses about sexuality and work. I outline my methodology and close the chapter with limitations and contributions of this project in relation to understanding women's agency, subjectivity, and embodiment in the neoliberal era.

In chapter two, I lay the structural foundations of the alcohol industry and broader conceptual foundations of this project. I offer a broad overview of the three-tiered organization of the alcohol industry, arguing that its structure and function reveal the inner workings of what Lisa Duggan (2002) calls *the sexual politics of neoliberalism*. I employ a Foucauldian perspective on neoliberal governmentality and introduce two distinct but interrelated concepts: *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1988) and *technologies of sexiness* (Evans & Riley 2014), which I will weave throughout my conceptual framing of each subsequent chapter. I suggest that, from an industry perspective, promo girls are central to the "exchange of aesthetics", where their commodified, gendered, and sexualized performances are framed as part of gift exchange relations which work to reinforce commodity exchange relations (Mauss 2002; Rubin 1975; Tyler & Taylor 1988).

In chapter three, I borrow Pierre Bourdieu's (1984) notions of *habitus* to tease out the racial and class dimensions of alcohol promotions, arguing that promo girls embody brand values which work to reinstate and naturalize raced, classed, gendered, and sexual hierarchies. I discuss the promo girl's *look,* and which looks and subjectivities signal which raced and classed values. I argue that promo girls use *technologies of sexiness* to simultaneously construct gendered and sexual subjectivities while making these hierarchies bodily. I engage in a more in-depth analysis of luxury brands, highlighting the tensions and vulnerabilities associated with their consumption and promotion.

In chapter four, I shift my focus to the subjective, embodied experience of being a promo girl

through a Foucauldian lens of subjectivity. Following Lauren Berlant (2007), Adrienne Evans, and Sarah Riley (2014), I elaborate my argument that promo girls use *technologies of sexiness* to enact agency, even though their activities and ways of sense-making reinforce neoliberal labor structures. What kinds of agency might we imagine in the context of neoliberalism? How do promo girls use of the discourses made available to them at the intersection of neoliberalism, consumption, gender, and sexuality? How do promo girls make sense of their gendered and sexual identities in the terms set by neoliberalism? What kinds of dangers, pleasures, and pressures do promo girls negotiate in bars, nightclubs, and liquor stores across the San Francisco Bay Area?

1.3 Literature Review

This section reviews the existing scholarly literature on gender, sexuality, sex work, and what Ashley Mears (2014) refers to as *aesthetic labor*. I will outline crucial definitions and debates, paying special attention to questions of structure, agency and subjectivity. Importantly, I want to show that key debates about sex work either overvalue or undervalue women's agency, while overlooking the ways in which women experience themselves in relation to the neoliberal "economization" (Brown 2015, 33) of all spheres of life. I begin with a brief overview of two historical antecedents to the promo girl: The Victorian barmaid and the London shopgirl.

Lise Sanders (2006) describes the historical moment when "a new identity, the shopgirl, emerged in the midst of a heated debate about the nature of the social, sexual, and moral practice for for women employed in the public sphere" (Sanders 2006, 1). The shopgirl was an attractive woman who embodied the symbolic values of leisure products she sold at department stores cropping up across late Victorian England. Sanders argues that the shopgirl came to be the focal point of various literary and pop culture representations, while at the same time, illuminated certain aspects of the subjective, embodied experience of "everyday" women

working as shop assistants during the Victorian period. The shopgirl can thus be read as a symbol for "new models of female identity, behavior, and experience" who incited new forms of bodily and behavioral discipline, troubling the notion of "separate spheres" in which femininity and sexuality were relegated to the private (Sanders 2006, 2). The increased visibility of sexy women in new economic spaces at the end of the Victorian era is similar to the assimilation of female sexuality by neoliberal regimes.

Like Sanders, Peter Bailey (1990) is interested in new forms of sexual subjectivity emerging in the Victorian era. Bailey uses the term *parasexuality* to describe the experience of the Victorian barmaid and the ways in which she negotiated her sexuality. For Bailey, *parasexuality* is "everything but" – a sexuality that is "deployed but contained, carefully channeled rather than fully discharged" (Bailey 1990, 148), which, counter to Foucault, suggests that sexuality is distinct from its embodiment (Foucault 1978). While the term *parasexuality* helps shed light on the ways in which sexuality is actively managed by women in economic spaces, I want to interrogate Bailey's suggestion that parasexuality is conceptually different from sexuality *as such*. I suggest that sexuality is not simply about having sex, as the term *parasexuality* might imply. Rather, it is about how individuals negotiate their gendered sexualities, and how they use broader discourses about sexuality to construct their identities. In what follows, I flesh out debates around sexuality and sex work focusing on the ways in which scholars have theorized power, structure and agency.

According to Wendy Chapkis, the commercial sexualization of women's bodies has been a long-standing concern for feminists, as evidenced by the feminist "sex wars" of the late 1970's and 1980's. These debates centered around the ambiguous role of sexuality regarding women's oppression and liberation (Chapkis 1997, 11). For example, Catherine MacKinnon's radical feminist approach attempts to understand the production of women's sexuality and

objectification. For MacKinnon, the construction of sexuality "centers on aggressive intrusion on those with less power" (1989, 127). Work which foregrounds women's sexuality necessarily undergirds male sexual dominance and sexual hierarchy (1989, 127) because it "constructs women as things for sexual use and constructs its consumer to desperately want women, to desperately want possession and cruelty and dehumanization" (MacKinnon 1989, 167). While MacKinnon's perspective helps denaturalize sexuality, indicating that it does not exist in a pre-social vacuum, it negates the possibility of theorizing agency in relation to sex work.

Similar to MacKinnon, Andrea Dworkin identifies unequal power relations between the sexes as fundamental to the production of social reality. In this framework, pornography is one vehicle through which male domination is legitimized. According to Dworkin, pornography is "inextricably tied to victimizing, hurting, exploiting" (Dworkin 1981, 69). Because they are defined by men, women are automatically denied freedom of choice. MacKinnon and Dworkin, in attempting to explain the social and economic conditions which render women passive sexual objects, actually reinforce the notion that women who participate in sexualized labor lack agency. Any pleasure derived from sexuality or sex work must logically be reduced to false consciousness. Such analytic constructions of sex work are paralyzing. They elide any possibility of locating agency outside of unconstrained freedom, and preclude analysis of the ways in which women experience their sexuality through neoliberal language of economic freedom and choice.

While she does not view all sexual experiences as necessarily oppressive, Kathleen Barry argues against the commodification of sexuality, stating that it "disengages sex from its human experience…[and] increasingly is becoming the model for private sexual behavior" (Barry 1995 in Chapkis 1997, 15). On the other side of the debate, *sex radical* feminists like Gloria Steinem argue that sexuality is "rooted in eros or passionate love, and thus in the ideal of

positive choice, free will, the yearning for a particular person" (Steinem 1978, 54). Barry and Steinem's views, though not identical, create a rigid divide between autonomous, empowering articulations of sexuality and commodified, oppressive articulations, sidestepping the notion that under neoliberalism, pleasure and sexuality are always already mediated by power. As Melissa Gira Grant has argued, sexualization exists. However, attempts to curb it are not automatically rendered into more autonomy for women unless there is "a complementary demand for women's freedom, sexual and otherwise" (Grant 2014, 85-6).

Counter to radical feminist views, Catherine Hakim's analysis helps us envisage women's agency with regard to sexuality. Hakim advances a theory of *erotic capital*. However, she assumes that sexuality is simply an economic asset; a strategy one can mobilize for better economic returns (Hakim 2010; Mears 2014). From Hakim's perspective, women "have more erotic capital than men, and this gives them a significant potential advantage in negotiations with men" (Hakim 2010, 505). While Hakim's analysis is helpful in developing a theory that accounts for erotic capital, her strictly economic approach is grounded in neoliberal rationality of marketization. As Wendy Brown puts it, such views support neoliberal agendas in which, for example, "one might approach one's dating life in the mode of an entrepreneur or investor" (Brown 2015, 31). Further, it relies on a simplistic theory of sexual difference, and ignores the processes by which sexuality is converted into market value. It also overlooks the non-economic consequences of sexuality. While a theory of agency is operable within this framework, it relies on liberal figurations of freedom while offering few tools to explore "what power relations define beauty" (Mears 2014, 1330).

The final section engages with literature dealing more directly with *aesthetic labor*, which Ashley Mears defines as "work in which individuals are compensated, indirectly or directly, for their own body's looks and affect" (Mears 2014, 1330). Mears argues that aesthetic labor

is a useful theoretical tool because it foregrounds the processes by which sexuality is converted into value. The concept can help "show how evaluations of bodies are constructed within organizational and market contexts" (Mears 2014, 1331). Importantly, aesthetic labor is a "gendered practice" (Mears 2014, 1338), one that Melissa Tyler and Steve Taylor implicate in the prevailing notion that looking good is "women's work" (1998, 165). Mears also notes that in the contemporary labor market, women's bodies become operative as "sign-bearing" capital (Skeggs 2004, 22) far more often than men's bodies (Mears 2014, 1338).

A pattern emerges in definitions articulated by theorists of aesthetic labor. Chris Warhust and Dennis Nickson define aesthetic labor as "the mobilization, development and commodification of employees' corporeality", where employers thus "appropriate, transmute, and control" worker's corporeality for commercial rewards (Warhurst & Nickson 2009, 389). Jan Karlsson's definition states that "aesthetic labor means corporeal dispositions in people that employers can commodify and exploit to their advantage when competing with other firms" (Karlsson 2011, 54). Mears' more precise formulation of aesthetic labor includes "how worker corporeality is appropriated and transmuted for commercial benefit" (Mears 2014, 1330). Mears further elaborates, pointing out that "customers also enact control over workers' bodies" (Mears 2014, 1335).

Commodification, *appropriate*, *transmute*, *control.* The language in each definition is consequential. It suggests that those who participate in aesthetic labor are resolutely passive and at the mercy of employers – and broader neoliberal labor structures. Although their approaches to understanding both sexuality and sex work differ significantly, the scholarship with which I have thus far engaged advances theories and definitions which implicitly depend on a universalized conception of a subject who can or cannot achieve freedom from power.

For MacKinnon, Dworkin, and other radical feminists, sex work is always already oppressive, agency is only achievable *exterior* to fields of power. For Hakim, agency corresponds with the freedom to exploit one's unconstrained erotic capital in order to reap economic benefits. The aesthetic labor theorists, while they see the importance of structure, seem to unwittingly fetishize it. None of these approaches are robust enough to theorize agency *within* structures of power, and both approaches strictly limit our capacity to comprehend women's autonomy, desires and affects.

These debates, though they have offered valuable insights, do not fully take into account the potency of neoliberal discourses about agency, sexuality, and selfhood. Moreover, they do not recognize the economic pressures women experience as labor becomes increasingly precarious within broader structures of neoliberalism, where individuals must learn to "manage the risk of living in a rapidly changing postindustrial society be being flexible, autonomous workers within a market-driven economy" (Evans & Riley 2014, 17). Under these conditions, sex work becomes a viable and visible means of risk-management, thus requiring a more complicated conceptual framework for theorizing agency, subjectivity, gender, and sexuality.

1.4 Methodology

Scholarship on sexuality, sex work, and aesthetic labor help situate my study. But to truly understand the promo girl's embodied experience and the dangers, pleasures, and pressures in which she is imbricated, I retrace my own high heeled steps. In addition to talking to promo girls about their experiences, I do my best to critically reflect upon my own complicated experience working as a promo girl.

I spent the month of April doing fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area. I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews and one focus group interview. I interviewed a total of 14 promo girls

and one market manager from a major alcohol producer for whom I had previously worked. I began by contacting five promo girls with whom I was acquainted, and used the snowball method to secure the remainder of my sample. Because I am interested in the racial and class dimensions of alcohol promotions, I tried to secure a diverse sample to include as many perspectives as possible. I conducted participant observation at two on-premise promotions and at one special event. I reviewed marketing materials, which helped me (re)gain an understanding of the strategies deployed by marketing organizations to teach promo girls "fundamental tenets about what it means to be a person — an individual, 'accountable,' responsible, self-managing person" (Dunn 2004, 7). Importantly, I also revisited field notes and photos from various times during my five-year stint as a promo girl.

I inevitably entered the field with some preconceived ideas about what I might find because of my position as an ex-promo girl turned researcher. But, following Mitchell Duneier (1999), I I wanted to allow for the emergence of unexpected theoretical categories from my ethnographic data. Although I entered the field with guiding theories regarding power, sexuality, consumption, and neoliberalism, I did not want to strictly impose a premeditated theoretical framework on my interview participants' representations. Like Judith Stacey (1988) I believe that feminist research should be deliberately reflexive, "humble about the partiality of its ethnographic vision and its capacity to represent self and other" (Stacey 1988, 117).

I anticipated several potential methodological hurdles. Promo girls' schedules can be quite unpredictable due to the *flexible* nature of the work. Although I scheduled my interviews well in advance, I was forced to forgo several interviews because girls needed to make money. The same issue applied in terms of participant observation: promotions are routinely cancelled, rescheduled, or moved at the last minute. Because of marketing agency regulations about bringing acquaintances to promotions and the risk of on-site surveillance, I sensed anxiety

when I asked girls if I could attend their promotions. For this reason, I did not attend as many as I had planned. These issues spotlight the conditions of neoliberal labor discipline.

My deep emotional investment in this project has also proved to be a hurdle. I first conceived of it during my junior year of college – the morning after a particularly bad night of promotions. When I complained to one of my anthropology professors later that day, she looked at me and said, "Why don't you study it?" From then on, I entered every promotion not just as a promo girl, but as an anthropologist. Although I did not yet have clear research questions, this perspective helped emotionally insulate me from disparaging remarks about my body, my character, and my (lack of) intelligence from consumers and alcohol industry representatives alike – thus giving me a sense of control and agency in the face of gendered and sexualized pressures of neoliberal labor.

My number one priority is to keep my interview participants safe. Although several participants told me that I was welcome to use their real names, I have used pseudonyms to protect their identities. At no point do I want any participant in my study to feel as though her job or her reputation are in danger. I have worked alongside several of my participants, and have deeply personal, pre-established relationships with several more. As Judith Stacey asserts, "fieldworkers can and do form valuable relationships with many of those we study" (Stacey 1988, 117), and while those participants whom I call friends have supported me in this project since its inception, it is essential to recognize the potential dangers of such intimacy. To avoid any legal tensions with marketing organizations, distributors, and producers, I have used pseudonyms instead of actual organizational titles.

Although I am wholly committed to producing an ethnography grounded in feminist ethics such as collaboration and "reciprocal quest for understanding" (Stacey 1988, 114), the question of authority will not be entirely mitigated. I have produced an ethnographic account. It reads

in my voice and is oriented towards my purposes as a researcher (Stacey 1988). My participants' stories, representations and vulnerabilities have been filtered through my analysis, thus heightening the possibility for symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992). I have done everything in my power to continually acknowledge the inherent partiality of ethnographic representations and, as Stacey suggests "place more of the voices and perspectives of the researched into the narrative and that more authentically reflect the dissonance and particularity of the ethnographic research process" (Stacey 1988, 115).

Although my participation as a promo girl has immense methodological and practical research benefits, I tried to remain critically aware of the assumptions and the emotional trappings I brought to my interview and to the field. Katherine Borland warns against "overgeneralizing about women's experience in its initial enthusiasm of sisterly identification" (Borland 1991, 72). That my experience registered in a particular way does not necessarily mean that it registers in the same way for my participants. I believe that reflexivity can and absolutely should be an ongoing process, and that fieldwork itself is a collaborative process (Borland 1991, 73; Stacey 1988, 114). Throughout the project, my goal has been to navigate my participants' interpretations —as well as my own — with enduring sensitivity and awareness.

1.5 Limitations

Due to time constraints and the snowball sampling method, my study is limited in the number of interviews I could realistically conduct. Although I attempted to secure as diverse a sample as possible, it consists primarily of working and middle class girls in their mid-to-late twenties and early thirties, mostly of Caucasian and, to a lesser extent, African American descent. It is geographically limited to the San Francisco Bay Area, where the cost of living is significantly higher than other parts of the U.S., a factor which may play into the necessity to perform this kind of work. It is also limited in the amount of participant observation I was able to conduct.

It does not an include an analysis of the experiences of male promotional models hired to work at "LGBT" accounts. It focuses only on heterosexual expressions of gender, sexuality, and subjectivity. Broadly speaking, alcohol is a leisure commodity, so it includes forms of consumption that encompass leisure and luxury, and excludes an analysis of consumption of more "everyday," practical items. Together, these factors influence the meanings and the effects of promotional modeling.

1.6 Contributions

This project will chart a more complex, de-exceptionalized figuration of agency which takes into account embodied experience, pleasure, and economic motivation within the context of neoliberal labor structures. It will show that promo girls *and* girls-at-large agentically use discourses about autonomy and sexuality made available by neoliberalism, thus complicating both popular and scholarly notions that those who participate in sex work are either fully free or fully oppressed. In this view, the ways in which girls use ideas about gender and sexuality to make promotional modeling work can be explicitly read as *agency*, even when such agency operates in support of neoliberal power. At the same time, this project aims to highlight the structural dangers and vulnerabilities produced by neoliberal labor arrangements, which are so often masked by their accompanying rhetoric of freedom and choice. Throughout the following pages, I hope to show that there is an ethical imperative to value women's labor choices in a landscape increasingly saturated by neoliberal rationality and diminishing social protections. In doing so, I hope to show that promo girls - while they must meet certain bodily and affective criteria in order to adhere to marketing agency standards — are not merely cardboard babes.

Chapter II – The Alcohol Industry

2.1 Smirnoff & Gay Pride

Every June, San Francisco holds its annual Gay Pride Parade to celebrate the inclusion and visibility of LGBT individuals in mainstream society. Gay pride parades are, as Francesca Stella argues, an "intimation to 'get out of the closet and into the streets'" (Stella 2012, 1827) – a strategy paramount to Western LGBT identity politics. Put simply, San Francisco Gay Pride is a "party with politics" (Browne 2007). Pride parades have garnered a good deal of criticism in North America in recent years due to the increased commercialization and commodification of gay identities (Guidotto 2006). There are LGBT activist group exhibitions, live musical performances, parades, and of course, corporate sponsorship – including that from multinational liquor producers. San Francisco Civic Center is scattered with Smirnoff Vodka branded bars, and if you wander the streets for long enough, you will inevitably encounter Smirnoff *promo girls* clad in colorful bikinis and rainbow headdresses, passing out Smirnoff branded beads and posing for pictures with love-struck attendees.

San Francisco Gay Pride, despite its rhetoric of equality and social transformation, has somewhat contradictory goals. In 2013, I attended Gay Pride as a Smirnoff girl. As I made my way through drunken, costumed crowds, I recall feeling puzzled by the presence of United States military representatives, who were eagerly trying secure new recruits. I stood there in a sequined bikini, asking myself: Where are the radical, transformational politics? Chelsea Manning, then known as Bradley Manning, a self-identified trans woman, was on trial for revealing evidence of U.S. war crimes. Why was no one talking about it? Why were people more interested in me, a straight white girl from the suburbs, passing out temporary Smirnoff tattoos and plastic beads? As I reflect on this experience, I realize that San Francisco Gay Pride *is* political – just not in the ways that I had imagined.

This chapter offers an overview of the alcohol industry in the United States, arguing that its gendered and sexualized valences further illuminate Duggan's (2002) claim that neoliberalism has a "sexual politics." It employs a Foucauldian (2008) view of neoliberal governmentality, thus illuminating the ways in which promo girls experience their sexualities. It explores how girls get involved in promotional modeling, arguing that what makes a *good* promo girl is not so radically different from everyday embodiments of neoliberal femininity. It broadly maps the three-tiered system of alcohol production, distribution, and sales, as well as its relationship to public health institutions, state regulatory bodies and marketing organizations — paying special attention to the often conflicting goals of each. It situates promo girls as key players in the "exchange of aesthetics" (Tyler & Taylor 1998), where particular aspects of "women's work" act as part of gift exchange relations (Mauss 2002) which work in favor of commodity exchange relations, a perspective which supports Gayle Rubin's (1975) claim that there is a *political economy of sex* and that gender itself becomes intelligible through the exchange of women. A variety of gendered and sexualized subjectivities underpin the production, distribution, sale, and marketing of alcohol. A closer look at the alcohol industry reveals key mechanisms of neoliberalism.

The alcohol industry is a burgeoning, multinational business complex spun together by a serpentine network of producers, distributors, and retailers of various alcoholic beverages. Because of its sheer size, the industry also wields varying degrees of economic and political control over government organizations, consumers, and media outlets. Enter any given sports bar, nightclub, or cocktail lounge in the San Francisco Bay Area on a Saturday night and there is a good possibility that you will see attractive, high-heeled, smiling promo girls "making the rounds:" serving sample shots, handing out branded plastic beads, or posing for pictures with delighted consumers. On the surface, promotional modeling may resemble a trivial — perhaps even irreverent — practice, but the smooth function of the entire alcohol industry rests on its

gendered and sexual character.

2.2 The Alcohol Industry & The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism

Smirnoff's overwhelming presence – and the presence of slim, conventionally attractive promo girls at San Francisco's Gay Pride Parade speaks to broader patterns of sexual assimilation in contemporary neoliberal societies. According to Lisa Duggan, "Neoliberalism in fact *has* a sexual politics, albeit a contradictory and contested sexual politics not unlike the equally contradictory and internally contested economic and trade politics that have defined the location 'neoliberal' since the 1980s of Reagan and Thatcher" (Duggan 2002, 177). Neoliberalism constructs itself as a sort of "nonpolitics"– a universally beneficial means by which to promote uninhibited economic growth and democracy (Duggan 2002, 177) and a seemingly *natural* free-market rationale (Brown 2015, 31), but its gendered and sexualized practices extend beyond a simple renegotiation of market and state relations.

Wendy Brown defines neoliberalism as a "normative order of reason" which endeavors to transform all spheres of human experience and activity into economic activity – "even when those spheres are not directly monetized" (Brown 2015, 9-10), thus blurring the boundaries between public and private spheres and complicating the distinction between commercial sexuality and private expressions of sexuality. Neoliberalism was developed in the 1970's in response to vast economic recession and the nonsuccess of government interventions in both economic and social spheres (Kelly 2006; Evans & Riley 2014, 15). Neoliberal politics is a "politics of normalization" (Richardson 2005), and it aims to assimilate not only LGBT individuals, but women and sex workers as well (Di Feliciantonio 2015, 1010). Through projects of inclusion and visibility, neoliberalism strives to create a *demobilized, depoliticized,* and *privatized* workforce of sexual subjectivities that "does not contest dominant

heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them (Duggan 2002, 179). Neoliberal strategies of sexual assimilation are manifest in the use of sexy girls to market alcohol in visible spaces across the San Francisco Bay Area.

The rise of neoliberal labor practices, despite their accompanying rhetoric of individual freedom and choice, have played a critical role in producing destabilizing economic changes which have unequally affected women (Abramovitz 2012, 30). Under neoliberalism, the most fundamental social policy is economic growth. It is not interested in providing individuals with protection against risks, but "according everyone a sort of economic space within which they can take on and confront risks" (Foucault 2008, 144). As part of its assimilation strategy, neoliberalism carves out visible space for sexualized economic practices like promotional modeling. Promotional modeling is appealing to girls because its relatively high pay and flexible hours offer a sort of economic freedom, allowing them to pursue other *interests*, such as school, hobbies, childrearing, or to secure a sort of economic cushion in the face of the skyrocketing cost of living in the San Francisco Bay Area. However, as Foucault shows, the category of interest takes on a distinct meaning under neoliberalism.

2.3 Neoliberal Governmentality

Foucault's work on neoliberal governmentality, or "the art of government" (Foucault 2008) helps us understand how economic fields become tethered to social fields, bodies, and sexual identities, thus creating a biopolitical society. For Foucault, neoliberal governmentality is "a whole way of being and thinking" (Foucault 2008, 218), its central aim to produce a very particular kind of subjectivity (Oksala 2011). It endeavors to shape autonomous, self-regulating subjects who can manage themselves (Foucault 2008, 223-25). Because they are fundamental markers of selfhood rooted in bodily experience, gender and sexuality become foregrounded in subjects' self-regulating practices. Just as gender and sexuality produce natural truths about

the subject (Foucault 1978, 70), the market produces natural truths from which both economic and government processes follow, and through which the category of *interest* is formed. Interest operates as a mechanism that permits the government to indirectly shape subjectivities, practices, discourses and comportments (Foucault 2008, 270-5). Neoliberal subjects, then, are "governed by and through their own interests" (Cotoi 2011, 113) because interest aligns with particular economic and governmental objectives and "is such that it converges spontaneously with the interests of others" (Foucault 2008, 270). Autonomy, flexibility, responsible self-management, economic gain – and for girls, the possession of a certain "girl next door" sex appeal – coalesce to form the naturalized category of interest. Neoliberal "governance through self-governance" is a powerful force because it is intimately bound up with gender, sexuality, and subjective experience (Evans & Riley 2014, 17). In this view, neoliberal self-governance is inherently biopolitical in the ways that it incites individuals to manage their bodies, sexualities, and gendered behaviors.

Neoliberal biopolitics affords girls an array of new sexual identifications, or what Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley call *technologies of sexiness*[4], a term developed from Foucault's (1988) *technologies of the self*. Put differently, girls actively adopt neoliberal discourses "about the self in order to create the self" (Evans & Riley 2014, 18). By adopting these articulations of ideal selfhood (Evans & Riley 2014), girls agentically construct their identities while simultaneously reinstating neoliberal ideals of subjectivity. Maintaining a fit, feminine, sexy body affords girls the opportunity to become "enterprising selves" (Foucault 2008) in control of their own economic destinies – even when work is not at the forefront of their minds. By mere virtue of embodying hegemonic femininity, girls are always already *selling themselves* – an overtly sexual metaphor often used in contemporary discussions about obtaining work.

[4] The term *technologies of sexiness* has also appeared in Radner (1999) and Gill (2007), but I refer to Evans & Riley's more recent conceptualization in the explicit context of neoliberal governmentality and consumption.

Neoliberal embodiment then, is "being in a position where everything counts, up to and including one's most basic subjective and physical attitudes" (Power 2009, 23).

Girls generally do not always seek out promotional modeling work. The majority of girls in my study told me that they were scouted by marketing agencies, or that an acquaintance thought they had the right look and should consider applying. Over iced tea at a cozy café in Walnut creek, an upscale suburb of San Francisco, I spoke with 26-year-old Sasha[5] about how she got involved in promotional modeling. Sasha had just gotten off work, and she was dressed in a chic white sundress that matched her purse and shoes, contrasting sharply with her tanned skin. I had worked several promotions with her, but do not know her particularly well. Still, she greeted me warmly, flashing an elegant and effortless smile.

Sasha grew up in Walnut Creek and also works full-time at a finance office, and was once a staffing manager for a marketing agency. She told me that she felt apprehensive when an acquaintance encouraged her to attend a casting: "My ex fiancé's training partner's girlfriend used to be the supervisor for Jameson. I met her and she was like 'Oh, you should do this, you have the right look.[6]' So I went to a casting not knowing what it entailed." Before this interaction, Sasha had never heard of promotional modeling. Yet something about the way she carries herself, her pleasant features, her fit, slender body, and perhaps the apparent ease and grace with which she handles social situations – her air of *professionalism*[7] – makes her ideal for the gendered and sexualized duties that promotional modeling entails.

My life as a promo girl began in a similar way. At a friend's house on my 22nd birthday, a young woman approached me and handed me a beer and a business card. "I'm an event

[5] Sasha is uniquely positioned because she worked not only as a promo girl, but as a staffing manager for a marketing agency. I consider her a key informant.
[6] I discuss *the look* in more detail in chapter three.
[7] I discuss *professionalism* in more detail in chapter four.

manager for a marketing agency. I book hot girls to promote alcohol at fun events. Want to work for me?" Like Sasha, I felt anxious at the prospect of accepting her offer, but I politely took her card and told her that I would email her later that week. After casually asking around, a promo girl acquaintance told me how much money she made: Twenty-five dollars an hour, with the freedom to set her own schedule. As an unemployed college student living at home with growing student loan debt, what job could be better? I emailed her. There was no interview process – I was hired on the spot.

Promo girls are either hired part-time or contracted with marketing agencies, and they are paramount to the execution and success of experiential marketing programs. Nina Power (2009) argues that agency work is "sold as a type of freedom" which shrouds its atomizing and contingent dimensions. Still, its appeals often outweigh its risks. Although promo girls represent various brands owned by alcohol producers, it is critical to note that they do not receive their paychecks from those producers. There are numerous marketing agencies who contract with alcohol producers in the San Francisco Bay Area. Unlike other service workers, promo girls make a relatively high starting hourly rate, ranging from anywhere between twenty to forty dollars an hour. Promo girls generally set their own hours, responding to "open promo" emails and requesting the promotions they would like to work. I worked for several agencies during my career as a promo girl, but I most frequently worked for Gold Star Concepts, representing Liquore Brands. Gold Star secured my loyalty quickly, in large part because they were the only agency who would hire girls as part-time, at-will employees rather than independent contractors. The majority of marketing agencies do not hire girls as employees, and in recent years, independent contractor agreements have been the most common method of obtaining promotional work. Such nonstandard employment arrangements — such as contract work, "flexible" at-will employment, part-time employment and temporary employment (Kalleberg 2000) — are becoming an increasingly common method of organizing

contemporary neoliberal labor.

The girls who participated in my study pointed out many appealing aspects of part-time, contingent, and contract employment which aligned with not only their own interests, but with the interests of a neoliberal society invested in unrestrained economic growth. I met Maria and Haley at a sports bar in Pleasanton, part of San Francisco's increasingly sprawling suburbs, for a focus group interview. Maria is 31, a mother, and a full-time promo girl. Although she has a certificate in medical office management, Maria decided she would rather work promotions full time. I have known Maria for several years, and was always struck by her calm demeanor and ability to manage a schedule packed with promotions. We discussed the ways in which promotional modeling helps secure free time spend with her daughter. She told me:

> What we make in two hours takes some people all day to make. You have a lot more opportunities when you do what we do, because you have a lot more time on your hands, you know? I would love it if my daughter could get into this while she's in college, I would be all for it.

I met Cara, a single mother and full-time promo girl, on her day off from school at a café near her apartment in Walnut Creek. Cara was dressed casually in sweatpants and a plain white shirt. She told me amicably that meeting for tea was a nice break from studying for exams. Cara is 29, and has returned to school to study child development. She hopes to one day become a teacher. In the meantime, she works promotions so that she has more time to focus on school and, like Maria, spend with her daughter:

> If you were to work a regular job, say for instance you work at a coffee shop, you get paid, let's say, 15 dollars an hour. You work the whole day, say about 6 hours. Do the math, what is that, about 90 dollars? Versus me working for three hours and getting the same amount. So if you balance it out, you have more time on your hands but you're

> getting paid the same as if you were to work a full shift.

Both Maria and Cara view promotional modeling as a way to make use of a system that encourages individuals to think of themselves as autonomous and responsible for their own welfare (Evans & Riley 2014, 15). Like Maria and Cara, I enjoyed the autonomy and relative economic freedom that promotional modeling provided during college. I also became more keenly aware of my physical appearance, spending money on makeup and spending more time at the gym. As subjects governed by economic rationality, promo girls' sexual and bodily capital become the source of their own interests and earnings. High hourly wages and flexible schedules quietly disguise the contingent nature of the work, along with its lack of benefits and organizational recourse for instances of verbal and sexual harassment.

Despite the perks of freedom and flexibility often associated with promotional modeling, several girls also expressed frustration at independent contractor arrangements. They frequently pointed out tax difficulties that cropped up when agencies utilize 1099 tax forms and thus do not take out taxes, leaving the "enterprising self" (Foucault 2008) with the burden of responsibility. While comparing Gold Star to Strive Models, another marketing agency that hires girls as independent contractors, Vicky, a 24-year-old buyer in the health and beauty department at Whole Foods Market, remarked:

> The part that pissed me off was that I was 21 and I didn't know, because my parents lived across the world, I didn't know anything about how a 1099 affects your fucking taxes. I remember that I totally got screwed over by that. Because I did my taxes, and they don't take taxes out of your paycheck with the 1099. So then I owed money.

Vicky has been living on her own since she was about 17. She lives in San Francisco, where rent is exorbitantly high. Like many girls living in the Bay Area, Vicky needed another job to make ends meet. Anne, a 27-year-old ex-promo girl who works as a property manager and

leasing consultant, recounted her unpleasant experience working as an independent contractor. Ann lives in Fairfield – the furthest reaches of the Bay Area, where rent is still moderately affordable. Although I offered to meet her in Fairfield, she told me that she did not want to make me drive and that we could meet halfway. We met at a coffee shop in the small town of Martinez. Ann had been struggling financially. She worked part-time as a sales assistant at a department store and filled up all her free time with promotions. Although she felt as if she was constantly working, she could still barely make rent. She remembered feeling incredulous at the thought of possibly having to pay when she did not make that much income in the first place:

> That's how I got fucked on my taxes. I ended up owing money, because I didn't know they weren't taking taxes out. I remember hearing that I might owe some amount because of what I had made for Strive. I was like, really? How do I owe money? Like, how do *I* owe money. And then I looked, and it was Strive, because they didn't take any taxes out.

Girls do not blindly or unreflectively take up neoliberal constructions of subjectivity wholesale, but rather choose certain aspects while contesting others. Both Vicky and Ann said that they stopped working for Strive after these experiences, and looked to Gold Star for the majority of their work. Their decisions show how individuals participate in shaping structures: by accepting, challenging, and reshaping the discourses available to them. At the same time, Foucault reminds us that risk management is a part self-management (2008, 144), and thus a part of neoliberal subjectivity, further complicating simplistic figurations of agency. In what follows, I outline the complex structure of the alcohol industry, arguing that it adheres to Foucault's understandings of the workings of power in the neoliberal enterprise society.

2.4 Regulation & The Three-Tiered System

Power permeates various interwoven strata in the alcohol industry, thus convoluting the notion that girls can only enact agency in opposition to a central source of power. Indeed, there is no "central point" of power in the alcohol industry, nor is there a central point in the multiple institutions which attempt to control its activity. Similar to sexuality, alcohol consumption functions "not only in an economy of pleasure, but in an ordered system of knowledge" which requires "an entire machinery for producing true discourses concerning it" (Foucault 1978, 69). It is segmented into a three-tiered system made up of distinct but overlapping enterprises: producers, distributors, and retailers. Each tier is subject to both federal and state regulations. At the federal level, regulations mediate labeling, alcohol content of wine, beer, and liquor, as well as tax rates, distribution, and advertising. State agencies control licensing to sell alcohol at various establishments. The primary state regulatory body which controls alcohol licensing to sell in California is the California Department of Alcoholic Beverage control, or ABC.

Licensing for retailers of alcoholic beverages is broken into two categories: on-premise and off-premise. Establishments where consumers can purchase drinks for immediate consumption — such as bars, restaurants, lounges, nightclubs, and sports arenas — receive on-premise licensing, and those where consumers can purchase full bottles for later consumption, such as convenience stores, liquor stores, and supermarkets receive off-premise licensing. The three-tiered system is structured so that only producers can to sell to distributors, and only distributors can sell to retailers. Producers will often build contracts with distributors in order to avoid conflicts of interest, such as two rival distributors striving to sell the same products. For example, Liquore, the world's largest producer of distilled spirits, recently signed a new a distribution contract with Evergreen Wine & Spirits. This means that only Evergreen can sell Liquore brands to retail establishments in California.

Although all three tiers share a common goal, each individual tier may be subject to varying laws state controls and regulations, and has its own attitudes and objectives — a matter which will become important for understanding the conflicting pressures from various tiers that promo girls negotiate. Producers frequently attempt to influence state laws so that consumers must assume responsibility for safe consumption practices. When that fails, however, they may try to offset responsibility onto retailers of alcoholic beverages. In either case, producers generally escape liability and are not held accountable for any harm caused by their products (Williams & Yoast 2004, 5). The trend of producers offsetting liability into other organizations is also highly visible with regard to alcohol marketing.

Foucault's notion of the neoliberal "enterprise society" is clearly visible in the structure of the alcohol industry. Contrary to the liberal, homogeneous commodity-oriented societies theorized by Marx, neoliberal societies are "not oriented towards the commodity and the uniformity of the commodity, but towards a multiplicity and differentiation of enterprises" (Foucault 2008, 149; Cotoi 2011, 114). The formation of a society structured by multiple enterprises, a society in which each individual is an enterprise in and of themselves and in which individuals must *sell themselves* is a society in which multiple centers of power proliferate, thus increasing the probability of altercations between enterprises and the need for legal mediation (Foucault 2008, 149-50).

2.5 Marketing Agency or *Legal Loophole*?

Although marketing agencies are not straightforwardly built into the three-tier system, they are bound up in the neoliberal enterprise structure of the alcohol industry. They work closely with representatives from both the producer and the distributors. Control of the production and proliferation of brand identities ultimately lies in the hands of brand teams from the producer, but many producers sign contracts with third-party marketing organizations to help them

engineer and execute marketing programs. Once a contract is signed, brand teams begin to work out their promotional budgets. They may either provide marketing agencies with a large lump sum of money upfront or reimburse agencies for their own expenditures. Over an extravagant lunch at a posh sushi bar in Walnut Creek, a market manager and long-time friend named Kevin from producer Le Papillon Spirits revealed that marketing agencies operate as a sort of "legal loophole" for producers and distributors. Kevin used to be an event manager for a marketing agency called NRG, and I had previously worked several promotions for him. He was one of the few people I had met in the industry who displayed concern for promo girls' safety and general well-being. When I called him asking to set up an interview, he eagerly obliged.

"It's less of a liability," he said matter-of-factly, his eyes half scanning me inquisitively and half scanning the drink menu to check how many of his brands had achieved permanent menu placement. "They take out a bunch of insurance policies, so if anyone gets sued, it's the agency, not us." He smiled demurely and asked our waiter if there was any *pisco*, a brandy produced in wine-making regions of South America, available on the menu. "We just acquired this new pisco. I want to see how it stands up to what they have here. So what else do you wanna know about marketing agencies?" When I asked Kevin to tell me more about the benefits of hiring a marketing agency, he explained that it was a legal way to "pay off" accounts. Because the money that promo girls use to buy back bottles of alcohol at promotions is simply part of a "promotional budget" provided to the marketing agency by the producer, sales reps from the distributor can easily request a bar spend much larger than the retail price of that bottle.

During this conversation, I casually asked Kevin to describe his vision of the ideal promo girl. "Well, for your standard bar promo, you don't want a girl that's too hot. Hot girls don't work as hard. You always want to have hotter girls, you know, like you and Haley, for special

events." He flashed me a sly smile as I rolled my eyes. "The perfect promo girl is a 7 that looks like an 8.[8] She's got a girl-next-door vibe, she's cheerful, she's sweet." Kevin's insights reveal the ways in which the neoliberal structure of the alcohol industry is built on embodiments of everyday, hegemonic femininity, and speaks to the criteria used by marketing agencies to scout girls. However, as I will show later, promo girls can and do contest this structure, even while fundamentally upholding it. In the last section of this chapter, I describe the organization of promotions, arguing that promo girls are utilized in gift exchange relations (Mauss 2002) which occur alongside commodity exchange relations.

2.6 Alcohol Promotions & *The Exchange of Aesthetics*

Under supervision from the producer, distributors and marketing agencies work together to prearrange promotions at both on and off-premise retailers, or *accounts*. Brand teams from the producer work together to come up with budgets for the promotional allowances of various brands, information which they will then pass along to both the distributor and the marketing agency. For instance, Liquore's Ketel One vodka brand team[9] will alert Evergreen Wine & Spirits[10] and Gold Star[11] that they have set aside a budget which will allow for 100 on-premise Ketel One promotions. It is the distributors' responsibility to "sell in" or schedule promotions, which are then sent to the marketing agencies so that they can book girls to execute those promotions. Generally, a sales representative, or *rep* as they are commonly referred to in the industry, will enter one of his accounts in hopes of selling as many cases of a particular brand as the account will agree to purchase. Reps use the promise of promotions — and girls— as leverage to incite account managers to purchase cases, thus explicitly linking girls to circuits

[8] Here, Kevin refers to the "1-10 scale" commonly used by men to "rate" women's physical appearance.
[9] From the producer.
[10] The distributor.
[11] The marketing agency.

of commodity exchange.

Broadly speaking, there are two main types of events that promo girls execute. Events which take place at bars, restaurants, lounges and nightclubs are called on premise promotions, and those which take place at convenience stores, liquor stores, and supermarkets are called off premise promotions, or demos. Depending on the time of year, promo girls will also work industry events and special consumer events such as scotch tastings, and holiday pub crawls.[12]

Demos generally last about three hours, and they can either be wet or dry. Marketing agencies identify two types of off-premise accounts: independently owned liquor stores, and larger chain retailers, such as supermarkets. Promo girls are responsible for roping off the designated sampling area and displaying appropriate signage indicating that only those over the legal drinking age may enter and receive a sample. Failure to adhere to these rules have serious material repercussions, including substantial fines, the temporary or permanent loss of accounts, and in some cases, the immediate fire of promo girls.

At on-premise promotions, girls enter accounts wearing sexy branded uniforms and furnishing free giveaways, sample cups, and importantly, a road check or credit card. Road checks and credit cards are used to "buy back" a bottle of whichever liquor the rep has recently sold to the account. The girls circulate the account, cheerfully greeting consumers, communicating key brand facts, and using the bottle to pour samples which they carry around on a tray. To help the promotion, the account will frequently offer a discount on drinks prepared with the featured brand. Unlike off-premise promotions, promo girls do not sell bottles. In some cases, they do not even sell drinks.

In the service of producers and sales reps, promo girls assume the role of *the gift* (Mauss 2002).

[12] I discuss pub crawls in greater detail in chapter 4.

In Maussian terms, the gift is an object or service that exceeds the purely formal aspects of commodity exchange. Gifts are power-laden (Mauss 2002, 41) because they are oriented towards mediating a broad range of social relations — legal, economic, political, and so forth. Gift transactions symbolically and materially alter social fields, and it is this fundamental aspect from which gifts draw their power. According to Gayle Rubin, the exchange of women defines and shapes gendered power relations and "is more profound than the result of other gift transactions, because the relationship established is not just one of reciprocity, but one of kinship" (Rubin 1975, 173-74). Importantly, Rubin points out that this exchange "does not necessarily imply that women are objectified" but it does create a sort of stratification between the giver and the gift, so that "women are no longer in the position to realize the benefits of their own circulations" (Rubin 1975, 174).

While Rubin's insights are valuable in showing how gendered power relations are forged through gift exchange relations, I would like to suggest that promo girls are often very aware of their roles in these exchanges. As 29-year-old Ava and I shared stories about our experiences at on-premise promotions, she looked at me and grinned. "There are a lot of politics with the reps. Do we even sell drinks at bar promos?" she asked knowingly. Ava is hardworking and consistently busy. She lives with her boyfriend in Vallejo, a lower-income city in San Francisco's East bay. She commutes to Daly city to work at a finance office, and she is also enrolled in classes at a nearby community college, preparing to apply for ultrasound technician programs. Like Ava, many girls come to understand the sales strategies employed by reps, especially when they are repeatedly sent to accounts that do not sell much product. While drink sales are important, alcohol promotions are fundamentally about articulating the raced and classed values invested in products in fundamentally gendered and sexual terms.

Still, the gift's social and economic power is evident in the way in which reps strategically use

the promise of sexy girls and a hefty road check to help support the "formal, contractual relations of commodity exchange" (Tyler & Taylor 1998, 166). From this perspective, the promo girl's primary job is not to sell drinks as *such*, but to mediate positive relations between reps and accounts, distributors, retailers, and consumers, while at the same time, investing the product with sexual meaning. In this *exchange of aesthetics* (Tyler & Taylor 1998), promo girls' sexualized labor occurs outside of the formal transactional relationship between the rep and the account. Although promo girls are told to encourage drink sales, it is not at all uncommon to leave an on-premise promotion having sold nothing. But this does not necessarily mean that the promotion was a failure. The account still receives a relatively large sum of money for a bottle, much larger, in fact, than the retail price of that bottle — regardless of how many featured drinks are sold during a promotion. For example, a bottle of Captain Morgan rum that retails for roughly around eighteen dollars may be bought back from an account for one hundred seventy-five dollars. In addition to facilitating a critical economic exchange, the aesthetic appeal of promo girls adds value and a kind of social distinction to the account. Account managers will frequently publicize promotions themselves in hopes that the presence of sexy girls will encourage consumers to come, regardless of whether or not they actually purchase the featured drink. By scheduling promotions, reps can effectively — and legally — pay off accounts, in hopes that those accounts will continue to purchase cases of liquor. The exchange of aesthetics in the alcohol industry articulates its gendered logic.

2.7 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have mapped the organization of the alcohol industry in order to reveal its gendered and sexual character. Neoliberalism has "reorganized the social world into market terms" (Evans & Riley 2014, 30), and the alcohol industry's marketing practices illuminate the sexual politics of neoliberalism – a politics which aims to assimilate and valorize commercial

sexuality and sexual subjectivity in the name of the market, while simultaneously eroding fundamental social protections. Promotional modeling, a practice in which gender and sexuality are foregrounded, mediates the exchange of commodities and invests them with meaning. I have shown that neoliberal biopolitics uses the language of autonomy, choice, and responsibility to shape bodies and subjectivities, and that the ideal promo girl is fundamentally an embodiment of everyday expressions of hegemonic femininity. These preliminary arguments thus lay the foundations of subsequent arguments: that alcohol promotions reinstate racial and class hierarchies in a gendered and sexual tenor, and that we need a more critical language with which to engage with agency in the context of neoliberalism. As I will continue to show, promotional modeling forms a basis for understanding articulations of neoliberal subjectivity, embodiment, consumption, gender, and sexuality.

Chapter III - *The Look*: Race, Class, Embodiment & Consumption

3.1 *Commodities Have Social Lives*

In chapter one of *Capital*, Karl Marx writes: "The mystical character of commodities does not originate [therefore] in their use value" (Marx 1989, 82). For Marx, commodities assume a social form because the labor which produces them is inherently social. In his essay "Commodities and the Politics of Value," Arjun Appadurai suggest that "commodities, like persons, have social lives" (Appadurai 1986, 3). Commodities can be defined as "objects of economic value" (Appadurai 1986, 3), and although economic exchange produces value, Appadurai argues that it should not be misunderstood as an innate, naturally occurring commodity characteristic. In other words, commodities cannot so easily be reduced to their production or exchange value. Appadurai advances the idea that a commodity's value is in part determined through the judgements made about it by subjects (Appadurai 1986; Simmel 1978). But how do such subjective judgements about commodities arise? Or, put differently, what power relations define taste?

In this chapter, I use Appadurai's claim that *commodities have social lives* as a starting point to explore the raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized dimensions of alcohol marketing and consumption. If we accept Appadurai's assertion that we must "follow the things themselves, for their meanings are inscribed in their forms, their uses, their trajectories" (Appadurai 1986, 5), we will be better able to grasp the promo girl's critical role in embodying, or *making bodily* – and thus naturalizing – the raced, classed, and sexualized meanings that come to be associated with a wide array of branded wines, beers, and liquors. As my interview participants show, gender, sexuality and knowledge underwrite power and the politics of alcohol marketing and

consumption. As market researchers and *walking billboards* with sex appeal, promo girls bring brands to life.

Why is Captain Morgan rum "the life of the party?" How does Moet-Hennessey come to be known as a *luxury* brand? Borrowing insights from Pierre Bourdieu, I describe the ways in which alcohol promotions become implicated in patterns of racial, class, gender, and sexual stratification. I read these insights alongside George Mosse's (1985) concept of *middle class respectability*, arguing that promo girls articulate class through varying degrees of bodily presentation and control. Their active embodiment of brand values works to reify a *habitus* of alcohol consumption through shaping and reshaping consumer preferences. Neoliberalism stresses the importance of consumption practices because they "allow people to create themselves as authentic individuals" (Evans & Riley 2014, 21). Returning to Foucault, consumption-related practices such as promotional modeling can be better understood as *technologies of the self* (Foucault 1988) or more explicitly, *technologies of sexiness* (Evans & Riley 2014); tools available to individuals for shaping sexualized subjectivities.

I challenge the notion that consumption is merely an oppressive tool for ideological domination (Adorno & Horkheimer 2002). Although neoliberal subjectivities are constructed through the rhetoric of choice (Evans & Riley 2014), I aim to show that consumption practices can be productive (Appadurai 1986; Lunt & Livingstone 1992; de Certeau 2013), and alcohol promotions are sites where promo girls give brands meaning. Promo girls agentically mediate the relationships between consumers and brands, but they help also produce systems of *habitus* – embodied, naturalized hierarchies of race, class, gender, and sexuality. Through the narratives of my interview participants, I hope to show the ways in which the raced, classed, and sexualized valences of on and off-premise alcohol promotions come to bear on the lives of

promo girls themselves, and what kinds of economic and bodily vulnerabilities and exclusions that they can potentially produce.

3.2 *Being the Brand: Habitus* & Embodiment

Much like Foucault (1978), Pierre Bourdieu understands the construction of subjectivity to occur within a nexus of structure and agency. Bourdieu argues that individuals both structure and are structured by the social spaces in which they live (Bourdieu 1984, 169). He introduces the notion of *habitus* (Bourdieu 1984, 169-70) to better conceptualize the mechanisms – or, as Foucault (1988) might say – the *technologies* which link structure and agency. For Bourdieu, habitus is "not only a structuring structure, but a structured structure, which organizes practices and perceptions of practices" (Bourdieu 1984, 170).

As brand ambassadors and *the faces of the brand*, promo girls actively participate in the gendered and sexualized production of brand value, thus shaping consumers tastes for and judgements of a variety of brands of alcohol. In short, promo girls construct a habitus of alcohol consumption, or in Foucauldian terms, become intricately bound in the production of *technologies* of alcohol consumption. Here, technologies refer to the institutional level at which various self-making practices are organized, or what Foucault calls "mechanisms with a double impetus: pleasure and power" (Foucault 1978, 45).

The promo girl takes on an extra-special role in the world of alcohol marketing. While she may not be directly involved in the planning and budgeting of elaborate marketing programs, she is responsible for their execution and evaluation and, most importantly, for *being the face and the body of the brand*. When I asked my interview participants what marketing agencies emphasize as the most important aspect of being a promotional model, they repeatedly told me that being the brand registered as the most crucial expectation. While sitting on the grass near San Francisco's Cathedral Hill, 25-year-old Julia and I discussed the most important aspects of

promotional modeling. Her love of fashion is reflected in her trendy black crop top, oversized sunglasses, ripped jeans, and bleached blonde hair. Julia is a full-time promo girl who lives in San Francisco and gave up work in the corporate world so she could take on the challenge of "filling up an empty calendar with promotions." Julia has years of industry experience, and she explained the significance of the promo girls' role in relation to those of brand teams from marketing agencies and producers:

> We're face to face with the consumer, they're [the brand team and marketing agency] not face to face with the consumer. We are. On every single promotion that we do. You definitely are the brand. People are only gonna remember that experience, and and they're gonna associate you with that brand.

Amanda, a resolved and upbeat 28-year-old who works full-time in property management, echoed Julia's sentiments. Amanda lives in San Francisco's South Bay, and she treats promotions with the same focused intensity as she treats her full-time job. She told me in a serious tone: "They grill it into you that you're there to represent whatever the liquor is that day, whether it be Ketel One, Tanqueray, Captain Morgan, Crown Royal. You're the face of the brand." The *Promotional Model Orientation* manual for Gold Star Concepts articulates the promo girl's role through an explicitly bodily metaphor, making it clear that her ability to *embody brand values* – and to actively use her body to negotiate relations between consumers and commodities – are the most crucial parts of her role:

> YOU are the face of these brand: Consumers associate YOU with the brands. YOU bring the brand to life through interaction with consumers. It is required that you are energetic and knowledgeable about the brand you are promoting. Give the consumers an experience to remember. YOU are the eyes and ears for the brand. Please report specific comments and actions relevant to our brands on your event report form.

To facilitate the bodily experiences that promo girls offer consumers, uniforms sometimes resemble bottle designs. One of my most despised uniforms as a promo girl was a short, skin-tight, gold sequined dress with a thick black "JOSE CUERVO" branded belt. Not only was it hot, itchy and uncomfortable, it was unforgivably tacky, making it impossible to blend into a crowded bar. That, however, was the point. Jose Cuervo, an "affordable" (never cheap) tequila geared towards young LDA[13] male consumers, is sold as a means by which to "amp up the energy" at parties. Promo girls are instructed to wear dark eye makeup and red lipstick with voluminous, curly hair. At the promotion, they are told to be playful, outgoing, and extra flirtatious with male consumers, thus linking Jose Cuervo with the prospect of a sexual relationship while at the same time reinstating gendered and sexual hierarchies in which women buttress masculinity (Parreñas 2011) and class-based hierarchies in which "affordable" brands of alcohol become associated with lower-class behavioral and bodily excess.

As Bourdieu indicates, the field of consumption is "a site of struggle" over definitions of high, middle, and low class (Bourdieu 1984; Allen & Anderson 1994, 71). Bourdieu defines *class* as "sets of agents who occupy similar positions and who, being placed in similar conditions and submitted to similar types of conditioning, have every chance of having similar dispositions and interests, and thus of producing similar practices and adopting similar stances" (Bourdieu 1984, 230-231; *see also* 1990, 231-35). Similarly, Lise Sanders identifies class as "the bodily occupation of space" (Sanders 2006, 103), referring to individuals' control their bodies in public spaces. As George Mosse argues, one way in which class is delineated is through moral *respectability*, a concept which emerged in the 18th century in relation to bodily comportment and control. It was used by the middle class to "maintain their status and self-respect against both the lower classes and the aristocracy" (Mosse 1985, 5). With their revealing uniforms,

[13] LDA denotes legal drinking age.

overdone makeup, and flirtatious behavior, promo girls articulate a distinctly lower class habitus in relation to *taste* for Jose Cuervo. For Bourdieu, taste is a socially defined mechanism that reflects social and class hierarchy. In short, tastes "function as markers of 'class'" (Bourdieu 1984, 1), and tastes for particular brands of alcohol reflect one's social and class position.

Yet while promo girls' gendered, classed, and sexualized performances of Jose Cuervo brand values may work to naturalize hierarchies, they can also be expressions of agency. During my focus group interview with Haley and Maria, we discussed the things that motivated us to perform effectively. 35-year-old Haley, a full-time promo girl, is a superstar in the world of promotions. Tall and slender, with smooth skin and glowing auburn, hair she is sought after by many marketing agencies. She told Maria and I that what motivates her is not necessarily instruction from marketing agencies, but her experience of her sex appeal: "I think some of it has to do with how confident you feel that day, how well your hair turned out, your makeup, if it looks extra flawless. And the energy, the vibe you get from the other promo girl. And how hot the guy is that you're talking to. If it's an ugly guy, no one gives a shit." Haley's comments reveal the ways in which everyday, agentic expressions of hegemonic femininity – such as getting dressed up and going to the bar to flirt with cute guys – become tied to commodified expressions of femininity in the production of habitus, further underscoring that it is what individuals *do* in their daily lives that creates, upholds, and shapes neoliberal power structures.

3.3 Promo Girls & Market Research

Promo girls are an integral part of market research machinery that both influences consumer preference and collects valuable data about it. As market researchers, or the *eyes and ears for the brand*, promo girls are required to take photos of themselves interacting with *target market* consumers at every promotional event. Their bodily proximities to consumers at promotions

work in a sort of feedback loop: their outward embodiments reinstating brand values, and their inward assessments informing brand teams of the efficacy of their marketing strategies. This exteriorized/interiorized dynamic is sustained by neoliberal logic which "configures human beings as exhaustively market actors" (Brown 2015, 31) and creates a system of surveillance in which both promo girls' and consumers' subjectivities are shaped.

At the end of each event, promo girls are required to fill out an event report form, or *event recap*. The purpose of this recap is to reflect specific details about the promotion – how consumers reacted to the brand, how many drinks were sold, and whether or not the promotion was executed at the "right account" for the brand. Together, event recaps and photos capture key demographic information about consumers, including their ages, races, gender identities, and socioeconomic positions. As Maria explained, "Every email that we get tells us who the demographic is. We recap back to them to let them know that we did encounter this particular demographic at the account. They use that information."

My interview participants often proudly acknowledged the importance of their roles as market researchers, and were sometimes resentful that they were not recognized or compensated accordingly, as Haley concisely articulated:

> They [the marketing agency] pay us well, but when you think about all of the data and information that we go out to collect, that is extremely valuable. When you look at that, coupled with all the other tasks we're supposed to carry out, they're getting kind of a bargain. We observe people's reactions, we come back with direct quotes about how they feel about the product or their experience with the product.

This research-oriented aspect of the job allows promo girls to constitute themselves as both sexy and responsible subjects – a point I will elaborate in the next chapter. Haley's recognition of her role as a market researcher - one who collects and makes sense of valuable information

– helps supports the claim that consumption-related practices allow individuals to "exercise the autonomy and freedom of neoliberal subjectivity" (Evans & Riley 2014).

3.4 *The Look*

During the course of my interviews, several girls brought up *the look* – especially with regard to luxury brands. Before her Grand Marnier promotion, I asked 27-year-old Alana how marketing agencies define the look. Alana grew up in San Francisco, and works full time as a promo girl while she takes a break from business classes. Alana has a passion for makeup artistry, and hopes to one day start her own business. Because she is fluent in Spanish, Alana is often booked to promote highly racialized brands such as Hennessy, which I will discuss shortly. She explained that while physical appearance is an important aspect, it is not *solely* about physical appearance: "They focus on appearance, but also how to carry yourself. Like no chewing gum, no saying bad words."

Here, I define *the look* as the appropriate gendered and sexualized embodiment that underpins a particular brand's symbolic value, helps define consumer preferences, and ultimately, works to determine consumers' class orientations, thus creating and naturalizing a habitus of alcohol consumption. Different brands necessitate different looks. I asked Vicky how she interprets differences in the required looks for several of the key brands in the Liquore portfolio. She thought for a moment, tucking a strand of golden-blonde hair behind her ear:

> Ciroc, we always did at clubs. We never really did Ciroc at bars. And I feel like Ciroc was kinda more…urban. And young. Captain Morgan, we did a lot in the Marina district [of San Francisco]. It was definitely geared towards bros[14]. I feel like Ketel One was one of the brands where you're a little more…classy and professional. And then Captain Morgan and Ciroc…were more about

[14] The term *bro* denotes a U.S. male subculture often associated with drinking, college fraternities, and sports.

the party. Oh, and Johnnie walker was for sure like, up the class.

Before each promotion, detailed program emails containing brand information, the required uniform (including hair, makeup, and jewelry instructions) and a description of the target consumer are sent to girls via email. These looks also include notes about behavior and bodily discipline. For example, a Ketel One[15] program email describes the Ketel One *lady* as "smart and well-spoken, she exudes class. Polished and clean appearance – think Elizabeth Hurley." She wears a "black cocktail dress, black pumps, simple makeup, and classic, understated jewelry." Alcohol sales, then, are built on the intimate linking of commodities with girls' bodies and behaviors, thus producing the expectation of a sexual relationship – be it flirting, a date, sex – among consumers, illuminating Appadurai's claim that commodities do in fact have social lives.

Promo girls make alcohol consumption look and feel sexy. During our focus group interview, Maria summarized marketing agencies' broad strategy for outfitting promo girls, citing a particular black cocktail dress used for Ketel One promotions: "In that dress…there is nothing you can do in that dress that wouldn't be sexy." However, while are uniforms are sexy, they are not sexy in the same way. When I asked Sasha how men react to her at promotions, she explained that it depended on several interrelated factors: "Well, it really varies. Depending on the brand you're promoting, on what your uniform looks like, and it depends on where you're at. I feel like whenever I work a tequila brand, I'm more looked upon like a piece of meat, if that makes sense. It's the opposite with scotches and whiskies."

Returning briefly to Jose Cuervo sheds light on Sasha's remarks. Tequilas – especially those with lower price points – are often marketed to lower-class Hispanic and white populations, and associated with exaggerated partying and lack of restraint, thus signaling a lower-class

[15] Ketel One is an ultra-premium vodka with a relatively high price point.

habitus. As such, uniforms for tequila promotions are frequently sequined, low-cut, skin-tight. Scotches and whiskies, marketed for gradual *sipping*, is associated with a white, upper-middle-class habitus because of the manners, morals, and restraint (Mosse 1985) required to enjoy its complex flavors properly. Promo girls are outfitted in "classy" cocktail attire, sexy without revealing too much, and told to carry themselves with grace and dignity. In both cases, promo girls' gendered and sexualized performances re-establish raced and classed hierarchies.

Drawing from her dual experience as promo girl and staffing manager for a marketing agency, Sasha told me explicitly about the classed dimensions of alcohol promotions: "There is definitely a class element. I'm not gonna lie. I was guilty of this too when I was staffing. I'm gonna staff a completely different girl based upon how she acts. When I asked Sasha to elaborate, she explained that she would staff "flakey" girls who did not seem to take the job seriously and who she had to have "wear their own black because they wouldn't fit in their uniforms," for less "aspirational" brands, further demonstrating the ways in which manners, bodily control, and respectability mark out racial and class boundaries.

One could easily write a cultural history on luxury brands of alcohol, their accompanying looks, and the racialized and classes spaces that their consumption carves out. For the sake of scope and breadth, the following pages try to unpack the meaning of *luxury* in the world of alcohol promotions. A closer look at luxury brands opens up a space in which the relationship between sexual subjectivities, brand embodiment, and neoliberal ideals of consumer self-making become more clear. Alcohol marketing strategies are deeply invested in creating aspirational visions of upward class mobility among consumers. They also reproduce racial and class hierarchies, and their staffing procedures can at times border on racial discrimination.

3.5 Luxury Brands: An Overview

"Okay guys, here's what I need you to think. You know the redhead in the show Mad Men, what's her name?" It's late afternoon at Fort Mason's Herbst Pavilion, situated in San Francisco's Marina district. I'm standing with ten other promo girls, and we're quietly gathered around Jillian, the tour director for the Johnnie Walker House of Walker Experience. House of Walker, a traveling whisky tasting, was previously one of Gold Star and Liquore's biggest special consumer events between the years of 2010 and 2013, hitting many major U.S. cities. Jillian is sober and ambitious. She is in the process of prepping us for the evening's tasting by explaining how we needed to *carry* ourselves around consumers. "Right, the character played by Christina Hendricks. Joan! That's the one. She's sexy, but she can also hang with the boys. Men love her because she's bold, she's fierce. She's the type of woman who's in tune with her sex appeal, but can still talk about whisky and cigars with the best of them. She's hot, she's feminine, but she's also one of the guys. That's the character I want you girls to embody tonight."

Certain varieties of cognac, whisky, and single-malt scotch - such as Moet-Hennessey, Remy Martin, and Johnnie Walker– are considered luxury brands, and they come to signify much more than one's palate for expensive, high quality liquors. As Bourdieu argues, consumer preferences and tastes function to create what he calls "class on paper" – that is, groups of individuals who, while they may lack a discernable class consciousness, are still socially visible due to the amount and configuration of economic and cultural *capital* they come to control (Bourdieu 1991, 231-32). *Capital* can be understood as both economic resources and social resources –the cultural abilities, experiences, and perspectives which come to reflect one's sense of self and position in society (Bourdieu 1991; Allen & Anderson 1994, 70). From this perspective, a taste for Hennessey, a luxury French cognac, can simultaneously demonstrate

access to economic resources and cultural proficiency.

Luxury denotes a very particular kind of embodiment – debonair, composed, with a taste for nice clothes, nice cars, and ambitions of upward class mobility. Consumers of luxury brands strive to become neoliberal *entrepreneurs of the self*, and promo girls invest luxury brands with affluence and grace. In order for promo girls to embody luxury brand ideals, they must look, dress, and act the part. Sexuality takes on a particularly discriminating meaning with regard to luxury brands. Uniforms for luxury brand promotions are sleek and sophisticated. Make up must be immaculate, and hair expertly styled. Marketing agencies which represent luxury brands frequently emphasize uniformity in promo girls' self-presentations. During a conversation about uniforms, Alana outlined appearance expectations required by NRG, the marketing agency that represents Hennessey:

> Because Hennessey is a luxury brand, they try to keep their uniforms classier. At one of our meetings, an event manager told us, "Oh, we're changing the heel. We don't want you girls to wear those big old platform heels anymore, because they look kinda hooker-ish. So they're trying to keep the nice, luxury appearance.

To be truly successful embodiments of luxury, promo girls' sex appeal must be contained, as evidenced by event managers' distaste for big, platform "hooker-ish" heels. Promo girls must also cultivate their own specific sexualized forms of capital and become consumers themselves, embracing "a sexuality that is consumer-oriented" (Evans & Riley 2014, 8). Promo girls are encouraged to arm themselves with essential items for a variety of brands and promotions: several pairs of high heels, boots, fake eyelashes, red lipstick, curling irons, strapless bras, mini-skirts, and skinny jeans. I met 30-year-old Brianna at a hip coffee shop in downtown Walnut Creek. Brianna, who works full-time at a CPA firm, has been doing promotions for almost ten years. An ex-fashion model, she is tall, athletic, and energetic. She enjoys lifting

weights in her free time, which is attenuated due to her busy work schedule. We discussed the intricate and detailed process of getting promo ready for Hennessy promotions:

> Everything has to be perfect. They give you a manual of how to do your hair and makeup. The uniforms are a lot more elaborate. You'll have a skin tight silver dress, and you'll have headpieces. And you have to have a bunch of jewelry. Earrings and stuff. They want you to have the same shoes. They'll even tell you what lipstick to buy. They'll tell you that they don't want shoes that are scuffed up.

Here, I suggest that key aspects of promotional modeling: sexy uniforms, heels, makeup, and the non-material practices that underpin being classy work together to form *technologies of sexiness* (Evans & Riley 2014), or what Foucault would more broadly refer to as *technologies of the self*, which "permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their bodies and souls, thoughts, and conducts, and ways of being so as to transform themselves" (Foucault 1988, 18). As this term becomes an increasingly crucial part of my conceptual framing, I elaborate it here "to account for women's engagement with material and non-material practices in the pursuit of (hetero)sexy subjectivity" (Evans & Riley 2014, 59). Although they are located within broader discourses of neoliberal subjectivity that valorize sexual autonomy, technologies of sexiness allow promo girls to construct themselves in gratifying ways that are closely tied to everyday embodiments of hegemonic femininity. Girls often model these constructions from consumer fashion trends, further teasing out the conflicting pressures that revolve around agency within neoliberal discourses. Cara explained the pleasure she derives from dressing up for work:

> You also feel like you're in a different mode when you're all dressed up. If you look good, you feel good. So that makes it all easier. It makes it more interesting. It makes it more exciting. Because if you just put on eyeliner and you go to an event and you feel regular…being dressed up makes you feel sexier.

Promo girls use technologies of sexiness to embody raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized values attached to alcohol consumption, animating brands and endowing them with social lives. At the same time, technologies of sexiness are rooted in particular raced, class, gendered, and sexualized ideals of respectability that come to represent systems of habitus, highlighting the tensions between neoliberal structure and agency. As the following pages aim to show, class and race become intimately fused in the ways in which alcohol promotions play out. Alcohol producers and marketing agencies use promo girls to construct very particular classed and racialized hierarchies, which at times subject them to bodily and economic vulnerabilities.

3.5.1 Luxury Brands & Stratification

Luxury brands offer a great deal of insight into constructions of racialized systems of habitus. 22-year-old Savannah has only been working as a promo girl for about six months, and she has already begun to detect patterns in staffing for particular brands. We met at a small coffee shop at about 8:00 P.M. in downtown Walnut Creek before her promotion. Tall and bright with long blonde hair and almond-shaped eyes, Savannah is currently attending community college as she prepares to apply to law school at UC Berkeley. She seemed slightly uneasy about discussing the racial and ethnic composition of NRG's promotional team. When I asked her what stood out in her mind about her first training with NRG, she answered with a tinge of hesitance in her voice:

> Our demographic for Hennessey in particular, is the good looking, young, stylish, black or Hispanic male. We have a lot of diverse girls. A lot of girls are like…I don't know if this is inappropriate, but a lot of girls are different ethnicities, or mixed ethnicities. They're all beautiful, but they're just super different.

Aware of the apprehension in her voice, I assured her that she had said nothing wrong, and that this was actually one of the topics I wanted to discuss. She seemed relieved, and began to speak

more freely. She told me that another agency she had worked for a few times, Emerald Talent, preferred white, blonde haired girls, but the white girls hired by NRG typically needed to have a particular, perhaps unconventional, look:

> Yeah, like I said, there's just such a diverse group of girls at this training. All ethnicities, a lot of mixed girls. Everyone's super pretty. There's only a handful of white girls. But with Emerald Talent…they wanted blonde, white girls. But this is totally different. Or like, our white girls, they are a little bit different. They're unique. Like Haley – don't you think she looks kind of exotic?

Something about Savannah's look – her porcelain skin, almond-shaped blue eyes, and thick golden hair – allowed her to fit the bill for Hennessey promotions. As she points out, white girls, depending on their particular, exotic look – can sometimes be booked for Hennessey promotions. However, several of my interview participants indicated that their skin color and racial identity is sexualized and has deterred them from being staffed for certain brands and promotions. Brianna noticed that she was singled out to work Hennessey promotions, but was often "the only black girl" in other promotional contexts:

> With Hennessy…they contacted me once and were like, "Oh we're doing a special event. We want you to work." I joked with my boyfriend at the time, "Oh, they must need another black girl." I got there and it was all black girls working. NRG has a multitude of different nationalities. But it was all black girls working this event, and it was pretty much an all-black person event. NRG specifically, like for South Bay events, mainly book Hispanic girls, sometimes white girls too. In Oakland, they try to get more black girls. Another racial aspect, besides NRG, is typically, with Gold Star, I was always the only black girl working.

Being "the only black girl" does not necessarily play out favorably for promo girls. Ann and Cara, who are also black, noticed that they were routinely booked for "urban" events, but were purposely overlooked for some of the higher paying special events with longer hours,

specifically with Gold Star. It is worth nothing that, while NRG is one of the highest-paying agencies, girls are booked as independent contractors. This means that making a higher hourly rate when coupled with more hours of work increases the likelihood that girls will have to pay additional taxes as *enterprising selves* (Foucault 2008). Because Gold Star hires girls as part-time employees, it is generally one of the more sought-after agencies. I asked Ann about her experiences working for Gold Star, she explained:

> It felt like I was always put in more of an urban demographic. I didn't really get to work a lot of more prestigious events. A lot of GSMs [general sales meetings] or House of Walker. I remember that I emailed Sunny [an event manager], and I was like "If you want an extra girl for House of Walker, I could do it." And she emailed me back, "You're not supposed to know about that." So maybe I wasn't the look that they were going for. I always wanted to work Pride. I would never get considered for Pride. They had a particular kind of girl. I would get sent no problem to the Oakland promos, you know? I wanted to do more than just the urban scene.

When I asked Cara if she felt as though she had ever been subject to racial discrimination by a marketing agency, she responded:

> Yeah, that's how it was with Gold Star. When I went to a couple of trainings, I noticed that they liked blonde hair and blue eyes. It was just kind of offensive. Cause you won't really hear them say, "Oh, we want a black model with brown hair," you know? You don't really hear that. So…it's kind of, like…a shot fired.

In Ann's example, "urban" stands as a euphemism for "non-white", and her and Cara's exclusions – and the exclusions of other non-white promo girls – work to reaffirm a specific racialized and spatialized habitus, where non-white girls with particular looks are sent to particular kinds of accounts. In the following section, I outline some of the risks associated with promoting racialized luxury brands.

3.5.2 Bulletproof Accounts

Hennessey, Remy Martin, and Ciroc vodka are among brands which attempt to cater to an "urban demographic." This means that on-premise promotions for these brands will often occur at nightclubs and tend to be booked late in the evening, often not finishing until 1:30 A.M. Off-premise promotions are frequently booked at what my interview participants refer to as *bulletproof accounts*. I had worked at maybe a handful of bulletproof accounts during my five years as a promo girl, yet I had never before heard the term – a detail which I believe speaks to my relative privilege as a white girl. Bulletproof accounts are liquor and convenience stores in lower socioeconomic areas with bulletproof glass windows where promo girls are sent by themselves.[16]

Although girls are certainly vulnerable while getting off work at nightclubs at 1:30 A.M., they are at least in groups of at least two or three, and may ask club bouncers to escort them to their cars – though this is not guaranteed, as promo girls are not legally protected by the accounts at which they work. At bulletproof accounts, girls are left entirely to their own devices in terms of personal safety, and as my interview participants show, are routinely subject to harassment from consumers. Here, I want to be expressly clear. I do not mean to pathologize consumers who frequent bulletproof accounts, nor do I mean to perpetuate stereotypes about these consumers. Rather, I hope to continue to tease out the ways in which consumer tastes are deeply entrenched in class-based and racialized hierarchies which are established and (re)enforced by cultural producers (Allen & Anderson 1994, 74) such as alcohol producers, brand teams, and marketing agencies.

As I have suggested, a pervasive marketing strategy among brand teams is to sell not only

[16] At on-premise promotions, girls generally work in pairs or small groups. At off-premise promotions, girls generally work alone.

bottles of particular brands of alcohol, but entire lifestyles embodied within those brands. Purchasing specific brands of alcohol thus becomes a technology of the self (Foucault 1988) for consumers, creating aspirations of upward class mobility that are as simple as purchasing a bottle of Hennessey. This may in part explain an ostensible paradox: the increased focus on selling in luxury brands by producers and distributors at liquor stores in lower socioeconomic spaces. And because promo girls are intimately entwined in the lifestyles being sold by way of their own gendered and sexualized positions within systems of habitus and neoliberal labor structures, they must follow the brands they embody – even at the expense of their own safety.

Several of my interview participants informed me that NRG used to hire bodyguards for their promo girls – specifically for off-premise promotions at bulletproof accounts. However, this practice was abandoned fairly soon after it was instated due to budget cuts. Other prominent agencies, such as Gold Star, do not hire body guards. Instead, they emphasize promo girls' individual responsibility for staying safe. Sasha told me about an experience at a bulletproof account where she had her purse stolen before a promotion. Instead of supporting her, Gold Star took her off the promotional roster for not executing the promotion:

> I was booked for an off-premise event. It was from 8pm-11pm at this little liquor store, a bulletproof account. I literally had my purse stolen as I was walking to the account. Right off my shoulder. I was in tears. I walked to the account anyway, told the manager. My car keys were in there; my phone was in there. Thank god I knew my ex's number. He came and picked me up, and I emailed Danielle [event manager] that night and told her what happened. Never heard back. And then probably a week later, I finally heard from her. Basically, it was an email saying she got a complaint from the rep that an event wasn't executed. Long story short, they didn't believe what had happened. I sent them a picture of my police report, told them exactly what happened. And I just stopped receiving their open promo emails.

Because marketing agencies – and the alcohol industry as a whole – operate within neoliberal

discourses of personal responsibility, promo girls often do take safety into their own hands, but not always in the ways that marketing agencies intend. Brianna outlined some of the tactics she employs for staying safe at off-premise promotions at bulletproof accounts:

> When I do off-prems for Hennessy, I don't stay. I don't think any of the girls stay. You set up, you take pictures, you leave. Because it's not safe. A lot of places are super sketchy. And they still have you wearing tight dresses. So it's like, you're going into a place super done up, with tight clothes on, into the hood, basically. It's not safe. One time, the dress was so freaking tight that I wore a skirt under it. And I just cropped the picture.

Brianna's preemptive approach to personal safety at bulletproof accounts – leaving early and altering her uniform in such a way that it both covers her body and goes unnoticed in the photos that she is required to submit to the marketing agency – shows how promo girls actively engage with neoliberal discourses. As Brianna shows, promo girls can and do learn to re-appropriate neoliberal technologies of subjectivity and personalize them, thus opening up a space for agency in otherwise constraining and potentially dangerous situations. However, it is worth noting that if a white promo girl engages in these particular tactics, she may be reaffirming a classed and racialized habitus in which only non-white consumers and promo girls frequent certain spaces, further complicating our understanding of agency. By quietly leaving early, Brianna is still paid for the entire promotion, while simultaneously offsetting her risk of harassment. She is also negotiating what it means to be "responsible." By altering the provided uniform and strategically cropping her photos, Brianna is able to protect herself from unwanted attention without overtly defying the required dress code.[17]

[17] This becomes complicated in the context of surveillance and *secret shoppers*, which will be discussed in chapter four in more detail.

3.6 Conclusion

As I have shown, alcohol brands have rich and complex social lives that become embedded in raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized systems of habitus, which are supported and naturalized by the raced, classed, gendered, and sexualized embodiments of promo girls. In order to effectively embody brand values, promo girls actively take up particular technologies of sexiness (Evans & Riley 2014) involving behavior, bodily management, and appearance. Technologies of sexiness allow them to *make brand values bodily* and communicate them to consumers, thus investing brands with the prospect of a sexual relationship. Technologies of sexiness are tools with which promo girls make sense of their sexual identities and subjectivities. At the same time, these technologies of sexiness are entrenched in middle-class ideals of respectability and bodily control (Mosse 1985) and in neoliberal discourses "in which women's empowerment is enabled through consumerism" (Evans & Riley 2014, 11).

Technologies of sexiness allow us to see more clearly the coupling between systems of habitus, embodiments of promo girls, and the everyday embodiments of neoliberal femininity. Girls make use of neoliberal discourses of personal responsibility and autonomy as market researchers incited to collect valuable demographic information and as individuals subject to increased bodily vulnerabilities at bulletproof accounts. Promo girls renegotiate meanings of personal responsibility by leaving promotions early, in the process undermining the goals of marketing agencies and brand teams while deriving pleasure from their skills in sexy and professional self-presentation. In the following chapter, I will outline in more detail the ways in which promo girls use neoliberal discourses to constitute themselves as sexy and responsible subjects.

Chapter IV: The Promo Girl

4.1 "Get a Real Job, Sweetheart"

"I bet you don't even know anything about tequila. How much do they pay you to be here? Why don't you get a real job, sweetheart?" The young man seated at the bar in front of me smirked. His friends struggled unsuccessfully to suppress their laughter. Clad in a short, skin-tight black cocktail dress and uncomfortably high heels, I stiffened. My face flushed, hot with embarrassment. I scanned the dimly-lit bar for my coworker, whom I will call Jacqueline, who had excused herself to use the restroom. I spotted her a few tables away, caught up chatting with another consumer.

I took a deep, quiet breath, trying to shroud my anger. I could easily lose my cool, call him pathetic, tell him to fuck off. I glanced over to the bar, where a man in a suit was chatting amiably with the bar manager. "Could that be a sales rep?" I wondered anxiously to myself. Regardless, I would rather not risk losing my job, which was keeping me financially afloat during college. "Well actually," I said with a smile, "Don Julio tequila is made from 100% blue agave. The agaves are grown in the Jalisco region of Mexico, which is known for its rich volcanic soil. What else would you like to know about tequila?"

Although the memory above looms in my mind, it represents just one manifestation of an enduring theme that I encountered throughout my time as a promo girl, and one that many of my interview participants recounted with exasperation. Promo girls are routinely assumed to be uneducated, attention-starved, lazy, promiscuous, and vacuously pretty — assumptions which are reproduced by consumers, industry representatives, and account staff alike. My participants highlighted the tensions between the desire to react and the fear of causing a scene and potentially losing their flexible, well-paying jobs. I asked Alana how she deals with

unpleasant consumers. She pointed out that her embodied reactions are always reigned in. This is in part due to marketing agencies' expectations regarding her role as brand ambassador, and in part due to norms that dictate bodily control, rooted in middle-class notions of respectability (Mosse 1985): "They always want us to be polite. Because of, um, how they say that they want people to perceive a positive image with the brand. They don't want people to be like, 'Oh, the Hennessy girl was super rude' or anything like that." Brianna told me that it's easier to ignore consumers' lewd remarks:

> I pretend it doesn't happen. I worked at the AT&T Park Giants game last weekend, and me and Amanda were telling people "Hey, we're doing samples." And this guy walks up and goes, "I'd love a sample of you." And I just turned around. It's easier just not to say anything than it is to say anything and start some sort of dialogue. But I looked at Amanda like, what the hell.

It's common for consumers, industry representatives – and in some cases, loved ones – to critique promo girls in one of two ways. One: they *enjoy* promotional modeling because it allows them to manipulate a particular kind of embodied femininity and sexuality, which they do because they are lazy and shallow. Unaware that they are being exploited, they cling to affordances of imagined social esteem. Two: they recognize their exploitation, but are, for whatever reason, indifferent. Both arguments present a sort of hapless worker, one who is either too passive or stupid to extricate herself from relations of exploitation. This chapter aims to challenge the above identifications by mapping a more complicated vision of agency, where agency sometimes reinforces neoliberal structures of power. At the same time, it emphasizes that it *is* in fact a hegemonic gendered, sexualized, and embodied selfhood that is integrated in neoliberal labor structures, making promotional modeling an appealing, visible, and profitable form of labor.

I begin with a more detailed Foucauldian (1978) conception of subjectivity to illuminate promo

girls' critical roles as both brand ambassadors and market researchers, arguing that these gendered and sexualized practices produce specific, fine-tuned forms of power and knowledge. I continue to build my argument that promotional modeling is a *technology of sexiness* (Evans & Riley 2014) that, though it is grounded in neoliberal logic, allows promo girls to actively constitute themselves as both desirable and responsible subjects. I use Foucault's (1975) understandings of discipline and surveillance to show how promo girls negotiate their roles and being "self-managed." Following Lauren Berlant (2007), I suggest that a reassessment of the ways in which we think about neoliberal ideals of freedom, choice, and individual sovereignty may illuminate agency as an *active negotiation* with power relations, where agency becomes untethered from simplistic notions of the sovereign self. In doing so, I hope to highlight the conflicting pressures exerted from various points of power contained within the alcohol industry. This approach to understanding subjectivity helps us move beyond stifling debates in which legitimate selfhood and agency are only possible when they are positioned outside fields of power. It also helps characterize the ways in which neoliberalism assimilates and commodifies pre-existing hegemonic articulations of femininity and sexuality while demonstrating how individuals' active embodiments shape and reshape neoliberal structures.

4.2 *Knowledge is Sexy*: A Foucauldian Exploration of Subjectivity

Foucault begins his work on subjectivity with the distinct, historically situated conditions of possibility which allow subjects to become intelligible as such. He asks, "How was the subject established, at different moments and in different institutional contexts, as a possible, desirable, or even indispensable object of knowledge?" (Foucault 1997, 87). For Foucault, subjectivity is constituted through social practices and individuals' actions (Foucault 2011, 159). Subject production, or *subjectivation*, refers to an active, practice-oriented process in which the subject

continually constitutes itself. Aihwa Ong makes sense of subjectivation as a bifurcate process of both subject-making and self-making (Ong 2003, 6; Parreñas 2011), a process through which one's sense of selfhood becomes inextricably linked to one's subject position in the neoliberal order.

In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault explores the ways in which "the truth of the subject" gravitates around the question of sexuality (Foucault 1978, 70). Sexuality is a critical marker of selfhood, and discourses about sexuality produce particular forms of power and knowledge. Because experiences of sexuality are rooted in the body, they become naturalized and thus produce uncontestable truths about the self. Sexuality becomes critical in linking the self to various discourses and institutions, thus creating a biopolitical society (Foucault 1978, 141). In what follows, I present an account of what it *feels* like to be a good promo girl in the words of my interview participants. Their narratives reveal that promotional modeling closely reflects articulations of neoliberal femininity and sexuality. Success as a promo girl means embracing a sexual and professional world in which one's sexuality is foregrounded in very particular ways. Promotional modeling produces a subjective experience in which knowledge and responsibility are inseparable components of sexuality and sex appeal.

Foucault contends that the notion of *technologies of the self* - "the procedures, which no doubt exist in every civilization, suggested or prescribed to individuals in order to determine their identity, maintain it, or transform it in terms of a certain number of ends, through relations of self-mastery or self-knowledge" (Foucault 1997, 87) intersect both processes of subjectivation and governmentality. Following Foucault, Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley's concept *technologies of sexiness* help us "think through the complexities of women's engagement in sexualized culture in ways that allow us to value women's choices of participation, while also maintaining a critical standpoint towards the cultural context within which sexualized culture

has emerged" (Evans & Riley 2014, 58). For Evans and Riley, technologies of sexiness offer a view of agency that does not hyperbolize it or treat it as a necessary source of emancipatory potential, "but instead as something that is produced through play and difference between different technologies of the self" (Evans & Riley 2014, 58).

4.3 Be Professional! Sexy & Responsible Subjects

Promo girls are consistently given sexy, revealing branded uniforms to wear for each promotion. Interestingly, however, none of my interview participants identified sex appeal as the single most important part of the job. While they did acknowledge sex appeal, they placed a greater emphasis on professionalism and knowledge, especially with regard to brand facts. According to Amanda:

> You wanna make sure you have a clean image. You want something very clean and professional looking. It is a job, and I show up to my day job with very clean makeup. Make sure you're put together, like you're not wearing flip flops with your cocktail dress. So it's important, but I think it's more important that you look put together for your job.

At brand trainings, the importance of being professional is repeatedly emphasized by marketing agencies. When I asked Vicky what marketing agencies expect of promo girls, she remembered how frequently event managers stressed professionalism during brand trainings: "They want you to be super groomed, very polished looking. Oh my gosh, the photos. They would go crazy about critiquing the photos. They were really good about telling us how professional we needed to be." In marketing agency parlance, "be professional" is a diffuse way of articulating "be a very particular kind of sexy."

In her study of U.S. flight attendants, Arlie Hochschild (2012) argues that airline companies' ongoing reference to professionalism is a means by which to exert control over flight

attendants' physical appearance, as well as their mastery of a particular body of knowledge. Crucially, she suggests that airline companies link the standardization of appearance and knowledge to personal autonomy, and that this acts as a major selling point. (Hochschild 2012, 103). A similar pattern emerges in marketing agencies' management of promo girls' physical beauty and their own responsible mastery of both brand facts and legislation regarding alcohol consumption. Returning to Mosse (1985), the gendered and sexual dimensions of *respectability* helps illuminate how "professional" operates as a euphemism for "sexy." Here, polite feminine behavior, controlled sexuality, and mastery of a distinct body of brand knowledge produce the "perpetual spirals of power and pleasure" (Foucault 1978, 45) which are critical mechanisms in the art of neoliberal governmentality. Girls' understandings of their sex appeal as "professional" demonstrates one of the ways in which neoliberal labor structures simultaneously articulate what counts as legitimate sexuality *and* commodify larger structures of embodied gendered and sexual selfhood, creating a gendered and sexual system of habitus.

Sasha explained that a good promo girl recognizes that knowledge is sexy and that marketing agencies will more readily book girls who adopt such a perspective:

> They're gonna hire the girl that not only knows her information, but also has sex appeal without being too over the top. She's gonna draw attention to the brand, but she also knows what she's talking about. Be knowledgeable, in the sense that knowledge is sexy. And just putting on a hot dress? It doesn't matter if you're the hottest girl out there. If you don't know what you're talking about, you're gonna get booked what no one else can work.

Sasha's remarks indicate that a girl who "knows her information" will be staffed to work for more aspirational brands and special events, while those who knowledge lacks will be left with undesirable promotions for more "affordable" brands, thus reinstating a classed and potentially raced habitus. Sasha does not outright deny the importance of sex appeal. Instead, she gestures

toward the force which being both sexy and responsible carries. While marketing agencies continue to deploy the shrouded rhetoric of professionalism-as-sex-appeal, promo girls treat the incitement to be professional with the utmost gravity. Here, I identify promo girls' careful cultivation of knowledge as a technology of sexiness – a tool for "sense-making" (Evans & Riley 2014, 59) that promo girls to understand their seemingly contradictory roles as both sexy and responsible subjects.

The alcohol industry deploys neoliberal strategies of sexual assimilation and discourses of individualism and personal responsibility to market alcohol. As brand ambassadors, promo girls are accountable for communicating messages of responsible drinking alongside key brand facts. Many girls view mastery of brand knowledge as a way to assert themselves to incredulous consumers who see them as little more than *cardboard babes*. Although learning brand facts is rooted in neoliberal logic of autonomy and personal responsibility, it does not render girls passive tokens who mindlessly recite brand facts. Rather, it encompasses an agentive process of self-making which, while it complies with neoliberal labor logic, allows promo girls to defy persistent stereotypes in which they are characterized as stupid and shallow. In the following section, I outline the role of the promo girl in greater detail.

4.4 *Discipline* & Promotion

> There's a lot that goes into it, never mind the fact that you're constantly maintaining your looks, and the time and effort that it takes for you to do your hair and makeup and buy all of that stuff that makes you look a certain way. You have to go to these trainings. Just sitting in these meetings, learning the brand facts, learning about what the plan is for that fiscal year. And you have to document everything, because they wanna see what's going on. You have to take pictures and do a report. You actually use Salesforce, which is something that a lot of huge companies use. So something that looks like you're just passing out samples at a promotion…you're inputting data that is used on such a larger scale.

As Julia highlights in the quote above, promotional modeling is work. Although several girls told me that promotional modeling is easy in the sense that one can set her own hours and make relatively large sums of money in short amounts of time, it involves a lot more effort and skill than the performative aspect of the job signals. Promo girls are subject to a range of disciplinary technologies (Foucault 1975): some imposed directly by marketing agencies, some by the threat of *surveillance* from *secret shoppers*, and some exercised through neoliberal governmentality in which girls take up discourses regarding ideal embodiments of sexual selfhood and use them in agentive processes of sense-making and identity construction (Evans & Riley 2014, 18) – a critical strategy in neoliberal commodification of everyday embodiments of hegemonic femininity and sexuality. In what follows, I outline these disciplines, showing that promo girls find creative ways to make use of neoliberal discourses of "self-management."

Promo girls are prohibited by marketing agencies from drinking alcohol at promotions, which often comes as a shock to tipsy consumers begging them to "take a shot with us!" However, it is not uncommon for girls to engage in covert drinking. Because they are *self-managed* – meaning no event manager is present at the time of the promotion – it is possible to sneak drinks when no one is looking, especially in crowded bars. During my group interview with Haley and Maria, we discussed whether or not promotional modeling is fun. Haley explained that drinking on the job makes promotions more fun – and successful – because it mitigates anxiety: "We can kinda let our hair down, and maybe we have some drinks of our own." Maria nodded in agreement: "Which makes it a better event for consumers. If we're having a great time, it's a way better event."

However, a tension arises with drinking at promotions in the context of *secret shoppers* – unannounced representatives from either the producer, the distributor, or ABC:[18] who, as their

[18] ABC stands for Alcoholic Beverage Control, California's regulatory body for the production, consumption, and sale of alcohol.

name suggests, secretly come to accounts to check up on promotions in order to assure that they are running smoothly. Regardless of whether or not secret shoppers attend promotions, the very possibility of their presence "implies an uninterrupted, constant coercion, supervising the processes of the activity rather than its result" (Foucault 1975, 137). For Foucault, surveillance is a disciplinary technique that produces *docile bodies*. Docile bodies are not passive bodies. Rather, they are bodies which *actively* respond to specific disciplinary logics (Foucault 1975, 135-36). From this perspective, docile bodies can still be engaged in agentive processes of self-making, even if they are shaped by neoliberal structures. Through processes of risk-management, though part of a larger strategy of neoliberal governmentality, promo girls agentically bend rules, creating the potential for "a great time" for themselves and "a better event for consumers." Haley and Maria's conversation shows how a particular kind of embodied selfhood: fun-loving, sexy, energetic, and prepared to risk-manage in order to sneak a drink, is transformed into commodified labor under neoliberalism.

Like secret shoppers, uniforms are technologies of discipline. Although physical fitness is not always overtly enforced by marketing agencies, it does occasionally happen. Ann told me about a conversation she heard between an event manager and promo girl at a training: "I overheard her [event manager] say to one of the girls that she's gained a little too much weight. I was like, okay. So that's how they are." Other girls expressed anxieties about getting less work – or at least less desirable work – because of weight gain. Sasha's remarks in the previous chapter about staffing girls who could not fit into uniforms for less aspirational brands sanctions these anxieties. Small uniforms are one way in which marketing agencies *discipline* promo girls' bodies. Uniform sizes generally range from extra-small to medium. Ann and I laughed as we shared our objections to receiving small uniforms when we requested mediums. As Ann puts it: "Sometimes I would ask for mediums, and I would still get a small in my kit. And I'm looking at it, like clearly I'm not going to be able to fit into this. What am I supposed to do?"

In order to assure that they will fit into uniforms – and thus to assure that they will get work– girls engage in disciplinary technologies of sexiness, or *beauty work* (Kwan & Trautner 2009); that is, aesthetic practices that individuals perform on themselves to derive economic benefits. Fitness routines, diet regimens, skin and hair care, and makeup application are forms of beauty work and technologies of discipline that produce docile feminine bodies, optimized for economic gain. As Johanna Oksala indicates, "These disciplinary practices of femininity aim at an exhaustive and perpetual regulation of the body's size and its contours, its appetite, posture, gestures and comportment, as well as the appearance of each of its visible parts" (Oksala 2011, 106).

The disciplinary beauty work that promo girls do is part of a larger structure of everyday, hegemonic femininity, and it has particular consequences for the construction of feminine subjectivity in neoliberal society. These practices, while they are not new in and of themselves, take on new meaning, which has "emerged in tandem with the rise of the neoliberal, economic subject" (Oksala 2011, 112). Neoliberalism produces feminine subjects who agentically engage in technologies of sexiness to pursue their own economic interests. They are, according to Oksala, "atomic, autonomous subjects of interest competing freely for economic opportunities available" (Oksala 2011, 115). Put simply, promo girls and girls-at-large use technologies of sexiness construct a sexy, fun, and agentic selfhood in the terms set by neoliberal market logic.

Another technology of discipline with which promo girls engage is taking event photos. Promo girls take photos at promotions to prove, because they are self-managed, that they actually showed up to work. These photos are either emailed or uploaded to a private photo album for review by event managers. They capture both promo girls' bodily presentations and how consumers responded to the promotion. Photos allow marketing agencies to monitor promo girls' physical appearance and to see that they adhere to particular disciplinary criteria, which

is is referred to as *promo readiness*. Getting promo ready is a sometimes painstaking process which involves applying makeup, false eyelashes, and doing hair to match the right *look* for whatever brand is being promoted. Promo readiness, then, incites girls to engage technologies of sexiness which involve self-building through use of makeup and hair products (Evans & Riley 2014, 59).

Over glasses of wine in San Francisco's posh Financial district, I discussed the process of getting promo ready with 27-year-old Skye. Skye studied fashion in Los Angeles, and works full-time as an event planner for a cosmetic company. She was recently engaged to her boyfriend, and her engagement ring sparkled on her finger. Skye has an eye for detail, as evidenced by her perfectly coordinated outfit and accessories. Skye told me that she found it unfair that promo girls are not compensated for their beauty work:

> I would always say that we should be paid for getting ready. It would take me an hour to get ready, and I would always leave like an hour before the promo to make sure I got there on time, because I was so scared about being late. So it would take me like, two hours before the promotion to prepare.

Skye's remarks, along with her polished appearance, reveal that part of what is being commodified in promotional modeling is a broader structure of feminine "(hetero)sexy" subjectivity (Evans & Riley 2014, 59); in other words, hegemonic beauty practices in which *both* promo girls and girls engage. Skye recognizes this in her comment "we should be paid for getting ready," showing that she does not blindly accept neoliberal frameworks of subjectivity, but instead critically and agentically contests certain aspects, even those in which she actively engages. In the following section, I offer a perspective that does not embellish agency, but takes into account neoliberal discourses in which agency is compulsory.

4.5 *I'm Working*: Rethinking Agency

To better envisage an agency that does not necessarily encompass freedom from the neoliberal ideals of individual sovereignty, autonomy and personal choice — or an outright rebellion against power — I employ Lauren Berlant's (2007) notion of *lateral agency.* For Berlant, individual sovereignty and unconstrained personal autonomy are insufficient concepts for making sense of agency under regimes of neoliberalism, because neoliberalism relies on these logics in its strategies of governmentality. By positing an *intentional subject* (Berlant 2007, 757) one whose expressions of agency must automatically be oriented towards freedom from domination, we severely limit the ways in which we imagine agency, who has it, and who does not. Although Berlant uses the term in the context of obesity and personal responsibility, I find it useful because it refers to particular bodily disciplines with which individuals are expected to engage within biopolitical, neoliberal structures of labor. Sovereignty-as-agency allows certain *technologies of sexiness* to become recast as shallowness and incapacity to free oneself from relations of domination. It de-contextualizes and universalizes agency without taking into account the structural constraints which subjects must actively negotiate. How might we imagine agency when we take into account the variety of constraints that promo girls must negotiate?

Promotional modeling inhabits a paradoxical space in which girls may simultaneously experience a variety of dangers, pressures, and pleasures. In the following sections, I will try to briefly outline the ways in which these forces manifest, arguing that promotional modeling involves a dual process of personal advancement and subjugation. I attempt to "capture the complex dynamics of coercion and choice" (Parreñas 2011, 7) which can help us think beyond overly simplistic framings of agency in which sexualized workers are either wholly free or wholly oppressed.

4.5.1 Dangers & Pressures

Because promo girls are self-managed at promotions, they are offered little or no protection from instances of verbal, sexual, and physical harassment. When girls do try to initiate conversations about harassment with event managers, the neoliberal rhetoric of choice (Power 2009, 19) is strategically invoked: "Well, it was your *choice* to work at that bar, so just ignore it next time you see it on the schedule, okay?" Girls' expressions of agency and autonomy are repeatedly ignored and dismissed, leaving them to deal with harassment on their own accord. Under such conditions, sovereign agency is rendered largely ineffective and re-articulated as *lateral agency* – a response to what often feels like structural stalemate.

Bar staff, though they are sometimes sympathetic towards promo girls, do not have any legal obligations to protect promo girls. As I have discussed, self-management, although it is deployed in the context of neoliberal autonomy, can also work as a technology of discipline. The threat of secret shoppers makes overly emotional responses dangerous, a point underpinning my opening anecdote. When I asked my interview participants how they deal with harassment or how they "cut someone off" when he is overstepping boundaries, an interesting pattern emerged. Almost all the girls I interviewed told me that they used work as a tactic to extricate themselves from uncomfortable situations during promotions. Alana discussed her tactics for evading harassment, explaining how she uses her authority as lead promotional model to assist other girls:

> I'll kind of just, awkwardly laugh. Or be like, "Well, I have to go make my rounds and just kinda head somewhere else. Or sometimes —like lately, I've been put in charge as the lead —so when I notice that [harassment] with other girls, I'll be like, "Hey, you need to go cut some lemons or get more cups," or something to get them out of that situation.

Invoking work, though it may not register as "autonomous self-assertion" (Berlant 2007, 757),

can be understood as active negotiation within neoliberal labor structures. For many girls, it is a reliable means of sidestepping harassment — without having to endanger their jobs. Sasha eloquently highlights the tensions between not wanting to "cause a scene" when cutting someone off and still doing what it takes to successfully cut him off:

> You do everything you can to not cause a scene. That being said, even if you're being the politest person, when someone is belligerently drunk, some type of scene is gonna be made. And I feel like you just have to just walk away. You don't wanna bring that type of attention to a brand. So if someone would say something that I thought was inappropriate, I would just turn around and walk away. I've had people brush their hands on me and I wasn't okay with that so I was like, don't touch me. And then turned around and walk away. I know we're here promoting alcohol, but that is not ok. So if someone is too drunk and they keep following you, be polite, say "Oh, I'm working right now, but I'll come and chat with you at the end of my shift." And you don't go talk to them, you're outta there when your shift is done.

For Sasha, walking away from an uncomfortable situation is not an articulation of indifference, nor does it signal Sasha's incapacity to assert herself. It speaks to the ways in which "agency can be an activity of maintenance, not making" (Berlant 2007, 759) under biopolitical regimes of neoliberalism. Walking away a useful tactic for circumventing situations in which girls do not wish to be involved. Despite the possibility that busying oneself with work-related tasks such as cutting lemons, pouring samples, or communicating brand facts to consumers actually supports and upholds structures of power, dismissing such action as passivity ignores the *lateral* agency involved in fending off consumers without being overtly rude. Such dismissals overlook the degree to which girls must think, feel, and act to mediate their interactions with consumers.

While the threat of consumer harassment is always present, promo girls frequently cope with harassment that arises from within the alcohol industry itself. Although they share a common

goal, sales representatives from alcohol distributors remain somewhat disconnected from marketing agency expectations of promo girls — and what promo girls must actually *do* at promotions. As discussed in chapter two, many sales reps view marketing agencies as little more than "legal loopholes" and the source of money which they can use to legally pay off their accounts. Reps will occasionally schedule promotions at accounts which may not be appropriate for the time of day, brand, or in some cases, the type of account. In order for checks to be legally handed over to accounts, the promotion must be executed in full. This means that girls must sample, take photos, and fill out event recaps. Failure to do so could result in the loss of a job and massive fines. To some extent, reps are aware of this risk. But they often instrumentalize girls, allowing them to take the fall for failure to execute promotions. To complicate matters, newer girls do not always fully understand the structure of the industry and will assume that they must conform to reps' demands, regardless of whether or not they are in line with marketing agency expectations. Sasha[19] explained the tension between reps and promo girls in more detail:

> They'll try to get the checks and have the girls not do the promo. If the account complains, I've had reps be like, "The girls came in and they paid and they left." With the reps, whether you do what they say or not, it's gonna backfire on you in some way. I did have incidences when I was staffing and reps would tell the girls to run the card for the full amount and just leave. So I had a lot of girls who would just leave. And then I would get a call from a rep just screaming at me, pretending he didn't know anything, saying that the account complained that the girls didn't show up. They always try to make you look stupid.

Several girls shared horror stories about reps, especially with regard to Saint Patrick's Day pub crawls. During pub crawls, promo girls will accompany a limo-full of reps, their clients, and other industry personnel on a tour of popular Irish pubs and restaurants. Pub crawls are

[19] Here, Sasha speaks from her experience as a staffing manager.

considered "special" events, which means they are not subject to the same regulations as normal on-premise promotions. Girls generally do not sample to consumers. Rather, they walk around passing out plastic beads, encouraging consumers to purchase a Guinness, Jameson, or whatever specifically Irish brand around which the crawl is organized. The bar spend, normally used to buy back a bottle to sample, is instead used so that reps can purchase drinks for themselves and their companions. Towards the end of the night, everyone — except the promo girls — are inevitably very drunk. Ann bitterly recalled her pub crawl experience, emphasizing how uncomfortable she felt having to spend time alone with five inebriated reps, one of whom made aggressive advances:

> He would just make these really inappropriate comments. And he was hammered. All the reps started to get hammered at the second or third account. We were in the car, and we were on our way back. One of the reps was like, "What do you think, I'm gonna rape you or something?" I didn't wanna make a scene. Like, these are the reps. These are the people who set up promos. He was like, "well, take my number down." He was hammered. He tried to kiss me.

Because reps are "the people who set up promos," it becomes exceedingly difficult for girls to assert themselves. This does not signal indifference or passivity —Ann was visibly angry as she recalled her experience. However, asserting oneself can and generally will result in punishment and loss of valuable work while at the same time, disrupting the gendered and sexualized embodiments that make *girls* good *promo girls* in the first place. Promo girls are often actively aware of their fraught positions, caught at the intersection of conflicting pressures and demands from various points of power. Here too, agency is more accurately conceptualized as "ongoingness, getting by, and living on" (Berlant 2007, 759). While reps try to take advantage of promo girls, consumers offer unwelcome, moralizing critiques. Vicky recalled her impassioned reaction when a young man told her to "get a better job:"

> This guy at a Guinness event, he took me to the side and he was like, "Why are you doing this? Why don't you get a better job?" I remember being so pissed about it. I was just like, "I'm getting paid twenty-five dollars an hour to walk around and do this, and you're the one that's paying to be here. I'm coming up in this situation."

In this account, Vicky is mindful of her place in the system and openly embraces it. Haley makes a distinction between promotional modeling and other forms of sex work: "We're not performing sexual favors; you know? I mean yeah, we're being flirtatious, cute women, but we're also speaking to the brand, and we maintain a certain level of class and decorum." Vicky and Haley's perspectives illuminate how promotional modeling and its involved practices are technologies of sexiness which allow girls to constitute themselves as responsible and sexy.

However, communicating such views becomes difficult in the context of intimate partners. Girls are also subject to pressures from within their personal lives. Several of my interview participants described the strain, and in extreme cases, physical and emotional abuse — that arose with significant others. Sasha described the turmoil that working as a promo girl caused in her relationship: "It actually caused a really big strain in my relationship because he was like, 'How could you possibly think that's normal? You're doing this because you want all this attention, you're probably dating someone and having him meet you.'" Ann's painful experience with intimate partner violence further illuminates such pressures:

> I was starting to do more promos so I could keep up with rent. That's when it got bad. I remember I came home one night, exhausted from work, and I was just laying down in bed. He grabbed me by my hair and threw me out of the bed and was like, "Alright, so who were you fucking? Why are you home this late?" He's been with me to plenty of promos. He knows it takes me a while, because I work in the city mainly. It started to take a toll on the relationship. It came to a point where I would do promos just so I could get out the house so I wouldn't have to see him. But then I knew if I came home, it was gonna be bad.

Although sexual subjectivities become more visible in neoliberal labor structures, tension arises in relationships because partners assume that promo girls are getting paid to do *what they would do as girls anyway*: go to bars looking for attention from men. Like Sasha and Ann, I also experienced ridicule, shaming, and violence from my ex-fiancé, who consistently accused me of "wanting attention from strange men." He could not (or perhaps, did not want) to understand why I willingly "got dressed up for strangers" more often than I did for him, no matter how many times I explained that it made sense for me at this point in my life, so I could pursue other interests, such as preparing to apply for graduate school. Tensions in relationships speak volumes to the neoliberal strategies of sexual assimilation and commodification. Despite its challenging aspects, there are many other aspects which make promotional modeling enjoyable. In the final section, I briefly discuss the pleasures produced by promotional modeling, again cementing my argument that gendered and sexual expressions of selfhood become integrated into neoliberal labor structures.

4.5.2 Pleasures

At the end of each interview, I explicitly asked girls if they thought promotional modeling was fun. The response was a resounding *yes*: nearly all of my interview participants told me that they had enjoyed many, if not most, of their experiences. I too remember a myriad of good times as I reflect on my experience as a promo girl, including but not limited to an industry party where I got to meet legendary DJ Grandmaster Flash. But this is, in part, how the sexual politics of neoliberalism work: through transforming pre-existing practices and embodiments of gendered and sexual selfhood into commodified, profitable forms of labor. Amanda explained that promotional modeling helped her develop social skills, and was a reliable way to locate fun places to go for dinner and drinks:

> I think it's fun. It helps me work on being social. Also being able to go to different bars, that's

> another thing. Checking out the bars in the area. I would travel between San Francisco, the East Bay, and the South Bay. I could be like, "Oh, you know, I actually like this place in the South Bay, maybe I'll come back here sometime for dinner or a night out." I really like the social aspect of it, being able to interact with different people, and you know, representing brands that I actually enjoy.

As Amanda reveals, promotional modeling commodifies leisure activities such as "a night out." By mere virtue of her gendered and sexual identity, Amanda is able to profit as a representative of brands she enjoys. Cara reiterated Amanda's reflections: "I do. I like the club events a little bit more. I don't go out often. But when I do go out, it's mostly because I'm working a promo. So that's kind of my go-out time." As a mother, promotional modeling affords Cara the ability to make money while at the same time, enjoy herself at nightclubs.

Even girls who did not always particularly enjoy the gendered and sexual discipline, or in other words, the "going out" aspect of the work, explained that promotional modeling could be fun because of relationships they formed with other girls. According to Vicky:

> It was fun. I met a lot of great girls. it felt a little bit like a sorority. I really liked all the events we had, like the bigger events, for Guinness and Johnnie Walker. Those were really fun. It was good money, and it was easy. It sucked if you just weren't in the mood to be in party mode, like when it's 9 o'clock and you're so not in the mood to get out of your sweatpants. So that sucked, when that kind of thing happened. But mostly it was easy, and it was fun."

As Brianna puts it, "I mean, I enjoy the girls. I've always liked the people that I work with. But I mean, you always have to smile and put up with people's inappropriate comments, crowded rooms, or people not really acknowledging that you're a person." Promotional modeling can be pleasurable and exhausting – just like any other form of work. At times, it occupies what Berlant calls "the shifting sensual space between pleasure and numbness"

(Berlant 2007, 779). Moreover, it reveals the ways in which a particular kind of embodied femininity and sexual selfhood is fed into the mouth of neoliberalism. The pleasurable aspects of the work – such as getting dressed up, going out, and having fun with other girls – reveals a critical mechanism of neoliberal governmentality: the mutual constitution of economic subjects of interest and feminine subjects who experience their sexuality and their agentic expressions of selfhood in economic terms.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have used a Foucauldian view of subjectivity to help us better understand the complicated relationship between structure and female agency in the context of neoliberal governmentality. Foucault's (1988) notion of *technologies of the self* and more specifically, Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley's (2014) term *technologies of sexiness* reveal that neoliberal labor structures are in part built on the gendered, sexual practices and embodiments of not only promo girls, but through ubiquitous articulations of girlness. According to Evans and Riley, the term *technologies* "conceptualizes individuals as acting upon themselves in order to transform themselves" (Evans & Riley 2014, 60). These embodiments did not originate with neoliberalism. Rather, neoliberalism has strategically invoked discourses of self-building, autonomy, responsibility, and sexuality in order to commodify new spheres of life. Girls agentically use these discourse as tools for sense-making and identity construction, even if such sense-making reinforces neoliberal labor structures.

A Foucauldian (1975) view of discipline accentuates the production of docile feminine bodies and processes of subject construction and governmentality by exposing the active and receptive practices in which promo girls engage to make sense of themselves and their roles. Lauren Berlant's (2007) notion of lateral agency helps us view agency not as an aggrandizement, but as the everyday activities in which subjects engage and the disciplines to which they become

receptive. By outlining the dangers, pleasures, and pressures which promo girls must negotiate in their everyday lives, I hope to have sketched a world in which they are more than cardboard babes.

Chapter V: Conclusion

I began this project with a personal account of one of my most difficult experiences because it introduced several tensions with which promo girls frequently wrestle. It also weaves together some of the key issues with which I have engaged. The increased visibility of sexualized bodies and subjectivities in recent years has spawned a great deal of apprehension (Evans & Riley 2014, 166), evidenced in part by the poor and dismissive treatment of promo girls by consumers, boyfriends, event managers, sales reps, and other industry personnel. Promo girls frequently find themselves on the receiving end of critiques with moralizing tenor – "*you're better than this,*" or, in the words of several of my interview participants, regarded as stupid, disposable, "*pieces of meat"* – or at worst, subject to physical and sexual harassment. I have endeavored to challenge these identifications of promo girls by analyzing how they make sense of themselves and their roles in the context of neoliberal, sexual subjectivity while challenging the view that this kind of work is somehow *naturally* enjoyable or *naturally* oppressive.

My aim in this project has been threefold: to analyze the gendered and sexual dimensions of the alcohol industry (chapter two), to explore the racial and class dimensions of the ways in which alcohol promotions are organized and executed (chapter three) and to consider what kinds of subjectivities are produced and mediated through the practice of promotional modeling, or in other words, to understand how promo girls use neoliberal discourses of autonomy and responsibility to construct gendered and sexual subjectivities (chapter four). Throughout the project, I have argued for a more complicated understanding of agency – one that is delinked from liberal figurations of autonomy as freedom from total subjection.

In order to understand how sexuality is deployed in contemporary neoliberal societies, I turned to Lisa Duggan's claim that neoliberalism has a sexual politics (Duggan 2002), and it has worked to heighten inclusion of sexualities as a means by which to mask deeply anti-egalitarian

policies. By inciting gender and sexuality, neoliberalism secures subjects' support in an intimate, biopolitical sense. These sexual politics of neoliberalism (Duggan 2002) have vast implications for the ways in which individuals make sense of themselves – and for the ways in which we conceptualize agency. As I have shown, neoliberalism uses the rhetoric of choice, autonomy, and individuality to eclipse social and economic inequalities. Agency, then, becomes obligatory under neoliberal policy. The gendered, sexualized practice of promotional modeling – in which sexy, responsible women with extensive brand knowledge market alcohol to consumers as either at-will, part-time employees with no benefits and little or no organizational recourse for repeated instances of verbal and sexual harassment – speaks volumes to the ways in which new forms of labor and subjectivity are organized under regimes of neoliberalism.

Promotional modeling is a site where gender, sexuality, race and class coalesce in sometimes unexpected ways. As I have shown, promo girls embody raced and classed values ascribed to various brands of alcohol, thus constructing a habitus of alcohol consumption while sexualizing and naturalizing commodification of themselves and others. Their sexualized, gendered performances at promotions add to the appeal of alcoholic beverages, making drinking look sexy – experiences they use to construct themselves as sexy but responsible, professional subjects.

Although promo girls are subject to bodily and economic vulnerabilities in the context of luxury brands, they often actively use marketing agency discourses which emphasize safety as a personal responsibility to protect themselves in creative ways. While tactics of personal safety – such as leaving bulletproof accounts early while still getting paid for the entire promotion – undermine the efforts of marketing agencies, distributors, and producers, their racialized and

classed performances at other promotions still work to reinstate racial and class systems of habitus, further complicating our understandings of what counts as agency under neoliberalism.

I would like to return to the question of agency, which has been a primary concern in this project. It is not enough to argue that structures – economic, political, social – shape subjects in a unilateral fashion. It is also not enough to argue the opposite – that subjects are fully empowered to shape the structures in which they live, work, and play. Lauren Berlant has argued that agency can sometimes be "an activity of of maintenance, not making, fantasy, without grandiosity; sentience, without full intentionality…embodying, alongside embodiment" (Berlant 2007, 759). Adrienne Evans and Sarah Riley's *technologies of sexiness* provides a clearer picture of the ways in which women negotiate their sexual subjectivities without falling back into the logic of the "sex war" debates of the 1970s and 1980s.

These debates, though valuable in their claims that sexuality is a social relation, reaffirmed a strict divide between unbridled sexual freedom and sexual oppression (MacKinnon 1989; Dworkin 1981; Barry 1995) while eliding women's agency and creating a binary between passionate and loving expressions of sexuality relegated to the private sphere, and violent, oppressive articulations of commercialized sexuality, relegated to the public sphere. However, as Lisa Duggan has suggested, the public/private distinction which has historically used to characterize liberal democracy has been eroded by neoliberal strategies of privatization. Neoliberalism champions for the privatization of both economic and social enterprises (Duggan 2002, 178) and it is built on the notion that the growth and expansion of the free market are political imperatives. As such, sexuality is necessarily privatized through neoliberal governmentality.

Applying Foucauldian and Bourdieusian frameworks to analyze how women construct and deploy their sexuality using neoliberal discourses of autonomy and responsibility is useful

because it can help us work our way out of limiting debates about structure and agency. When we conflate agency with intentional resistance and opposition to power, we elide a wide array of self-building activities in which women engage. Foucault's notions of *technologies of the self*, Evan's and Riley's *technologies of sexiness*, and Bourdieu's *habitus* help us see agency more clearly – even when it reinforces structures of power. These concepts reveal the link between self-building and subject building (Ong 2003, Parreñas 2011), revealing agency as a reciprocal movement between individuals' dispositions and ways of sense-making and broader discourses about ideal selfhood. From these perspectives, structure and agency mutually reinforce each other.

Throughout this project, I have tried to show that what it means to be a good promo girl is not so distinct from the everyday embodiment of neoliberal femininity. The performative aspects of the job - the tight fitting, sparkly uniforms, the high heels and fake lashes – may make it seem more spectacular than it actually is, causing promo girls to be confused with cardboard babes – passive, one dimensional, always smiling. Promotional modeling, in all its spectacle, is a real job with real, material implications. It crystallizes the ways in which neoliberal labor structures incite *all* girls to be sexy, responsible, and professional in their everyday work and lives. Like promo girls, girls at large are aware of their sex appeal, and deploy it in very particular ways. During one of my final interviews, Skye explained that her promo girl-ness bled into her everyday life, but as something she could manipulate depending on her subject-position, or as she puts it, depending on her place in "that world:"

> I realized that I put myself in a situation where sex is the number one selling tool, I owned that. It's like, I'm already wearing a tiny dress. I'm wearing a padded bra. I remember when I first started, I was probably only 21. And I remember all the girls had fake boobs. And I remember for the one time in my life, being like "God, I want fake boobs." That was like, the only time I ever thought that. And I remember, I would buy more makeup. I would buy fake eyelashes. I

> would buy lipstick. I never bought that kind of stuff before. I bought hair extensions, I totally played the game. Because when you're in that world, you're like, "I might as well." It's sort of fun, actually. I did it all. I just got caught up in it, you know?

As my interview participants have shown, promo girls have unique backgrounds, histories, and experiences. Some are students, others are parents. Still others have full time jobs, and do promotions on the side to earn some extra money. Several girls confided that they do not necessarily like to wear makeup, dress up, or wear heels when they are not working, while several more explained that they enjoyed getting ready and looking good. Regardless, all of the girls I interviewed identified outgoingness, knowledge of brand facts, and responsibility as the most important characteristics of a good promo girl. Here, sex appeal comes to mean more than one's feelings about makeup or tight-fitting clothes. This is not to suggest that sex appeal is not important, nor does it suggest that promo girls attempt to downplay their sexualities. Rather, I argued that promo girls emphasize their sex appeal in very particular ways, so that desirability and responsibility become two sides of the same coin. As Sasha perceptively explained near the end of our interview:

> It's not just that you're not showing up to a job, you're letting down a lot of people. It's a fun job, and I feel like it's such a privilege to be able to do this. And so it does anger me when girls don't understand that. I work in an office, and you're not gonna make this kind of money in an office starting out. There's a lot more that goes into it than you showing up somewhere and sampling for two hours. There's so much more that goes into it.

Sasha's remarks reveal in part how neoliberal sense-making takes place in the context of alcohol promotions. Promo girls are expected to exercise responsibility and make "autonomous, consumer-oriented decisions" (Evans & Riley 2014, 168) in order to be successful. And, although sexual subjectivity under neoliberalism moves us away from passive figurations of female sexuality and "celebrates an agentically sexual woman," it incites

consumption of beauty products and "acts as a disciplinary force" (Evans & Riley 2014, 168) as Skye's comments on the pages above demonstrate. I return to a question posed at the beginning of the project: how do we conceptualize agency, when agency becomes compulsory under neoliberalism?

I hope to have contributed to illuminating debates revolving around structure, agency, neoliberal subjectivity, sexuality, and sex work. I have tried to account for structural constraints generated by neoliberalism that promo girls must face – without letting their agency dissolve into that structure. The political implications of this project are far reaching. Promotional modeling is a distinct gendered and sexualized practice, but it weaves together critical elements of gendered and sexual power in neoliberal society. Independent contractor agreements and part-time labor are increasingly becoming the norm. As Nina Power contends, agency work is sold to individuals through the rhetoric of freedom, choice and empowerment. Under neoliberalism, *all* workers are expected to commodify themselves: "The demand…to be constantly 'networking', 'selling yourself', in effect, to become a kind of walking CV is felt keenly by both sexes in the developed world" (Power 2009, 21). These labor transformations articulate the ways in which "labor itself has become essentially feminized" (Power 2009, 21).

If we continue to think about women's agency in terms of entirely free or fully oppressed, we run the risk of falling into pathologizing, moralizing – and importantly, neoliberal – arguments about femininity and sex work, in which the worker should know that she's "better than this" and should rationally choose another job, or that she's "that kind of girl," the kind of girl who deserves to be harassed or stigmatized because she does not subscribe to certain ideals of feminine respectability. Returning to Marx, structure and agency are mutually constitutive. Although subjects are the central agents of history, they do not make history as they please. Rather, they use pre-existing and emerging forms of subjectivity as tools for sense-making and

identity construction. The everyday, hegemonic structures of femininity mutually constitute the gendered and sexualized practices of promotional modeling, and, more broadly, of neoliberal labor.

This project has been necessarily partial. Several questions still loom in my mind. This study has been limited to analysis of leisure commodities. Aside from alcohol, promo girls are used to represent and embody a wide array of consumer goods – from tech products to snack foods to scrap metals. How does representing these commodities come to bear on promo girls' subjective experiences? While I have strived to paint a more nuanced picture of the ways in which promo girls actively adopt neoliberal discourses of sexuality, autonomy, and responsibility and use them in processes of identity construction – and how their embodiments are not so different from neoliberal embodiments of *girlness* – I have excluded the ways in which male promotional models engage in sense-making practices. How do men's experiences as promotional models differ from those of women? What kinds of subjectivities does promotional modeling produce in the context of LGBT promotions? How do men use available discourses to construct subjectivities? Does promotional modeling necessarily play out in heteronormative (or, as Duggan would content, homonormative) terms? In other words, must promotional models (male and female) always be attractive and working-to-middle class? Finally, what can we learn from the perspectives of male consumers who encounter promo girls? What effects does it have? Does it work in the way that marketing agencies intend? How do promo girls affect male consumers' experience of masculinity, and how do they affect consumer subjectification?

I'd like to close with a few brief personal remarks. Despite its adversities, I do not regret the five years I spent as a promo girl. I met so many incredible, strong girls with unique stories, dreams, and motivations. I was able to save enough money to travel after college and to plan

ahead for graduate school. And, perhaps most importantly, I was able to develop my experience into a project with important implications for understanding the gendered and sexual mechanisms of neoliberalism. My complicated relationship with promotional modeling has made this project both extremely difficult and incredibly rewarding. It has challenged me to distance myself cruel and moralizing remarks I would so often internalize. Promotional modeling is not a symptom of moral impairment, nor is it a pathology. Although everyday femininity feeds into power structures of neoliberalism, promo girls are much more than cardboard babes.

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