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“Out of Africa”: Racist discourse in men’s talk on sex work

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Abstract

Sex work remains highly stigmatised throughout the world. This is particularly true in South Africa, where legal, academic, and popular discourses continue to construct sex workers and their clients as responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS, thereby exacerbating the public panic and stigma related to sex work. Through the lenses of feminist decolonial and queer theories, this paper explores how male clients manage the stigma associated with the purchase of sex and how they negotiate their gendered identities by enlisting discourses of race and class. Drawing on excerpts from in-depth interviews with 43 men who identify as clients of women sex workers, we show how men evoked racist colonial tropes to construct the black body as lower class, dirty and diseased. We argue that this denigration of the black Other allowed men to construct their own masculine identities favourably. To conclude, we reflect upon how legislation that criminalises sex work in South Africa operates in tandem with structural inequalities and racist ideologies to maintain and perpetuate the stigmatisation of the black body, particularly the black woman sex worker.

Sex work; clients; race; masculinities; feminist decolonial theory; queer theory; apartheid

“Out of Africa”: Racist discourse in men’s talk on sex work

Those involved in sex work are stigmatised to varying degrees throughout the world (Sanders, 2017; Weitzer, 2017). This is particularly true in South Africa, where legal, academic, and popular discourses continue to construct sex workers and their clients as responsible for the spread of HIV/AIDS, thereby exacerbating the public panic and stigma related to sex work. This paper explores how male clients manage the stigma associated with the purchase of sex and how they negotiate their gendered identities by enlisting discourses of race and class. Drawing on both feminist decolonial and queer theories to inform our analysis, we show how men evoked racist tropes to construct the black body as lower class, dirty and diseased, and how this denigration of the black Other served to legitimise their own masculinities as favourable.

Racialising sex work

Questions around how discourses on race intersect in men’s constructions of paid sex are relevant to any research into the subjectivities men who pay for sex, but especially in the post-apartheid, postcolonial South African moment. Nevertheless, little critical qualitative research, both in South Africa and internationally, explicitly address questions about how race informs men’s constructions of paying for sex.

Research on male sex tourists is one area that addresses questions of racism, white supremacy, and imperialism in relation to the sex work industry (Garrick, 2005; Gezinski et al., 2016). Sex tourists are typically (but not exclusively) white men from the Global North (often from Australia, Europe, and North America) who travel to holiday destinations in developing countries or the Global South to have sex with local women (e.g. Brennan, 2001; Garrick, 2005; Hoang, 2010; Katsulis, 2010; O'Connell Davidson, 2000, 2001; Seabrook, 2001). The notion that men pay for sex in pursuit of presumed difference and variety is not new to research on clients of sex workers (Gould and Fick, 2008; Holzman and Pines, 1982; Huysamen and Boonzaier, 2015; Joseph and Black, 2012). However, the explicit eroticisation of the exotic cultural Other is more prevalent and pronounced in the accounts of men who participate in sex tourism (Brennan, 2001; Katsulis, 2010; O'Connell Davidson, 2001) than in those of men who purchase in their local contexts. Brennan's (2001) work in the Dominican Republic on the relationships between Afro-Caribbean sex workers and their German clients explored this eroticisation. By analysing men's posts and participation on websites for male sex tourists in the area, Brennan shows how racism and white supremacy were central to how white German sex tourists understood and framed their preferences when paying for sex. She demonstrates how sex tourism allowed men to "purchase" racialised "dark" native bodies at "reduced prices"; or, as one man on a sex tourist's website put it, travelling to the Dominican Republic allowed him access to "dirt cheap colored girls" while on holiday (Brennan, 2001: 643).

A striking similarity between these studies is that they demonstrate the ways in which men constructed the “native” women selling sex in these holiday destinations as intrinsically different to Western women (e.g. Brennan, 2001; Garrick, 2005; Hoang, 2010; Katsulis, 2010; O’Connell Davidson, 2000, 2001; Seabrook, 2001). These studies found that men used racist stereotyping to construct “Third World” women as hyper-sexual and sexually uninhibited. They were constructed as more desirable as sex workers because they were more likely to embody traditional notions of femininity than Western women, to be submissive as well as more willing to serve, pleasure, nurture, and “take care” of men during their time with them on holiday. Conversely, women from Western countries were often constructed as being too independent and empowered.

The explicit misogyny and racism expressed by men on sex tourism websites has generally not been reported in research into men’s participation on websites and forums catering for local sex industries in the Global North (see Hammond, 2015; Horswill and Weitzer, 2016; Huschke and Schubotz, 2016; Milrod and Monto, 2012; Sanders, 2012). For example, Sanders (2012) describes a largely respectful culture within the British forums she analysed, showing how clients and sex workers often interact and cooperate with one another to establish and maintain good client etiquette, health and safety standards, and codes of conduct for sexual transactions.

What are the implications for these findings for the South African context, with its racist colonial past? South Africa remains one of the most economically

unequal societies in the world, still spatially segregated along the lines of race and class. From a white male perspective, therefore, this allows for the imagined racial and cultural Other to exist in closer geographical proximity than in more homogenous societies. Despite the importance of race(ist) relations in shaping South African society, no existing research explores the explicit ways in which race and racism filter through men's constructions of paying for sex. This paper examines the ways in which dominant discourses of class and race are enlisted to construct desirable masculine identities for men.

Historicising sex work: Discourses of dirt and disease

The bodies of women who sell sex have, throughout history, been constructed as dirty and diseased. In an analysis of the ways in which black and white women's bodies were portrayed in nineteenth-century art, medicine, and literature, Gilman (1985) shows how "the prostitute" was constructed as the essentially sexualised woman and was associated with moral corruption, physical pathology, disease, and societal decay. Similarly, Levine (2003), in her archival case study of British colonial policies around prostitution and venereal disease, argues that between 1850 and 1880 virtually every British colony was subject to contagious disease regulations that identified prostitutes as the primary source of contagion. In South Africa, paying for sex and the broader sex work industry is still largely constructed as "dirty" by the general public, and is linked to ideas about the moral decay of South African society (Gardner, 2009). Sex work is often seen to be the opposite of the "good", "pure", or "wholesome" sex occurring within the domain of a traditional loving and committed heterosexual relationship, exemplified by the have/hold discourse

(Hollway, 2001). In the contemporary South African context, sex work is also largely stigmatised by its association with the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. Lawless, Kippax, and Crawford (1996) write about how women who are associated with HIV infection are stigmatised and constructed as being dirty and diseased. Much of the social research conducted in South Africa and internationally is framed within a risk discourse, and focuses on the link between sex work, risk taking behaviours, and HIV/AIDS (e.g. Bucardo, 2004; Karim et al., 1995; Stadler and Delany, 2006; Wojcicki and Malala, 2001). Woman sex workers have been particularly stigmatised through this body of work, often being constructed as vectors of disease.

Sex work has, therefore, a long history of being associated with discourses of dirt, disease, and moral corruption. At the same time, discourses of dirt and disease have been, and continue to be, inextricably linked to class. McClintock (2013) shows how discourses around dirt and hygiene were among the first to be associated with ideas of class. From the early twentieth century onwards, dirt and disease has been associated with the poor working classes, who have been characterised as having crowded, unsanitary living conditions and little regard for personal hygiene. Beyond physical dirt, “moral dirtiness”, which includes assumed immorality or debasement related to sexual practices, has also been associated with the poor working classes (Berthold, 2010). Conversely, cleanliness, physical hygiene, and “moral purity” have been associated with civility and higher class. Berthold (2010), writing about contemporary American society’s obsession with sanitisation and hygiene (which is also relevant in the South African context), suggests that distinctions

of class based on dirt and disease versus cleanliness and purity remain dominant today, with a hygienic dirt-free aesthetic conferring higher status (Berthold, 2010).

Berthold (2010: 9) suggests that “dirt, contamination, or pollution are labels likely to be associated with behaviours that fall outside of, and thereby threaten, our most carefully guarded categories of social classification, including races, classes, genders, and sexualities”. Considering the continued association that sex work has with disease, as well as the association that dirt and disease have with constructions of class, it becomes apparent that notions of dirt and disease could pose a threat to the identities of men who pay for sex. How do men manage and negotiate the stigma related to paying for sex? We attempt to answer this question, specifically in relation to the ways in which discourses of race and class emerge in men’s talk.

Theoretical framework

Our analysis of men’s narratives of paying for sex is informed by a feminist decolonial reading (Lugones, 2010). Such a reading acknowledges not only the co-production of racialization and gendered subordination, but also the encompassing nature of coloniality (Lugones, 2007). A feminist decolonial reading is sensitive to the ways in which the bodies of the gendered, racialised and classed Other have been manufactured and continue to be produced and reproduced, sometimes in new, imaginative and insidious ways and sometimes in ways that are no different to its colonial production.

We also draw on queer theory to inform our understanding of the structures and processes which might reproduce and reinforce these systems of oppression as well as those that might offer moments of resistance and subversion. Specifically, we apply Judith Butler's (1999, 2008) concept of *performativity* and Sarah Ahmed's (2006) work on *orientation* to understanding men's narratives about paying for sex. Drawing on these two theorists' work, we understand gender, as well as race, as performative, rather than biological. It is through repeating certain gendered and racialised acts, or through occupying some spaces and not others, that we become gendered, as well as raced and classed.

Both Ahmed and Butler incorporate resistance and change into their theorising. Butler suggests that gender norms are subverted when they are repeated in a parodic fashion or in a context that defies expectation. It is through performing "bad" or "faulty" versions of gendered identities that resistance and change are made possible. Ahmed (2006: 61) suggests that there are possibilities for "failed orientations" – bodies can take up spaces that they are not intended to inhabit and follow lines other than those they have already taken, which can work towards the reorientation of bodies and spaces "where the 'new' is possible". We find these understandings of *performativity* and *orientation* generative for thinking about the ways in which men construct their participation in the sex industry, particularly through their roles as buyers or clients.

Methods

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via two online classifieds websites, Gumtree (www.gumtree.co.za) and Locanto (www.locanto.co.za). The advertisements explained that the researcher wanted to explore men's experiences and perceptions of paying for sex. Those interested were invited to make contact via an email address provided on the advertisement. Although no compensation for participation was offered, within the first few days of posting the advertisements, emails from men wanting to hear more about the project flooded in.

The sample consisted of 43 South African men who identified as clients of woman sex workers. The participants ranged between the ages of 22 and 67 years of age, with a mean age of just over 41 years. Most participants described professional careers that would place them easily within middle to upper middle class income brackets. Twenty-six participants identified themselves as white, 13 as Indian, three as black, and one participant identified as coloured.

Data collection

Interviews were conducted by the first author, a white woman researcher,¹ using either face-to-face or online methods, depending on participants' preferences. Face-to face interviews were conducted in coffee shops with 11 participants. Two interviews were conducted via Skype video calls. Thirty interviews were conducted using instant text messenger (IM) applications such as WhatsApp, Facebook chat or Gmail chat. Here the interviewer (first author)

¹ See Huysamen (2017) for an in-depth analysis of the how first author's positionality affected the interview-participant relationship, particularly her reflections upon how her whiteness sanctioned men's racist narratives.

and the participant communicated over text in real time. Both face-to-face and online interviews were relatively unstructured in format, allowing participants to lead the interviews as much as possible. The interviewer posed questions like “tell me about your first experience of paying for sex” to invite men’s narratives about paying for sex.

Data analysis

We did not employ a set step-by-step framework for data analysis. Instead, our approach to data analysis was eclectic and intuitive. Discursive patterns were identified in participants’ talk by employing an approach to discourse analysis that Parker (2004: 310) defines as a “sensitivity to language rather than as a ‘method’”. Discourse, as we have employed it, is understood as a system of meaning for understanding, experiencing, and acting in the world. Discourse regulates behaviour, stipulates how ideas about certain subjects are put into practice, and establishes rules that restrict alternative ways of talking about or conducting ourselves (Foucault, 1995). We also drew on an a narrative approach to inform our analysis, in the sense that we were careful to keep participants’ narratives intact where possible, viewing these stories as strategic and functional and as units of analysis (Riessman, 2008). We used this eclectic analytic approach to organise the data thematically: identifying common themes and subthemes and retuning to, re-organising, and refining these themes repeatedly.

Analysis and discussion

Discourses of dirt and disease: Class

The men interviewed in this research addressed threatening constructions of paid sex as dirty and diseased by constructing women who sell sex dualistically, as either dirty and diseased or as clean and “classy”. Men’s tendency to construct women dichotomously as either good/bad, clean/dirty, or as the Madonna/whore figure has been noted in other research on men’s constructions of heterosexual relationships (Hollway, 2001; Seal and Ehrhardt, 2003). The most common way participants in this study achieved this dualistic distinction between dirty and clean sex workers was by constructing sex workers who operated on the streets as essentially different to those who operated from indoor contexts. This supports Simpson, Slutskaya, and Lewis’s (2012: 2) argument that “cleanliness is about establishing boundaries, separating the pure from the contaminated and imposing a system on an ‘inherently untidy experience’”. Throughout men’s narratives, street-based sex workers were constructed as dirty, cheap, and disease-ridden. Conversely, sex workers operating from indoor venues were constructed as being physically clean and hygienic, free of disease, more respectable, and more “classy” than women who sold sex on the street. A majority of the participants stated explicitly that they would never patronise street-based sex workers. Therefore, men were able to construct themselves as respectable – an important position because, as Skeggs (1997) suggests, respectability is a key signifier of class.

The excerpts below illustrate how this binary construction of sex workers, particularly the discourse of dirt and disease, operated to allow men to distance themselves from the stigma and negative constructions associated with paying

for sex, enabling them to maintain their positive identifications with class. Steve, like many participants, classified or ranked sex workers according to the context within which they operated, often adding a monetary value to women according to this classification:

Steve: *“And then, so it seems there are three tiers, at least. You’ve got the street-workers and over here they are plentiful. Dodgy. Dodgy because of diseases, dodgy because of crime, dodgy because half of them rip people off. Then you’ve got the agency kind of tier, brothel... And you see the ads, the newspapers and the websites. And then there’s the really, really classy [private] women, amazing. And I almost, I almost admire them for their detachment from conventional values and their courage and their, um, I guess, I don’t know really how to put it, but their uniqueness.” (57, white: Face-to-face)*

The above excerpt clearly illustrates the intersection between dirt, disease, and class. Through juxtaposition with the dirty and diseased street-based sex worker, the cleanliness and classiness of the private sex worker is emphasised. In addition to constructing private sex workers as “classy”, as opposed to “dodgy” and diseased, Steve assigns them differing moral standards. Whilst street-based sex workers are constructed as criminals and likely to “rip people off”, the “really classy” women are constructed as holding some kind of moral high ground, illustrated through their “detachment from conventional values” and their “courage”. The excerpt from Steve provides a clear example of how constructions of dirt and disease come to symbolise moral dirt or decay, and how physical purity comes to suggest moral purity. Through this excerpt, we

begin to see how the production of the Other operates to allow men to construct their own identities in more favourable ways. This process of Othering is further elucidated in the following excerpt:

Anesh: *“I used to laugh. I used to. Men who went for pavement specials [laughing] they got a kick out of parking their Audi A8 in Voortrekker Road and having this hideous hooker. I mean hideous, I mean hideous where you swear this woman has got AIDS ... but one thing I can tell you, pavement specials: no, no”. (40, Indian: Skype)*

In much the same way as Steve constructs street-based sex workers as “dodgy” and diseased, Anesh expresses an almost visceral disgust for the sex worker who works on the streets. His language clearly dehumanises her. By referring to her as a “hideous hooker” and comparing her to a mongrel dog (a “pavement special”) he denies her identity as a woman. Using this highly emotive and dehumanising language allows Anesh to establish clear boundaries between himself and the women he imagines on the street.

However, narratives like this did more than just actively distance participants from associations with dirt and disease. By constructing the Other, dirty sex worker, they also produce the Other, dirty client. In the above example, Anesh emphasises this Otherness, or distance, between himself and men who patronise street-based sex workers through the act of laughing at them. By creating the Other, dirty client, Anesh was also simultaneously creating a disease-free and clean client identity for himself. Hall (2001: 146) talks about

the crucial role that the Other plays in the construction of identity. He argues that the process of identification is not only based on identifying as similar to a particular group, but is also largely built on dis-identifying with the Other, suggesting that identity is always constructed through “splitting between that which one is, and that which is the other”. As feminist scholars of coloniality have illustrated, this obsessive fixation with the Other frequently says more about the psyche of the “fixater” than it does about the body of the constructed “object” being fixated on (e.g. Wekker, 2016).

Discourses of dirt and disease: Intersections of race and class

“Cleanliness and dirt are accordingly inscribed onto particular bodies, affording them different levels of value”. (Simpson et al., 2012: 7).

Participants’ constructions of street-based sex workers as lower class, dirty and diseased were also heavily intertwined with constructions of race, with only certain bodies—black bodies—being constructed as dirty and diseased, while white bodies were constructed as clean and expensive. Lugones (2010: 746), suggests that “unlike colonization, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power”. The following conversation between Cyril and the interviewer illustrates these intersections of race, class, and gender that were explicit across men’s narratives about paying women for sex:

Cyril: *“If it was, if it was an upper class situation. If it was middle class and below, I would have a problem with it.”*

Interviewer: *“So what would the difference be?”*

Cyril: *“Okay the difference would be, and now it’s becoming a racial thing. Okay. The upper class people will not sleep with another colour. And I’m talking about, there’s two ex-Miss South Africa’s that are in this game. Okay. Alright and it’s categorically stated okay that they do not entertain other races, okay... Whereas if it’s middle to sort of lower, okay, that is: wham, boom, bang, you just pay... It’s not a racial thing. Okay not at all, absolutely not at all. It is a thing of risk. That is the biggest thing. Okay because, because the amount of people that are out of Africa that are in Cape Town at the present moment of time. I mean there is all types of diseases that come with it. And I’m not talking, I’m not talking sexual, I’m not talking STD, I’m not talking sexual diseases. I’m talking diseases as in diseases. You know like Ebola and stuff like that, that a person doesn’t know. So, so it is a very sort of... huge risk factor.”*

Interviewer: *“As in you feel that those diseases are attached to people of colour more than to white people?”*

Cyril: *“Ja, because of the situations.”*

Interviewer: *“And by situations?”*

Cyril: *“The areas, ja the areas ja, that they come from. I mean if you go in, I mean if you go up into Africa, it’s riddled. It’s riddled with all types, all types of things”. (53, white: Face-to-face)*

Cyril clearly distinguishes between sex workers who are “upper class”, “middle” class, and those who are “below” middle class. It is striking how explicitly and candidly Cyril makes definite linkages between class and race. He constructs “upper class” in terms of whiteness and “lower classes” in terms of blackness. However, Cyril in fact does not once use the terms “white” or “black”, but rather he uses “upper class” as a taken for granted signifier of whiteness.

Cyril draws on the colonial trope of black bodies coming from distant locations, such as “out of Africa”, as diseased (Jungar and Oinas, 2004). Here, Cyril also draws on the idea of all Africans belonging to one race and being one nation. Spronk (2014) argues that, although this notion of a unified “Africanness” is held with pride by many black people in Africa, this discourse has largely been used in scholarly work to produce degrading essentialist constructions of black masculinity. She shows how the notion of “African men” is a mechanism of Othering, and is “premised upon a historical process of a Western imagination and practices where Africa served as the paradigm of difference” (Spronk, 2014, p. 515). Cyril specifically clarifies his statement by saying “I’m not talking STD, I’m not talking sexual diseases. I’m talking diseases as in diseases. You know like Ebola”. Cyril clarifies that he is not just associating black bodies with stigmatised notions of sex work as a potential risk factor to the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, but rather he is drawing on a much broader,

more established discourse of black bodies as *generally* diseased. Motivated by the construction of black bodies as germ carriers, and white bodies as vulnerable to contamination by black bodies (Gilman, 1985; Levine, 2003; Zoia, 2015), Cyril states his unwillingness to have sex not only with black sex workers, but with any woman who has had sex with black men. Here, a discourse of bodily contamination is clearly at play (Berthold, 2010; Levine, 2003).

Cyril was not the only participant to use this kind of health/disease discourse to validate their racism and to construct racial difference between their white bodies and Othered “diseased” black women’s bodies. Nine out of the 11 participants interviewed face-to-face explicitly stated that they would not have sex with black women. A further 11 of the 32 men interviewed online stated the same. Below are some examples of how this racist rhetoric ran through participants’ narratives about paying women for sex, specifically marking black women’s bodies as diseased:

Peter: *“Mm, I wouldn’t, I wouldn’t go black. I wouldn’t go foreign, as in Malawi”.*

(50, white: Face-to-face)

Mark: *“I’ll be honest, ah white and coloured girls only”.* (38, Indian: Face-to-face)

Piet: *“I haven’t met one [black woman] in my life that was really of interest”.*

(55, white: Face-to-face)

Johan: *“I won’t go to someone that say ‘all races welcome’. Specifically someone who qualifies it and its only whites. You limit certain risk with that”.*
(48, white: Face-to-face)

Ashish: *“I know issues can be with any person but I never will go to a black... health issues with AIDS and stuff”. (Indian: Instant messenger)*

Gideon: *“I don’t want to cross the racial barrier... I don’t want, say someone who knows me and sees me to go around and tell everybody that guys sleeps with blacks”. (53, white: Instant messenger)*

Participants’ repeated association of the black body with dirt, disease, and risk are, of course, no coincidence, and reflect a long history of racism in South Africa, stemming from colonisation. During the first half of the twentieth century, dirtiness and disease was strongly associated with the black body. Zoia (2015) charts the relationship between race(ism) and sanitisation discourses and practices in the South African context between 1880 and 1980. He demonstrates the ways in which the emergence of germ theory and sanitisation discourses allowed for black African bodies to be constructed as dirty and diseased in relation to white bodies, which were valorised and constructed in terms of purity, sanitisation, and the absence of disease (2015: 158):

“Occurring at a time when the British Empire was at its zenith, it would be the black body that was to assume the role of principal germ-carrier for the white colonists could certainly not blame their (imagined to be) superior selves for

epidemic disease. Racism then resulted when a sense of disgust came to characterize white encounters with said black body; a sense of disgust that was given public legitimacy through the science² and social science of the first half of the Twentieth Century that reified racial difference as natural and unchanging”.

As our interview data suggests, constructions of black bodies as dirty and diseased are not limited to the first half of the twentieth century; they are still very much present in post-apartheid South Africa. These discourses still operate to maintain the status of black bodies as less desirable than white bodies, and continue to filter through into people’s gendered identities. In South Africa these constructions of black bodies as diseased are given public and scientific legitimacy through biomedical HIV/AIDS discourses. Patton (1997) has written about the construction of “African AIDS” as instrumental in positioning black bodies as diseased. Patton (1990) discusses how colonial constructions of black sexuality were revived in efforts to explain the characteristics of the AIDS epidemic. Further, Jungar and Oinas (2004), in their analysis of various texts about HIV/AIDS prevention (both scientific and media texts), show how these texts also construct HIV/AIDS as an African problem and African men as “high risk” for HIV/AIDS and other diseases. They discuss how these assumptions are both based on and reproduce “colonial imaginations of ‘African sexuality’” (2004: 97) in which the bodies of black people feature strongly. Moreover, Lewis (2011) argues, as is reflected in this study, that

² The London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, for example, was founded in 1899 (London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine, 2018)

gender provides a further foundation for othering so that black women's bodies are marked in particular ways.

Cyril's construction of the black Other as a lower class, dirty, disease-carrying body coming from "out of Africa" is significant not only in how it constructs blackness, but rather by what it "does" for whiteness. Hall (2001: 147) writes about the "doubleness of discourse", suggesting that for every narrative about a black body there is an (at times) unspoken, corresponding narrative about a white body. Just as discourses of dirt and disease serve to defile and degrade the black body, so they serve to idealise the white body (Berthold, 2010). Much like the whites of the colonial era, by evoking the trope of distant black Other from "out of Africa" Cyril is able to protect himself from threats to his white identity, in this case the stigma associated with the practice of paying for sex. This operates to allow Cyril to maintain (the illusion of) his white respectability.

It was not only white participants who negotiated desirable identities for themselves by drawing on discourses of whiteness as pure and disease-free. To illustrate this point, we draw on the excerpt below, taken from an interview with Riedwaan, who described himself as a "traditional Indian". Riedwaan was one of the very few participants interviewed who said that he patronised street-based sex workers. In this excerpt, Riedwaan is able to distance himself from discourses of dirt and disease associated with street-based sex workers, not only by distancing himself from dirty and diseased black women, but also by constructing himself as having sex with clean white women:

Riedwaan: *“I think it also comes from the standards I’ve set for myself. I wouldn’t pick just anybody up. I mean cleanliness is something that is important to me. Safety is something that is important to me. So at the end of the day even if you were in the mood to pick someone up, for example, I could drive around for half an hour before I decide on who... I mean someone who firstly you trust to actually pick up. They not going to get in and want to rob you and steal from you. From a safety in terms of health obviously, in terms of diseases.”*

Interviewer: *“Okay. But how would you know?”*

Riedwaan: *“It’s difficult to obviously assess... in the sense that if you meet someone for the first time and argument’s sake you’ve got relatively good hygiene yourself and the other person doesn’t... I think that’s something which I set for myself and that’s the reason, again I don’t want to sound racist but if you in Joburg, you found a black girl³ on the street, chances are she wouldn’t be that clean. So you’d probably prefer a white woman, in terms of Joburg. And that’s the other reason why I’d rather go to Boksburg. Because you would find more white women available”. (32, Indian: Face-to-face)*

Riedwaan constructs himself in terms of a health and sanitisation discourse, using words like “cleanliness” and “hygiene”. The interviewer challenges the notion that physical dirt is indicative of internal disease by asking Riedwaan

³ Note how Riedwaan refers to the white sex worker a “white woman”, while he calls the black sex worker a “black girl”. Similarly, in Anesh’s narrative, the black sex worker was imagined as a mongrel dog. Relevant to these narratives, Lugones argues that the coloniality of gender operates to dehumanise black women by denying their identity as women and indeed their personhood. She suggests that, “The semantic consequence of the coloniality of gender is that ‘colonized woman’ is an empty category: no women are colonized; no colonized females are women” (Lugones, 2010: 745).

how he would know just by looking at someone whether or not they had diseases. In response, Riedwaan explains that they should appear to have the same level of hygiene as himself, and, therefore, that they should not be black, because if he were to find a black “girl” on the street, the “chances are she wouldn’t be clean”. He then juxtaposes this black body with the white body, “so you would probably prefer a white woman”. Riedwaan did not need to describe explicitly the white body as clean and disease free; in fact, he did not describe the white body at all. This extra clarification would have been redundant, because the black woman’s body has already done the discursive work of constructing the white body as clean. By talking about being intimate with a white body Riedwaan is able to construct his own body as similarly clean.

“Dangerous” black bodies

A strong thread running through participants’ narratives was the construction of the black body as dangerous. This “danger” was primarily constructed in terms of the threat of disease that the black body signified, but it was also constructed in terms of violence and crime. In this excerpt, Stewart, talking about a sex worker he patronises regularly, draws on a dominant narrative around the danger of the black man’s sexuality (Ratele and Shefer, 2013):

Stewart: *“Most of her [the sex worker’s] clients are regular. Most of them are all white guys. And almost exclusively they’re married... She’s never been harmed. She doesn’t go with African men”.*

Interviewer: *“That’s her personal choice?”*

Stewart: *“She said, ‘I won’t even go. I just turn them down.’”*

Interviewer: *“And what do you think about that?”*

Stewart: *“Well... her concern is that, her concern is violence. That she has, in her head, rightly or wrongly, African men are more likely to be violent, they’re more likely to demand rather than request things of her, and she said, I mean it’s quite interesting from a business point of view, she didn’t put it this way, but she has a target market. She doesn’t mind coloured guys, she don’t want young guys, she don’t want twenty-five, thirty year olds... Forty-five, fifty onwards is her market. Even my age... So, she’s clearly said well this is a safe market, it’s a well-paying market, it’s a clean market, a you’re less likely to get disease market.” (67, white: Face-to-face)*

Men in this research (re)produced racist discourses not only to construct themselves as desirable, but in order to construct themselves as *superior* to black men who pay for sex. In the example above, Stewart draws on the familiar discourse of the black male body as notoriously dangerous, hyper-sexualised, and as a violent threat to women (Shefer, 2013; Spronk, 2014). Compared to young black men, Stewart is able to construct himself (and older white men like himself) as desirable in terms of being a “safe market”, a “well paying market”, a “clean market”, and a “you’re less likely to get disease market”. Ratele and Shefer (2013), discussing apartheid, suggest that racist discursive and

legislative divisions were not only about white supremacy; they were also about patriarchy, about white men wielding patriarchal authority and superiority over black men. Shefer (2013) reminds us that “hegemonic masculinity takes its power through disempowering, devaluing, and marginalising ‘other’ masculinities” (2013: 178). In this study, men’s narratives about black bodies as dirty and diseased were not only about constructing their whiteness in idealised ways, they were also about establishing and legitimising their positions of power over Other (black) men. This again demonstrates how race and gender, as power structures, are infused.

The black body: Proximity, disgust, fantasy, and desire

Participants’ narratives also reflect the powerful ways in which South Africa’s colonial past and the legacy of apartheid shaped, and continues to shape, not only men’s disgust towards, but their desires for, and fantasies of, the black body (Ratele and Shefer, 2013). It is in interrogating the structures implicated in producing men’s disgust as well as the desire for the black body that we draw heavily on Ahmed (2006) and Butler’s (2008) work. In line with a queer theoretical approach, Ratele and Shefer (2013) suggest that the laws and discourses that functioned to entrench apartheid did more than just impose geographical separation between black and white bodies. Laws like the *Immorality Act* (1927/1957) also sexualised the (dis)connection between white and black bodies and imposed notions of (im)morality onto them (Ratele and Shefer, 2013). This was instrumental in constructing sexual intimacy between bodies of different races as taboo. As Ratele and Shefer (2013) suggest, “that apartheid was sexualized lives on in current constructions of intimacy,

community and self-regulative practices with respect to desire and racial identification, and continues to be reinscribed in new ways in post-apartheid South Africa” (p.189). Indeed, when participants were asked about their preferences for paid sex, many spoke about self-regulatory boundaries that they set for themselves with regards to both the kind of sexual practices they would or would not pay for and the kinds of bodies they would pay to engage in these sexual practices with. For example, Steve explains how he sets sexual boundaries for himself in terms of race, gender, and sexuality:

Steve: *“Um, I kind of have this sense with three categories of partner. One is black women. Black women in general, though one shouldn’t generalise. But there’s something about the skin or the smell or the something, it just er, doesn’t reach me. Same with men, same with transsexuals”. (57, white: Face-to-face)*

Steve explains that there are three categories of sexual partner (both in paid and unpaid sexual encounters) that he has decided are off-limits for himself, namely black women, men, and trans people. Butler (2008: 184) addresses the kinds of boundaries or “prohibitive laws” that Steve talks about above, in particular how they function to maintain, normalise, and make compulsory an idealised heterosexuality. Butler (2008: 184) shows how bodies are restricted and policed along the lines of gender and sexuality in order to maintain the illusion of a stable and consistent heterosexual ideal. She argues that socially constructed taboos (such as taboos around homosexuality or transsexual bodies) function as regulatory practices that she describes as “the prohibitions that produce identity along the culturally intelligible grids of an idealised and compulsory heterosexuality”. Ahmed (2006: 121) theorises that since colonial

times whiteness has been maintained and reproduced through both its proximity to other white bodies and through its distance from black bodies:

“The alignment of race and space is crucial to how they materialize as givens, as if each ‘extends’ the other. In other words, while ‘the other side of the world’ is associated with ‘racial otherness’, racial others become associated with the ‘other side of the world’. They come to embody distance. This embodiment of distance is what makes whiteness ‘proximate’ as the ‘starting point’ for orientation. Whiteness becomes what is ‘here’, a line from which the world unfolds, which also makes what is ‘there’ on ‘the other side of the world’”.

Ahmed claims that distance is what defines racial Otherness, and distance from the racial Other defines and maintains whiteness. Similarly, she suggests that closeness (“what is here”) comes to define whiteness and racial sameness. Whiteness must, therefore, be reproduced through intimate proximity to white bodies. Consequently, too much proximity with blackness is prohibited in and by society as it comes to threaten this reproduction of whiteness:

“Such a prohibition is organized by the fantasy that white bodies must be sexually orientated toward white bodies in order to maintain their whiteness. Too much proximity with others, we might say, could threaten the reproduction of whiteness as a bodily or social attribute”. (Ahmed, 2006: 128)

In Steve’s narrative, we see how these prohibitive laws and regulatory practices are put in place precisely in the ways in which Butler and Ahmed’s theories

define them. Although Steve tried to construct himself as sexually liberal and adventurous throughout the interview, he sets strict rules for himself (“no men”, “no transsexuals”) that keep him safely within the boundaries of normative heterosexuality. At the same time, colonial- and apartheid-sanctioned taboos about interracial sexual contact keep racial boundaries, and therefore his whiteness, firmly in place. These racial taboos make sexual separation between black and white bodies appear as though it were somehow biological or natural (Steve says, “there’s something about the skin or the smell or the something, it just er doesn’t reach me”). Thus, these regulatory practices and prohibitive boundaries around race, class, and gender function, in conversation with one another, to maintain a natural, coherent, white heterosexuality.

Despite the boundaries that Steve establishes to separate himself from black women’s bodies, and despite the visceral distaste that he expresses for them, these black bodies are simultaneously heavily eroticised in his narrative below:

Steve: *“I remember when I was probably fourteen having these incredible dreams, an incredibly erotic dream about a black nanny. Turns out I had a black nanny when I was a kid – [when I was] like four or five, and I used to ride on this woman’s back, blanket around. Probably where that came from but it still stands out as the most erotic dream of my lifetime”.* (57, white: Face-to-face)

Steve’s narrative, set in the context of apartheid South Africa, reflects a complex interplay between power, race, sexuality, and gender. The image invoked here of the “black nanny” as nurturer and surrogate mother is, in and of itself, a product of colonisation and apartheid. Black women working as

residential domestic workers in white families were widespread in apartheid South Africa⁴ (Shefer, 2013). In this narrative Steve speaks about his first relationship to a black woman's body, a (power) relationship that was sanctioned by apartheid. The black woman carrying him on her back represents the nurturing maternal role (the emotional labour) that black women had to provide for white people's children, most often at the expense of not being available for her own children. However, through fantasy, Steve flips this act of riding on the black woman's back, turning it into a highly erotic encounter, one that queers the self-governed boundaries he set for himself. Ratele and Shefer (2013: 205) aptly theorise:

“Desire for the inadmissible⁵ is endemic to regulatory practices that disallow certain practices; desires are therefore always ‘breaking out’ (if only at the level of fantasy) of the shackles that contain them, while also always ensuring the very reproduction of the structures that hem them in.”

Similarly, Butler suggests that “although the gender meanings taken up in these parodic styles are clearly part of hegemonic misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalised and mobilised through their parodic recontextualisation” (2008: 188). In the same way, Steve repeats the racialised act of riding on the black women's back, but this time in the context of an erotic adult encounter. In doing so, Steve oversteps, in this moment, his own racial

⁴ Black women working as residential domestic workers in white families remain a widespread feature of contemporary South Africa.

⁵ See also bell hooks (2006: 366) who suggests that, “the ‘real fun’ is to be had by bringing to the surface all those ‘nasty’ unconscious fantasies and longings about contact with the Other embedded in the secret (not so secret) deep structure of white supremacy”.

boundaries that prohibit proximity between white and black bodies. Drawing on the work of Ratele and Shefer (2013), as well as Ahmed (2006) and Butler (2008), we suggest that Steve's narrative serves to maintain dominant positions of power, keeping black women in their (disempowered) place as servants and "nannies" in relation to white men's bodies. However, the narrative simultaneously potentially queers the sexual boundaries that enforce distance between black and white bodies.⁶ Although the participants' narratives were filled with racist and sexist discourses, this narrative shows that there were also moments of possible *reorientation* (2006) or "breaking out" (Ratele and Shefer, 2013: 205). However, the intimate proximity of white bodies to black bodies does not always subvert racial boundaries, nor does it necessarily threaten whiteness. Conversely, some fantasies of interracial intimacy, particularly where this desire is based and centred on difference (the exotic Other), allow for whiteness to be confirmed and emphasised (Ahmed, 2006). This resonates with Sandberg's (2011: 43) assertion that "becoming represents possibilities of something other, while at the same time reiterating sameness, forcing things back onto the well-trodden paths". Along the lines of the queer theoretical framework adopted in this paper it is important to keep multiple and sometimes ambiguous and contradictory readings in mind in our interpretations of what might, at face value, appear to be moments resistance.

Legislative implications

⁶ See bell hooks (2006) on "eating the other" for a discussion on this issue.

The racialising and stigmatising discourses identified in these men's narratives enter into an arena that is already heavily politicised and stigmatised. How might these findings inform sex work legislation in South Africa, where sex work is fully criminalised? The age-old stigma associated with sex work and the laws that criminalise sex work function reciprocally. The social meanings of sex work as immoral and deviant are reflected in the ways in which the state criminalises sex work; the criminalisation of sex work in turn serves to ensure that those who sell sex remain stigmatised (Mgbako, 2016). This paper has demonstrated that not all woman sex workers are equally stigmatised; it is poor street-based sex workers who bear the brunt of this stigma and are most heavily associated with discourses of dirt, disease, and moral corruption. Similarly, Levine (2003: 2) argues that, historically, the laws that criminalise sex workers have always punished poor working class sex workers operating in visible contexts, while "drawing a veil over the more discreet and hidden forms of sexual servicing exclusive to the wealthy". In contemporary South Africa, and in most countries across the globe, it is still poor women who sell sex in outdoor contexts who are the most visible and, therefore, most stigmatised in their communities and more often harassed and exploited by the police (Mgbako, 2016; Zatz, 1997). Due to the structural inequality in South Africa, the majority of poor street-based sex workers are black women (Gould, 2014; Mgbako, 2016). Therefore, while the criminalisation of sex work serves to perpetuate and maintain the age-old stigma associated with sex work, inequality and coloniality in South Africa serves to ensure that it is the black woman's body that remains the primary object of this stigma. Stigma, racist ideology, structural inequalities and the laws that criminalise sex work intersect in ways that ensure that black women's

bodies remains heavily policed and continue along a long historical trajectory, to be imagined as dirty, diseased, and dangerous. This research thus points towards the full decriminalisation of sex work as an appropriate legislative response to sex work, particularly in South Africa, where structural inequalities ensure that not all sex workers' bodies are treated equally by the law.

Conclusion

Pattman and Bhana (2009: 121) suggest that identity is constructed through producing the racial or gendered Other “which becomes a fantasy structure into which difference is projected, a peg onto which fears or desires can be hung”. This paper has presented an analysis of the process of constructing the Other onto which the stigma of paying for sex can be hung. It has demonstrated how men deploy longstanding gendered, racist discourses, tropes stemming from the colonial era, to construct the black body as lower class, dirty, diseased, and dangerous as a means of distancing themselves from the stigma attached to sex work.

This paper has further demonstrated how coloniality operates at the intersections of race, class, gender, and sexuality (Lugones, 2010). Butler (1999: XXVI) calls for us to do the important work of “thinking through the ways in which these vectors of power require and deploy each other for the purpose of their own articulation”. This research has shown how men exploit dominant constructions of gender, race, and class to establish and maintain desirable and powerful masculine heterosexual selves.

This paper also demonstrated how the notion of *orientation* and the proximity of white bodies and black bodies can provide new and important insights to the ways in which men negotiate the meanings of paying for sex (Ahmed, 2006). Paying for sex, or at least the act of talking about paying for sex, functioned to (re)establish racial boundaries and distance between black and white bodies (Ratele and Shefer, 2013). Discourses of dirt and disease employed in men's narratives about paying for sex served to bolster white supremacy while keeping the black body's subjugated position as the distant Other firmly in place. Conversely, men valued the ways in which paying for sex allowed them to associate themselves with, and come into close proximity to, desirable and idealised white bodies as a way of negotiating class, affluence, and, therefore, power. Ratele and Shefer (2013: 190) suggest that, "intimate relations continue to be a key site for the reproduction of racism and binaristic discourses of 'us' and 'them' in contemporary South Africa". This research shows how paid sex, as a kind of intimate relation, is in no way immune to this process.

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