BERNADETTE BARTON

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MORE STORIES FROM EXOTIC DANCERS

COMPLETELY REVISED AND UPDATED EDITION

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Bernadette Barton

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For all the feisty young women working to create a more just and joyous world

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Acknowledgments

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Preface

Walking into Red Key, a strip bar in Silverton[1] that serves an eighteen-and-older crowd, on a cold January afternoon in 2014, I greeted a bouncer at the front desk, “Hi, I’m Bernadette. I think we’ve met before.” This was my third visit to Red Key to interview dancers, and the bouncer looked vaguely familiar. As a puzzled expression flitted over his features, he smiled politely and reached out to shake my hand. “Yes,” he responded, “you’re one of the church ladies, right?” I smiled and said firmly, “No, I’m a researcher,” and felt a mixture of relief and amusement that I was now of an age not to be mistaken for a dancer. Dressed in jeans and a thick sweater, I further appreciated this potential evidence that I had finally stopped fussing over what to wear when I go to strip bars. Since publishing the original edition of *Stripped* in 2006, I had gone on to research other topics, particularly the experience of being gay in the Bible Belt, but I had always remained interested in the lives of exotic dancers, a group of women who I believe are paradoxically maligned, grossly stereotyped, and overrepresented as one-dimensional sex objects.

Drawing on sixty interviews, including over two dozen new interviews with dancers and other club employees, over 150 informal conversations with dancers, and 150 hours of observation, this new edition of *Stripped* explores and documents how seismic cultural shifts—a lingering economic recession (2008), the rise of raunch (early 2000s) and hookup (mid-to late 2000s) cultures, and the dawn of the cell phone (2007)—have changed the world of exotic dance. Reentering strip bars for this book, twelve years after I last regularly crossed such thresholds, I found that much had changed, perhaps the least of which was that I had a slightly easier time deciding how to present my physical self as a woman in the hyper-sexualized environment of a strip bar. My efforts to balance attractive, stylish, but not sexy or frumpy clothing had been exhausting the first go-around. One of the first lessons I learned in the field was that my appearance affects how management perceives me, how the customers treat me, and, most importantly, how willing dancers are to trust me with their stories.[2]

The first time I went into a strip bar it was 1987 and I was nineteen, on spring break from college, visiting my friend Charles in Minneapolis. We were downtown looking for lunch and passed a storefront advertising dancing and a buffet. In the bubble of youth, and a former ballet dancer, I said to Charles, “Oh,

dancing, wouldn't that be fun!" He looked puzzled, and said, "It's not that kind of dancing, Bernadette." And then I realized the business was a striptease bar, not a disco, nor an Arthur Murray studio soliciting new students with a free lunch buffet. Later, after Charles had returned to work, I decided to check the club out on my own. When pondering what motivated me to enter a strip bar at all in my adolescence, I perceive that, like many young women I've interviewed for this project, I was curious and I was broke. Also, I was confused by contradictory cultural messages telling me simultaneously that my most valuable asset was my beauty and body while cautioning me to protect my virtue. Finally, as a trained dancer in ballet, pointe, modern, and jazz, I felt more than a little aggravated that nine years of expensive dance lessons did not add up to much in the way of marketable skills.

This storefront strip bar in Minneapolis impressed me then, and continues to do so close to thirty years later, as one of the least sexy and most depressing places I have ever entered. It was very dark and dingy, and smelled of stale beer and cigarettes. There were only a few raggedy-looking customers hunched at the bar in ball caps. Heavy metal music blared from the speakers as a woman gyrated her crotch inches from the face of a customer seated at tip row. Barely out of the door front, not even in the bar *two minutes*, I was approached by a customer inquiring, "Are you up next?" This sexualization, this assumption from a customer that I was likely a sex worker because I was there, and later the ever-present titillating question about whether I had done *participant* observation from a whole range of other folks including scholars, journalists, colleagues, students, friends, and acquaintances still persists. But then, young, uncomfortable, and definitely out of place, I quickly fled the bar, happy to be back outside in the daylight, all my vague, romantic notions of saucy burlesque-style stage shows summarily squelched.

Nine years later I visited my second strip bar. I was twenty-eight, an eager graduate student attending an academic conference in Las Vegas, and considering possible dissertation topics, including studying exotic dancers. By coincidence, Penelope, a dancer/academic, had been a fellow panelist in my session and, when learning of my interest in stripping, she generously agreed to accompany me to an all-nude dance bar off the strip. Entering this club, decorated exclusively in shades of dark burgundy, felt like walking into a giant vulva. With company, and conversation, I lasted much longer that evening, even though I continued to feel uncomfortable. I *wanted* to like the place, to find it empowering as much of the literature I was reading claimed, and as Penelope did, but I kept getting distracted by the fact that most of the performers lacked

the ability, or the desire, to match the beat of the music. Their faces fixed in expressions of mingled contempt and boredom, the women on stage interspersed floor work with listless meandering around a pole. Watching these apathetic and arhythmic stage shows was like listening to grouchy people sing off key for two hours in a row.

Since these visits, after meeting, interviewing, and getting to know women who work, and have worked, in strip clubs, I have gradually become more at ease entering them and socializing there. Importantly, I learned to be a staunch supporter of dancers' rights, for they are individuals whose motivations I well understand. Most are intelligent risk takers, surviving in a world where women have limited economic options. In a neoliberal capitalist society, dancing is a choice with clear, practical benefits. "My time is important to me," more than one dancer told me. "Why should I work eighty hours to make the same money I can in eight?" For many women, dancing is also personally gratifying. "I like dancing," they said, "the music, the attention. I like being told I am beautiful." A job that supplies large sums of cash, an attentive audience, and free drinks is appealing to many. At the same time, stripping exacts a high cost from those who engage in it, which I theorize as the "toll" of stripping, and new data show that dancers are experiencing these costs faster than before.

The worst element of the toll is the social stigma dancers endure. Most avoid discussing their work because, when they do, others often react with a mixture of shock, disgust, and sexualization. Some dancers have trouble finding housing. Some do not easily form or maintain friendships, or intimate relationships, with those who are not dancers or otherwise in the business. In the clubs, dancers face additional challenges: customers who assume they are prostitutes, ceaselessly proposition them for additional sexual favors, and insult, grope, molest, and assault them. The work space itself is also stressful. In spite of the widespread implementation of smoking bans in cities across the United States, many strip bars still allow indoor smoking. Dancers also contend with bright stage lights and deafening music, work in dark and windowless rooms, and many must manage mandatory alcohol consumption on the job.

The 2008 Great Recession, involving bank bailouts and the collapse of the housing market, negatively affected many American industries, including strip bars, and one new finding explored in the following pages is a decline in dancers' earnings (although for many women, stripping may still be their most lucrative employment option). Moreover, a new generation of "born digital"[3] customers are now frequenting strip bars, cell phones in hand, well practiced in snapping a quick "pic." The increasing availability of free internet porn and

hookup culture also influences customers to have higher expectations of dancers' sexual availability. However, of all the cultural changes I've observed since the publication of the original edition of *Stripped* in 2006, I am most struck by the ways in which elements of stripping—accessories like platform stiletto heels and thongs, and behaviors like taking pole-dance classes for exercise and "twerking" as a popular dance form—have entered mainstream culture. Indeed, it is challenging to find a music video from any genre—country, rap, rock, pop—that does *not* include half-naked women dancing, often around a pole. When I began studying the lives of exotic dancers in the late 1990s, I posed the question, "what kind of woman dances naked for money?" Almost twenty years later the central question haunting me is, "why are so many young women almost naked for free?"

As we nudge our way into the second half of the second decade of the twenty-first century, sexually provocative images in our media landscape continue to multiply.[4] "Raunch" culture, sometimes called the "sexualization" of culture, describes a hyper-sexualized climate that oversexualizes women while encouraging women to sexualize other women and themselves.[5] Raunch culture marks a historical shift from the sexualization of women's bodies as something done almost exclusively *to* women, to an activity also done *by* women.[6] Media scholar Susan Douglas argues that raunch culture is a form of "enlightened sexism," as media outlets market explicitly sexual images with a playful, ironic, tongue-in-cheek message that "hip" women enjoy being sex objects.[7] Further, because popular culture is now a "pornified" culture,[8] conforming to it requires not only that one contend with the "beauty myth," but that one be "hot" "like a porn star or stripper."[9] Mimicking the performance of "sexy" promoted by the sex industry, in addition to the previously mentioned stripper shoes, thongs, pole-dance classes, and twerking, media sources relentlessly advertise the following products, activities, and body modifications: fake nails, breast implants, push-up bras, tan skin, long dyed hair, smoky eye makeup, plump lips, bleached white teeth, Brazilian waxes, low-cut shirts, micro skirts, small waists, and hairless bodies.

Raunch culture tells consumers, "a sexy girl has the body of a porn star, and knows how to do an epic lap dance for her guy," while offering her a range of products and services to accomplish this. Sandy, who is nineteen and mixed-race (part Native American, part African American, and part white), explored how a pornified raunch culture complicated the way she perceived her work outfits:

It's sad when I'm on my way home after work and I'm standing at the

> cash register buying gas, and I glance at the magazine rack, unintentionally at first, and I see Ashley Tisdale on the cover wearing something so similar to my black jacket and panties that I wear *at work*, in *a strip club*. I won't lie, it really pisses me off, and it's not just the fact that it's a semi-former Disney icon for little girls to look up to and I see her wearing one of *my work outfits*; I see it *all* the time, *everywhere*, and I think that my initial thought, subconsciously, is "How can I make myself look sexier than *that* tonight? Can I be?"

One consequence of seeing powerful, wealthy, and talented female celebrities like Ashley Tisdale and Miley Cyrus conform to the constraints of raunch is that viewers learn to read female self-objectification as sexual liberation.[10] So what does the rise of raunch culture mean for exotic dancers who are paid to self-objectify and be sexy? In a new chapter written for this edition, I explore how raunch culture coupled with free internet pornography together create a more competitive atmosphere for exotic dancers, one in which they must compete with images of female sexiness represented on screen technology, and dating apps like Tinder that facilitate casual hookups, to arouse and interest their customers. The voices of exotic dancers offer much insight about these cultural changes. Dancers are the canaries in the coal mine of our oversexualized culture, the first to expire from the toxic fumes of gender inequality—or not.

Much scholarship, and contemporary discussion, on sex work address the degree of control, power, and agency that women have, or do not have, over their lives.[11] These ongoing debates ask: is she in charge or is she exploited? Is she a creative entrepreneur of her own body or a dupe of cultural expectations? For me, who has "control" or "power" in a strip bar—the man buying a private dance or the woman performing one—means something different depending on one's level of analysis. For example, if we examine stripping on an *individual* level, control over one's body means having the freedom to take off one's shirt as well as leave it on, and earn a living how one chooses. At the same time, on an *institutional* level, women's overall participation in the sex industry reinforces a sexist social order that negatively impacts all women. Through the lens of institutional inequality, no matter how much power and control an individual dancer wields in *her* life, the work itself is emblematic of women's class-based subordination to men: they are *minority* group members servicing members of dominant groups. They are, first of all, *women* socialized to meet men's sexual desires. Many are also *women of color* in a white supremacist culture, *sexual minorities* in a heterosexist society (and in a heterosexist

profession), and the majority I interviewed come from *economically disadvantaged* backgrounds. Together, these minority locations limit the range of choices available to dancers, and shape the choices they do make.

At the center of *Stripped* are interviews with exotic dancers themselves, voices that continue to be missing from our culture even while ubiquitous media representations of "panting hotties" on poles encourage young girls and women, as Ariel Levy explores in her witty book *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, to be "Girls Gone Wild" and *model* their sexual selves after the stripper or the porn star. In the following pages, dancers describe their own journeys into, and sometimes out of, exotic dance. And although each woman is differently located on this path, the ways in which women begin, experience, and exit stripping share strikingly similar features. As you will soon see, exotic dancers inhabit the "borderlands"—a liminal location between titillating and scandalous, powerful and powerless.[12] Both revered and reviled, exotic dancers endure assault *and* receive adoration from men, in extremes women rarely experience outside the sex industry.

My goal with *Stripped* is to slake popular curiosity about stripping and strippers by presenting an evenhanded, multifaceted exploration of exotic dance in the United States, and add to the general library of information about stripping—a little-studied aspect of women's work lives. As Lily Burana noted in her book *Strip City*, "In stripping there is no sense of continuity. Women take their stories with them when they go."[13] Because stripping is such a socially stigmatized employment, the average performer has few opportunities to share her stories—not in the classroom, not with researchers, not with friends, and especially not with parents and partners. Indeed, dancers struggle to be even seen as *human*. For example, when asked what they most want others to know about exotic dance many echoed what Diana, who is twenty-five and white, said: "We're not as stupid as some people think. There are actually women who are really educated. So we're not stupid, and we're human. And we're not animals, and we have feelings. We have interests and hobbies just like anybody else." This humanization is necessary to the well-being of a group subject to hegemonic stereotyping, and central to the social justice goals of this study.

As individuals, like most people, exotic dancers are complicated. Simply characterizing them with a one-dimensional label—good, bad, sinner, slut, whore, or victim—perpetuates stereotypes and neglects the nuances that ensue when good and bad, exhilarating and devastating, not to mention mundane, boring, rewarding, funny, ironic, annoying, and the downright peculiar mingle at once, as they inevitably do. *Stripped* features unique individuals expressing the

messy complexity of their lives and unpacks these complexities by letting their narratives drive our understanding. You will likely find some of the stories dancers share in the following pages disturbing, some funny, some confusing, and some inspiring. I hope that, like me, you will appreciate the insights dancers provide on contemporary gender relations, cultural changes, and sexuality, and find your own point of connection with the women who generously shared the details of their lives.

Introduction

Come Inside and See the Show

Brandy is considering becoming an exotic dancer. Bringing a male friend to an upscale club near her home, Brandy enters the lobby of Pearls. Mötley Crüe's classic rock song "Girls, Girls, Girls!" is playing while an attractive, elaborately made-up woman flanked by a burly bouncer takes their money at the door. The lobby has a comfortable couch, some tasteful, artistic photographs of nude women, and a pot of coffee. Brandy walks down a hallway to a hazy room lit by black lights. There are several televisions sprinkled throughout the room airing college basketball during March Madness. The club is two-tiered. The first floor includes a main stage and side stages for the dancers on which at least two women perform, one clothed in an evening gown, the other topless. Dancers, waitresses, bouncers, and customers maneuver through a maze of tables and comfortable, padded chairs. While Brandy is grateful that they obtained seats in a relatively inconspicuous area of the club, she is, nonetheless, acutely conscious of being a clothed woman among so many near-naked ones.

She listens to the DJ's banter encouraging the men to applaud and tip the dancers: "Hey guys, give it up for Selena!" and "Who's drunk enough out there to give me a 'Hell, yeah!'" This DJ commentary is also spiced with raunchy remarks about the performers—"Shit fellas, somebody take over the booth, I got to get me some of that"—and homophobic quips like "Clap if you're not a fag!" The DJ frequently announces special dances, like a two-for-one table dance. Later, the dancers parade through the club, each in a T-shirt she offers to sell off her back with a bargain-priced couch dance. At one point, a dancer circling the room offers to sell Brandy's companion a pornographic DVD with a table dance. These are all gimmicks organized by the club to increase the cash flow.

When she glances up, Brandy spots couches ringing the second floor; on each couch is a patron with a dancer undulating over him. From the customer's vantage point, it is a voyeur's dream. People downstairs can see the backs of the dancers performing while the clients purchasing the dances are shadowed and anonymous. Brandy buys an overpriced beer and watches

are shadowed and anonymous. Brandy buys an overpriced beer and watches the dancers circling the room soliciting table dances as well as the women performing onstage. One dancer walks to the center of the stage, removes her evening gown, displays her breasts, pivots slowly, and thrusts out her buttocks. Brandy has the opportunity to peruse the dancer's body from every angle while the performer struts and sways, eyes glassy or shut. There is a pole in the center of the stage running from the base of the floor to the ceiling. After a period of languorous posing, the dancer twirls on the pole, twisting into a back flip while hanging upside down by her ankles. Brandy is intimidated and impressed by the acrobatics.

By the time Brandy and her friend have had two or three drinks, she encourages him to buy a table dance. He signals for the attention of the woman he finds most attractive, and she joins them. She swivels his chair, smiles and winks at Brandy, disrobes, and gives her undivided attention to the paying customer. She presses her body inches away from him, revealing her breasts, turns, and bends over to show her buttocks. Most men sit, their bodies quivering with restrained lust or slightly limp with desire, intently watching the performer, admiring the curves of her body. When the song is over, the dancer, just as casually as when she began, shrugs on her dress, sits, and chats for awhile about carefully neutral, flattering, noncontroversial topics: what business are you in? Where are you from? Do you like the club? My, aren't you the nicest-looking man here! Brandy notices that if a patron wants to continue to spend time with a dancer, he will have to spend more money. He may request a couch dance.

Private sequestered dances—in a VIP room or booth—feature more graphic expression of simulated sex than table dances. Most clubs reserve a special area for these dances, away from the main floor to ensure more privacy for the client and more supervision over the dancer. Bouncers patrol the area to make sure neither the customer nor the dancer violate club rules about touching and body contact, but can be paid to look the other way. At Pearls, a dancer takes a client by the hand and leads him upstairs to a deep fake-leather couch. He gets comfortable and watches while she strips off her dress, standing just above him. The angle and depth of the sofa provide the patron with an eye-level view of her crotch. Although she must have both feet on the sofa or floor at all times, if the bouncer is turned away, she might manage to maneuver her body to grind against his genitals. The more he pays, the more graphic is the dance.

Pearls closes at 4:00 a.m. Having watched the dancers perform, Brandy has a better idea of what stripping generally involves. Still a bit scared but

aware that she is totally broke, Brandy fills out a waitress application, thinking that she can make good money serving drinks and not have to take off her clothes. She is hired immediately.[1]

Getting Inside

It is August 2014 and I am in San Francisco presenting at a sociology conference. In the midst of updating *Stripped*, I decide to visit some of the strip bars in the city to see what has changed in the past fifteen years. I search the clubs online, find them on Google maps, and scan the Yelp! reviews. San Francisco has eighteen strip bars. Sitting in my overpriced hotel room, I start calling the clubs to learn their policies about female customers. Talking with an obstreperous and unhelpful person on the other end of the line—a manager, bouncer, or some other club employee—at the third place I've rung, unable to determine by his terse response if I will even be able to walk in the door, I hang up and throw my cell on the bed with a strangled grunt of frustration. All the club employees had responded with suspicion when I called, no one had offered any useful information, and again I was faced with the exhausting prospect of walking blind into a strange club. In retrospect, I acknowledge it's likely most female customers do not call ahead of time, and my doing so raised red flags. I pick a club in a fairly safe part of town, and coax a friend, Amy, from the conference into accompanying me. I warn her that we might not even get in the door, and explain how researching strip bars is unpredictable. Meanwhile my nervous wife had already texted me several times extracting promises from me to keep her updated about my well-being. (There had been six shootings at strip bars in Silverton that year alone. I am also a cis-gender woman. In clubs, male customers have stared at, insulted, hit on, stalked, and harassed me.) Thus begins a typical period of observation in a strip bar. In this particular case, the visit went relatively well. Amy and I got in. We observed for a couple of hours, and chatted with several dancers. Mission accomplished.

During 1998–2003 and 2013–2015, I collected data on the experiences of exotic dancers. I focused primarily on three locations: Silverton, San Francisco, and Honolulu. I have also spent time in strip bars in New York, Washington, Idaho, Tennessee, Minnesota, Kentucky, and Nevada. My first task is simply getting inside. In a same-sex relationship with no male spouse to badger into *escorting* me, just getting into clubs continues to be challenging.[2] Many clubs across the United States have rules that female customers must be accompanied

by a male companion. When questioned, club employees offer a number of reasons for this policy. The most disingenuous response to my question about why I could not enter a club alone came from a manager at the Pink Cave, an upscale chain club in Silverton, who chivalrously explained that there were a number of drunk and horny men in the bar, and he could not guarantee my safety. How did he guarantee the safety of dancers then, I wondered.

One bouncer initially refused to let me into Vixens, a local family-owned bar in Silverton. When I asked, "Why not?" he told me they did not want prostitutes in the club. As I glared at him, it eventually occurred to him that I might not appreciate being called a prostitute, and he added, grumpily, "Not that you're a hooker or anything." Given I had collected much rich data at Vixens for the original edition, I returned there in 2014, hoping to interview the new owner. I had stopped by twice before during the afternoon only to learn that he did not typically come into the club before 8:00 p.m. I tried again a couple weeks later, at 8:00 p.m. on a Monday in July, to then discover that Monday was his day off. Undaunted, I sat at the bar, ordered a drink, and introduced myself to the bartender who, when serving me a glass of wine, cleverly refused my money. By giving me a beverage for free, the bartender neatly classified me as "guest," not "customer." As I attempted to chat with a dancer on a nearby bar stool, showing her my book and briefly describing the study, a male customer, a regular I learned later, repeatedly interrupted us, making a number of illogical, hostile, incendiary remarks, including "If you really want to know about the dancers, you need to talk with the customers." He then maligned me to the dancer I had been talking with, telling her that I did not like dancers, thought badly of them, and warned her to stay away from me.

The bartender and bouncer watched me repeatedly deflect a long stream of irrational verbal attacks from this argumentative (and likely drunken) customer with growing trepidation while the previously friendly dancer said that she shouldn't talk with me, and disappeared. After perhaps ten minutes of this, just long enough for me to finish my drink, the bartender leaned over and sweetly said to me, "Honey, the owner is happy to speak with you, but since he is not here right now, he does not feel comfortable with you talking with the customers or employees until he meets you." I smiled politely (I was not a customer after all, only a guest), sighed, and got up. I was kicked out of Vixens—*again*. The bouncer walked me out the door, and we paused just outside. He said, "I was ready for you to tell that guy [the hostile customer] off. I wasn't going to do a thing." "I know," I responded, "what a huge asshole." The bouncer nodded, and we had a moment of alignment in our aggravation. "That's his truck there," he

said, pointing to a dilapidated white pickup truck. “You’ll know he’s here if you see the truck.”

While it strikes me, and most others, as illegal and discriminatory, clubs restrict female customers to keep prostitutes out, sometimes to discourage lesbians, and also to protect dancers from jealous wives and girlfriends. Brenda, the former owner of Vixens, explained this to me in 2000:

> [We have to] protect our customers from a wife coming in or jumping one of the dancers. We’ve been there and done that. You can always look up and see that look in their eyes. They come storming through and Bobby’s over there with Suzy and nine times out of ten they don’t hit Bobby, they hit Suzy. And it’s Bobby’s fault.

She added that increased security at the door helps to prevent such scenes. Charlotte, manager of Red Key, said frankly of female customers, “From a manager’s perspective, they kill my business.” Even with rules restricting and regulating female patrons, one of the major new findings in this edition is the increasing number of female customers in most clubs. I will explore this phenomenon in more detail in chapter 4.[3]

When I began this research in 1997, in addition to facing barriers to getting inside many clubs, and the stress I felt when dealing with harassing customers, I also labored to find dancers willing to talk with me. Then I considered doing participant observation and dancing myself. What better way to solve all my research problems? I could obtain access to the clubs, gain the trust of potential interview subjects, *and* make some money. For a couple of months I weighed the pros and cons of stripping while continuing to observe in clubs. I was twenty-nine, a little old to strip, but young in my understanding of the consequences of such a decision. I had no moral objection to stripping, no interest in conforming to patriarchal constructs about virtuous women, and no thoughts on how the choice to strip might later impact my career. During the first stage of data collection, I was curiously blind to the stigma of the profession—that insight would come later. Eventually, I chose not to strip. I did not think myself better than the dancers, or too good for the work. I just didn’t like it and didn’t want to do it, plus I was making thirteen dollars an hour as a graduate assistant, not a huge sum, but enough to live on. I was desperate for data, but not for money.

I found, and continue to find, being in strip clubs stressful. As soon as I walk in the door of a strip bar, I receive sexual attention from male customers, even

when dressed like a “church lady.” For instance, I had only been in Pearls five minutes one night in the spring of 2014 before a drunken man staggered up to me, grabbed me, and tried to kiss me. Additionally, regardless of any personal interaction I may have with male customers, I find watching clothed men purchasing sexual favors from naked or almost naked women a relentlessly exhausting illustration of gender inequality. Drinking heavily eases these discomforts, and I can well understand why many dancers do so (more on this in chapter 5), but it does nothing to facilitate gathering good data. For the original edition, with the help of male friends and female dancers who used their influence on my behalf, I logged in extensive observation time mostly in Silverton, San Francisco, and Honolulu. Silverton’s location in the Southeastern United States was convenient for me, as that’s where I live. I chose San Francisco for its sexual diversity and Honolulu for its racial and national diversity. Because I performed extensive observation at three different sites, my research is arguably more representative of a range of dancers. Of the nine clubs I frequented in Silverton in the late 1990s, I focused on two in particular—one upscale establishment, the Velvet Lounge, and one working-class club, Vixens. The time I spent in San Francisco and Honolulu was more concentrated, and I visited a variety of bars in each city daily. Since I wrote the original edition, the Velvet Lounge has closed, though obviously Vixens is still in business.

Given my expressed dislike of strip bars, even the most casual reader must, at this point, be wondering how and why I returned to them to gather additional data. Once a year I teach a popular course on the sex industry and in the spring of 2013 an undergraduate student, Hannah, did an honors project for the class, engaging in 150 hours of observation at Silverton’s alcohol-free Red Key. Her subsequent paper on the project revealed some big changes that had taken place over the past ten to fifteen years, and motivated me to gather data for a new edition.[4]

Meeting the Women

Making contact and establishing rapport with dancers is challenging because dancers are a stigmatized group, and understandably wary of outsiders. Many, indeed most, hide the fact that they dance from at least some people in their lives and are logically concerned about protecting their identities. Others are surprised to find their life stories and work experiences a topic of scholarly research. For example Tracy, who is white and thirty-five, told me that no one had ever been interested in hearing what she had to say about stripping before. Perhaps the

most exasperating problem I experienced was simply getting the dancers to show up for the interview session. In Honolulu, for instance, I arranged to meet participants outside the Honolulu zoo, at an open, safe, public park. Six women stood me up on six separate occasions. Some simply changed their minds, and others, when I called to follow up, claimed their boyfriends didn't want them to participate. I think some originally agreed to be interviewed because they are socialized not to say no to any request in the strip bar. A dancer's money depends upon being agreeable and accessible to customers. Finally, exotic dancing is not a nine-to-five job; the work discourages routines. Setting aside two hours for an interview appeared not to be high on their list of priorities.

After several thwarted attempts to meet dancers in clubs, including a desperate effort to get a job waitressing at a local club called Paradise (at which, strangely, I was *not* hired), I met April, a psychology major at a nearby university, introduced to me through friends. Bright, verbal, and fascinated by the social dynamics of strip clubs, April had much to say. She interviewed with me twice for the original edition, and again for this edition. After our first interview in 1998, April introduced me to a few of the women she worked with at the Velvet Lounge. As I grew a little more comfortable in the clubs, and familiar with the mores, it became easier to solicit participants. I interviewed thirty-six women for the original edition.[5] Finding interview subjects for this edition was much easier. In addition to my previous experience and contacts, Hannah's time spent at Red Key engendered the trust of many dancers there, and they were happy to participate in an interview. I conducted all the audio-taped interviews of strip club employees, seventeen of these with Hannah present as my research assistant.

In total, I have interviewed twenty-five club employees for this edition, twenty-three of whom are or had been dancers.[6] Approximately half of these participants also worked at other clubs in the United States, including those in Arizona, California, Kentucky, Utah, Illinois, Florida, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Michigan, and Ohio. This edition also benefitted from the support of the general managers of Red Key and Pearls, Charlotte and Wes. Each allowed me to meet and interview dancers at the club during slow times (which was almost all of day shift) so long as our conversations did not interfere with business. In this way, I was able to interview several dancers in a row during a single visit to a club.[7] In addition to conducting the sixty-one audio-taped interviews featured in this book, I have spoken informally with more than a 150 dancers, patrons, and other club employees about their experiences in strip bars and peep shows, and these conversations also inform the analyses I offer in the following chapters.

Although I focus on women's experience of exotic dancing throughout *Stripped*, I found that participants did other forms of sex work as well.[8] About one-third of the women I interviewed had been or continue to be involved in other aspects of the sex industry, including prostitution, phonesex work, webcam work, and both print and digital pornography.

The time dancers spent working in strip bars varied widely, from as little as four months to as long as seventeen years, although the majority featured in *Stripped* worked at least two years in the industry. Broadly classified, I interviewed and informally spoke with four types of dancers: students aged nineteen to twenty-five dancing their way through college,[9] taking a break from college, or supporting themselves after college while they decided what to do with their lives; "career"[10] dancers aged twenty-five to forty who generally began dancing when they were young, often with children to support, who continued because of low educational attainment and few equally lucrative job options; artists, bohemians, or "free spirits" of any age who appreciated the flexibility and economic advantages of stripping; and very young women aged eighteen to twenty who came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, had not completed high school, and were escaping stressful family situations with the money stripping provided.[11]

I also classified participants as "early" (had worked up to two years) or "late" (had worked two-plus years) career dancers, as I found that the length of time they worked proved an important distinction on many levels. In the original book, I chose three years as the dividing line. I lowered it to two years after collecting data for this edition. One of my new findings is that dancers are experiencing the toll of stripping faster than before. Two years (and sometimes as little as two months) better coincided with dancers' descriptions of when the negative aspects of dancing began to outweigh the positives. This distinction —"early" or "late"—bore little relationship to a dancer's age. For example, one twenty-five-year-old woman I interviewed had been dancing for six years, while a forty-year-old woman I spoke with had only been dancing one year.

The questions I posed for both editions explore what dancers like and dislike about the work, and in general how it affects them to work in strip bars. The interviews for this edition also covered changes that have taken place in the industry over the past fifteen years, in particular the impact of the 2008 recession, the introduction of mobile phones, and the availability of digital pornography. Questions I thought too intrusive to ask were those that explored an individual's childhood, especially experiences of sexual and physical abuse, questions about personal drug use, and questions about educational attainment. I

feared that those I interviewed might interpret questions about such topics as reinforcing negative stereotypes about strippers (i.e., that dancers are uneducated, drug-addicted victims of sexual abuse), and I wanted the dancers to trust me. Nevertheless, because many people independently introduced these controversial subjects, they are included in the book.

While it was sometimes difficult to get folks to *attend* the interviews, once engaged in our conversations, for example sitting on a living room sofa with cups of tea, most enjoyed discussing their experiences and observations. Because strip bars continue to be perceived in negative ways, workers *hide* their employment from many. Consequently, those I interviewed had had few occasions to reflect upon and process their work experiences. Like a closeted gay person, a dancer who is not "out" to family and friends cannot fully share herself and life with others, a phenomenon I will explore further in chapter 3. Many said that it was a relief to talk freely about the ways stripping had affected them. Despite the many challenges I faced researching exotic dancers, I had one unanticipated advantage collecting data. I came out to those I interviewed, and found that being open about my sexual orientation invited the trust of lesbian, bisexual, *and* heterosexual dancers. Subject to much stereotyping for being sexual outlaws, and accustomed to conversing with customers about a wide range of sexual practices, the dancers were not a judgmental or homophobic bunch. Indeed, many acted even more comfortable with me *after* I came out.

The Strip Club Industry

How many strip clubs exist, and how easy is it to get a job at one? Given the rate at which strip clubs open, close, change names and owners, along with the stigma associated with strip bars, and the local politics at play, reliable statistics are hard to find. The Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates there are 4,000 strip bars in the Unites States employing approximately 400,000 exotic dancers, generating revenues upward of $3 billion.[12] In an effort to substantiate these numbers I passed several hours, bleary-eyed, searching strip club lists online (trying to avoid pop-up ads for pornography while unable to escape a female cartoon stick figure giving oral sex to a male stick figure relentlessly scrolling across the top of one such list). The most accurate, if general, conclusion I can draw is that the number of strip bars has increased in the United States and worldwide since the first edition of *Stripped* (in 2005 estimated at 2,778 in the United States and 832 worldwide). Further, the U.S. still has more strip bars than all the rest of the world combined. Most sex work scholars citing figures like the

ones I just supplied offer cautionary caveats that all such numbers should be treated with skepticism, and I concur.[13] Indeed, after doing a comparison of two online strip club lists—the Ultimate Strip Club List, and the Strip Club Network—I found that the number of clubs included in these lists differ by state and country. For example, puzzlingly the Strip Club Network notes only three clubs in Australia compared to forty-two on the Ultimate Strip Club List.

Journalist Eric Schlosser observed, "Americans now spend more money at strip clubs than at Broadway theaters, regional and nonprofit theaters, and symphony orchestra performances—combined."[14] Logically, this highly lucrative, resilient, expanding sex market employs an increasing number of women and men. On a local level this means that most strip clubs are always hiring dancers, and often need support staff such as servers, hostesses, bartenders, and bouncers. While U.S. strip bars were not immune from the 2008 recession, some women laid off from other employment turned to stripping to make ends meet.[15] A woman who conforms to conventional, media-driven standards of age and beauty can dance almost anywhere at any time in the United States, and, if she has the means to go abroad, internationally as well. More women work as exotic dancers now than at any other time in U.S. history.[16]

Strip bars in the United States vary from upscale gentleman's clubs like the national chain Spearmint Rhino to local family-owned country bars like Vixens. Individual clubs attract a range of clients by class and race, although wealthier men tend to be drawn to the more expensive clubs and blue-collar men are more comfortable in working-class bars.[17] Cover charges range from free during off times to twenty dollars in clubs in Silverton (with five dollars the most common fee), and as high as thirty dollars at the more expensive clubs in big metropolitan areas like San Francisco. Clubs make most of their money from alcohol sales, and most collect a percentage, usually 20–30 percent, of each private dance a woman sells. Drink prices are comparable to those in moderate to expensive hotels: a beer or mixed drink will cost three to ten dollars, depending on the location and type of club. Customers will spend even more buying drinks for dancers. At certain clubs, management requires dancers to solicit drinks from the patrons by making them fill a drink quota. For example, at Vixens, each dancer must sell ten drinks per shift or pay for them herself.

Each club I visited differs depending on the customer base it hopes to attract, but the clubs do share some similarities. Most are dimly lit with black lights, play loud music, and have one to several stages with poles on which the dancers can perform, including a main stage centrally located. They usually have comfortable, sturdy chairs that can tolerate a great deal of activity (i.e., table and

lap dances). In areas that allow cigarettes, they are smoky. Most have large-screen televisions tuned to sports channels. Despite the sordid reputations of strip clubs in some circles, they typically follow standard business practices, and managers work hard to please the customers, keep the employees safe, and turn a profit.

The Entertainers

The strip club is entirely a buyer's market in which customers can purchase their preferred "product." Just as consumers expect their Quarter Pounders to taste the same from Miami to Boston to Taipei, patrons frequenting national chain clubs like Hustler Club or Déjà Vu expect a franchised standard in the club layout, service, and even the very bodies of the dancers.[18] Every club employs at least a few who conform to media-driven standards of female attractiveness: women with slender bodies, large breasts, even features, and blonde hair, and the more fashionable and expensive the club, the more likely are the dancers to resemble porn stars. Indeed, many porn stars also perform as feature dancers at strip bars to better market their personal brand and enhance their careers. Although the blonde, blue-eyed, big-breasted dancer is always popular, many customers do enjoy viewing a variety of women. To illustrate, while observing a dollar dance—a kind of strip club "musical chairs" during which all the entertainers circle the main floor and give thirty-second table dances to customers for a dollar a piece—at the Velvet Lounge, one man at an adjoining table happily remarked to me, "Time for the buffet!" as he assembled a number of single bills.

It does not take long for dancers to observe that the women with the biggest breasts get the biggest tips. Since the cost of breast implants has been decreasing—a friend of mine just underwent breast augmentation for $5,000—many dancers invest in implants. Sabrina, who is white and twenty-eight, described getting breast implants "as a business expense and a tax write-off." Sometimes customers pay for the surgery, as Lacy, who is white and thirty-six, shared. Overall, I observed that 30 to 50 percent of the dancers had implants. The percentage was smaller among the women interviewed for this book, closer to 10 percent.

The dancers' heights vary, as do their hair length, style, and color. In the audience, it is difficult to determine exactly how tall a particular dancer is since we are on different levels—I am sitting while she is standing, or I am tipping her while she dances on a raised stage—*and* the performers wear four-to six-inch

platform shoes. These shoes are standard dress and usually the only part of the costume (except for the g-string in the topless-only bars) that the dancers keep on. Woman after woman complained about the shoes during our interviews. The stiletto heels have little arch support, give them blisters, and make their feet bloody. Lacy called these bloody scars evidence that a woman had "earned her stripes." Weighing one to three pounds each, the shoes can also cause metatarsal issues, back pain, and knee problems. During one of my interviews with April, we paused the tape recorder so I could try on a pair of her dancer shoes. Standing carefully, I found that the thick platform section weighted my foot while the extremely high heel threw me off-center. The shoes forced my feet into such high arches, wearing them reminded me of dancing on pointe. As I wobbled across April's living room carpet, I winced as I imagined maneuvering between crowded tables, mounting stairs to a stage, and negotiating my way to the toilet (while likely at least a little intoxicated), not to mention actually *dancing* in them. After walking ten yards in an exotic dancer's shoes, I was even more impressed with the performers' balance, athleticism, and flexibility.

"I Am a Complete Racist but You Are So Beautiful": Negotiating Racial Differences

Like a dancer's height, weight, hair color, and breast size, race is another facet of a woman's appearance that customers evaluate, choose, and purchase. Racial stereotypes like the "Asian China doll," "big booty black woman," and "blonde Playmate" permeate our media culture, particularly in internet pornography, and influence customer expectations.[19] No one I interviewed seemed terribly concerned about this. Politically correct language and attitudes about race were largely irrelevant in the context of the strip bar. Customers want what they want: big breasts, long legs, blondes, Asian girls, black girls, the girl next door, and so on. Dancers interpret racial preferences much like they do a customer's interest in breast size or legs: as information they use to their advantage. Many dancers explained that a woman's race was less a site of stigma than just another distinguishing characteristic that enabled her to make either more or less money on a given night. Conscious that her white skin might inhibit her insight, Morgan shared,

> This is coming from someone who is of Caucasian descent so I don't know how much validity this has. From what I saw, all the other things

> we have talked about today, the personality types, the social stigma, I think race is less of a factor there than a lot of other places. Is a woman of color's experience different? I'm sure just like someone who is blonde is different, because everyone has their preferences. All the discussion of biological characteristics by clients to me was kind of lumped together. They said racial things, but they said a lot of things that were about physical characteristics.

Maxine, an African American dancer in Atlanta, explained that she felt her race had less of an impact on her experience of dancing than her ability to negotiate the environment and manage the money she made: "It's all about—not being black—it's all about being educated to do what you're supposed to do with whatever amount of money you made. It wouldn't make a difference if I was black or white. I made all that kind of money and get caught up in that drug thing just like some actresses do, and they become broke at the end."

In this environment, then, what differentiates good clients from bad ones in the eyes of a dancer is not his racial consciousness, but the respect he shows her. Trina, of mixed-race, identifying as white, African American, and Native American, explored this:

> One time I danced for this guy who was like, "I am a complete racist but you are so beautiful." He wanted to talk to me, and he spent money on me. Another time I danced for a customer and he was like, "I don't even like black women." I was like, "Well, I'm not just black," but whatever. He was like, "That was great," and he tipped me hard. Some guys are like, "I don't like black girls," and that's cool. At the end of the day people have their own flavors; some guys like blondes, some guys like redheads, and if you play into all that, then you are going to find all that.

As Trina's description of some of her customers illustrates, clients have preconceived notions about race, and some may make racist remarks. Yet if a customer says such things with a complimentary attitude, no matter how obnoxious or insulting they might be in another context, a dancer will generally respond graciously. They know the strip club is a place where customers get to pick who they want dances from, where a casual compliment might be to tell a woman she has a "nice ass." As Trina explained, each man prefers his own favorite "flavor" of dancer. The savvy dancer deliberately performs the fantasy a

client desires, including both racialized fantasies, such as the subservient lotus blossom, as well as fantasies that have nothing to do with race, like the dominatrix or schoolgirl. Sabrina, who is white and twenty-eight, keeps a number of different costumes in her locker and changes her look depending upon the crowd present. Mary, a white woman from Colorado dancing in Honolulu, described how customer expectations and preferences for a certain type changed daily. She said, “You can tell if it’s a blonde day or if it’s a local girl or Asian day. There are some days in here where the customers want the local girls, and I don’t make any money.”

At the same time, strip clubs are certainly not immune to racism. Several individuals observed that clubs were less likely to hire women of color than white women. Wes, general manager of Pearls, said, “Most clubs try real hard not to hire black girls. It’s because everybody likes white girls, not everybody likes black girls. Funny thing, though, when guys from super rural areas come in —he’s a big redneck, got on camouflage hat, coat, and his boots, looks like he’s just climbed off a tractor. You guarantee that guy is going to be with a black girl or a super-gothic-looking chick.” Also, the ratio of customers of color to white customers differed per club in Silverton. Certain places are locally known as “black clubs,” for example. This is a reference to the race of the customer base, not the dancers employed. Finally, dancers categorized customers by race, class, and age.

The Work

The amount of nudity and type of act prohibited and permitted in strip bars is idiosyncratically determined by state, city, and district ordinances.[20] In certain cities, dancers must maintain one to six inches of space between themselves and the customers; in others, they must be six feet from the client. Some places permit contact and nudity. Silverton customers can now receive full-contact, naked lap dances in clubs that serve alcohol (a big change since I wrote the original edition), although such dances are still technically illegal. About nine years ago, Silverton tried to pass an ordinance that would require dancers to be six feet away from customers at all times. Club owners in the city banded together to lobby politicians to tie the regulation up in appeals court where it remains. Charlotte said, “There are no cut and dry laws and regulations in place right now.”[21]

Women perform both public and private dances for customers. When they are

dressed and ready, dancers sign in with the DJ to enter the public dance rotation on the main and side stages. This is usually a two-to-three song set. During the first song, the dancer remains clothed, and in the later, depending upon local regulations about nudity, she strips to a g-string or completely disrobes. Most clubs allow dancers to decide how much they take off: she can strip naked (assuming this is not against the law), leave her g-string on, and even keep her breasts covered (although no one does this). Many dancers refuse to go fully nude on stage even when it is legal, saying, "I'm not showing my pussy to the whole room for a dollar." I observed that the women who removed their g-strings when other performers remained covered tended to be heavier. Dancers receive tips from customers and other dancers while on the public stages. While patrons will occasionally "make it rain," a rap culture reference that means to shower a woman with bills during a public performance, main stage tips are usually modest: a dollar per customer, perhaps a five-dollar bill. Women make the bulk of their earnings performing private dances including table, lap, and couch dances on the main floor and in champagne, fantasy, and VIP rooms.[22]

The number of times a woman dances on the main and side stages depends on the number of women working that shift: the more women working, the fewer times a dancer rotates onstage. During an average shift, this might be once every hour and a half; on a busy shift, a dancer may only perform on the main stage once every three hours. In between stage performances, she circles the room, chatting with the customers present, asking those who tipped her if they would like a private dance. This kind of sales work is particularly challenging for the new and shy dancers. All dancers experience some rejection "working the room." They try to stay positive and, like Melinda who is white and twenty-five, return to customers who originally said no. Melinda shared her strategy:

> They say no, right now they might not have had enough beer. So I'll give them another half hour, another beer and a half or whatever, and come by and hit them up again. Eventually you wear them down if you're always friendly and you pop up and are like, "Hey, are you ready now?" And then eventually they'll be like, "Yeah, sure. Why not?" You just keep going around and around, and you'll find people who will want to buy you a drink, and you'll sit down with them and chew the shit for twenty minutes, sell a couple drinks, and get up. You might find someone who wants to keep buying a lot of dances, and they'll buy you a drink, and you'll stay there as long as they're going to be there doing the same thing, buying dances and buying drinks.

Prices for private dances vary by club and performer. Beatrice, a white San Francisco dancer, described the different dances in the first club she worked:

> We had a room called the lap dance room. We had couches lining the wall. So, the customer would sit down, and you would either sit on them with your back facing them or straddling them. We would just sit on their lap, move around, and try to just be sexy. Do small talk. In the VIP booths there was just one chair and a curtain, so we would do naked dances in there. There was very little bodily contact. The men had to keep their hands on my hips; they couldn't touch my breasts or any other private parts of me. I didn't permit them to lick or suck me or kiss me. It was very clean-cut there. And it was nice. It was good money. We would charge twenty dollars for a regular lap dance, forty dollars topless, and forty dollars plus for private booths, [the price] going up as clothes came off. We would go around to customers and ask them if they would like some company, a lap dance or private dance. We took the money first.

Table dances occur right at or on the customer's table, and do not include any touching. During a table dance, performers maintain a short three-to-four-inch air buffer between themselves and customers. Lap dances *do* involve contact—a woman sits directly on a customer's lap and rubs against his body, including his genitalia. With this kind of friction, one might imagine that customers would sometimes ejaculate during private dances. This was not the case when I gathered data for the original edition. Dancers explained that customers visited strip bars for fantasy, relaxation,[23] and arousal, not satisfaction. Men interested in climaxing were more likely to seek out peep shows and prostitutes, not strip clubs. In 1999, new to the research, I asked a dancer at the Pink Cave if the men ever climaxed. She shuddered, disgusted, and said, "No, the men never come. It's not that kind of place." Melinda said that although men rarely reached orgasm, it occasionally happened. When one did, she demanded a hundred dollars from him on the spot, and the men would pay, knowing that ejaculating was forbidden and that they could face repercussions for doing so. In Silverton, this has changed. Dancers at Red Key described customers climaxing during dances, and then sitting in their ejaculate for the remainder of their time in the club. Anna, twenty and biracial (half-black and half-white), counted twenty-eight "jizzers" in the two years she's been working at Red Key. She quipped, "It's best to avoid the men wearing sweat pants."

A typical shift for a dancer lasts between six to eight hours, during which time she must remain inside the club. While it may strike readers as peculiar, and potentially illegal, for a workplace to restrict an employee's coming and going, in the case of strip bars, these rules aim to control both the possibility, and perception, of prostitution. A dancer who leaves the club might be meeting a customer to have sex. This is a problem for club management because, according to John who is white, forty-eight, and a former strip club owner, a dancer who later meets a customer at a hotel, for example, takes money away from the club (that he might have spent there), creates a more competitive work environment for the other dancers (will they also have sex with customers?), and makes the club owners vulnerable to legal charges of facilitating prostitution.

Owners comply with local regulations (or face legal issues), and make efforts to provide a safe working environment for their employees. For example, if a customer breaks a club rule by touching a dancer inappropriately, a bouncer will warn him. If he continues to break rules or generally disrespects and distresses a dancer, he will likely be thrown out—after paying. Club staff also ruthlessly seize cell phones from customers suspected of taking photos and videos of dancers and delete them. Dancers who break small rules—for example, arriving late for a shift—are fined a small amount. Those that break bigger ones—drug possession and prostitution—may be fired. At the same time, management turns a blind eye to certain kinds of drug use at work, especially smoking marijuana, and of course drinking during a shift is part of the job. Most dancers can easily access many types of illegal drugs (cocaine, pain pills, even heroin) working in the clubs. Those using such intoxicants make at least a modest effort to hide their drug use from management by consuming drugs before the shift, in the parking lot, or a bathroom stall. As I will be exploring in later chapters, dancing can be extremely stressful work, and management knows this. It is in their interest to facilitate a "don't ask, don't tell" climate about illegal drug use so long as the dancers are not excessively intoxicated (i.e., passing out, or sloppy drunk).

A Brief Herstory of Feminism and the Sex Industry

However tame their "dance" may seem now to contemporary Westerners, striptease performers throughout the twentieth century battled the "whore stigma" of their time.[24] This was true of women who worked as dancers in traveling carnivals in the early 1900s, in burlesque halls midcentury, and, beginning in the 1990s, franchised strip bars. The objectification and social

condemnation exotic dancers experience has little changed; however, the social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, in particular the sexual revolution and the women's liberation movement, generated a new feminist dialogue about sex work. While all feminists agree on certain key issues such as the existence of patriarchy and the importance of sexual equality, feminist groups differ on their perceptions of women's participation in the sex industry.

During the "sex wars" of the 1980s, feminist theorizing on the sex industry divided ideologically between radical and sex radical feminists, a distinction that still holds true today.[25] Briefly, radical feminists reason that sex work illustrates a fundamental inequality between women and men as the conditions of patriarchy prepare, train, and force some women (usually poor ones) to sell sex to men for their economic survival. Radical feminists are especially critical of pornography, arguing that it eroticizes hierarchy, domination, violence, and inequality, and consider such images symbolic (and sometimes actual) violence against women.[26] Sex radical feminists concede that many elements of the sex industry are unequal while arguing for a woman's right to engage in any sexual activity she chooses, including sex work. Some sex radical feminists are also uncomfortable with the language radical feminists use, like sociologist and sex radical feminist Wendy Chapkis, who writes that the language of radical feminists "joins forces with the power it seeks to challenge. The dialectics of struggle disappear entirely into an apparent seamless system of male supremacy. Male power is constantly reaffirmed even as it is denounced."[27] Further, some sex radical feminists situate women's participation in the sex industry within the First Amendment right to freedom of expression,[28] and still others contend that analyses of women's pleasure are as important to women's liberation as critiques of patriarchal violence done to women's bodies.[29]

I believe much of the disagreement between radical and sex radical feminists occurs because members of each group focus on different levels of analyses. As I wrote in the preface, radical feminists principally concentrate on the institutional consequences of sex work while sex radical feminists typically explore and situate individual experiences.[30] To illustrate, on an individual (sex radical) level, control over one's body means having the freedom to work as a stripper, or not. The income stripping provides may allow a poor young woman to improve her economic circumstances and become financially independent, as was the case for several dancers interviewed in this study. At the same time, on an institutional (radical) level, most women turn to sex work because they lack other economic options, and suffer under one or more forms of institutional inequality (classism, racism, and sexism). Further, any woman's participation in

the sex industry reinforces a sexist social order that negatively impacts all women. I believe radical and sex radical feminism work best in concert. As sociologist Lynn Chancer noted, the radical feminist goal of freedom from sexism *is* compatible with the sex radical goal of sexual freedom.[31] These need not be in tension. Indeed, a feminist reenvisioning of the social world *requires* that we attend to both these goals simultaneously, for one without the other leads to uneasy and problematic alliances: the radical feminists with conservative Christians, and the sex radical feminists with pornographers.[32] As I will illustrate in the following chapters, the experiences of exotic dancers demonstrate the value of both radical and sex radical feminist analyses.[33]

Finally, while there have always been women forced into sex work because of a lack of economic options, and women who dislike the labor no matter how much money they make, I argue there was a short twenty-to-twenty-five-year window of time, approximately 1975–2000, when dressing provocatively, acting like (or being) a stripper, and expressing a highly charged, feminine sexuality for personal gain (money, attention, self-esteem) was relatively new, edgy, and, for some, revolutionary, and much feminist third wave writing explored this.[34] In particular, dancers and other club employees characterize the 1990s as a time of relative prosperity and well-being for strippers. Dancers reported high incomes and sex radical reasons for dancing such as "reclaiming my body," "breaking taboos," "getting paid to party," and "finally making what I am worth." The 1990s also saw the emergence of sex worker rights organizations like the Exotic Dancer's Alliance and COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) offering support and resources to workers.[35] Famously, in 1997, dancers employed at the Lusty Lady peep show in San Francisco unionized, an event I will discuss further in chapter 7. The documentary *Live Nude Girls Unite!* exploring this unionization made a modest splash in feminist circles, and it seemed that stripper activism was rising. Since there have been no further stories of dancers successfully fighting for better working conditions, and the data gathered here illustrate that work environments have instead *grown worse* for dancers (as has been the case for workers in many occupations in deindustrialized economies), when I imagine the work lives of exotic dancers in graph form, I perceive not a steady improvement over time until the economic recession of 2008, but a flat line that bumps up in the 1990s.

New to This Edition

Much of what I found in the original edition still holds true today. Dancers

continue to experience the "Möbius strip"[36] and the "toll of stripping," and some still consider one another "family." The stigma of stripping also stubbornly persists in spite of the popularity of pole-dancing classes for workouts, increased representations of exotic dancers in media outlets, and an abundance of stripper-esque clothing sold in many retail stores to women and girls. The biggest *changes* I will explore in the following chapters include a decrease in dancers' reported incomes, the decline of "fantasy" in favor of actual sex, more bisexual behavior in the clubs (and culture), more discussion of religion, and an increasing number of female customers.

When considering the counterintuitive phenomenon of heterosexual female customers, I build on a new concept in feminist theory: androsexism. Androcentric media cultures condition all of us to be androsexist, that is, to like what men like and act like men do. Law scholar Francisco Valdez defines androsexism as "the type of 'sexism' biased in favor of 'male' identified persons, concepts, and practices."[37] To elaborate, where traditional sexist practices simply excluded women from certain male arenas, androsexist cultures allow women entry into, and participation within, male-dominated, male-centered environments (like strip bars and gaming) if they adopt the values, behaviors, and attitudes of patriarchal masculinity. Some androsexist cultures even relax the rules of "compulsory heterosexuality"[38]—the idea that heterosexuality is a natural and assumed obligation—for female participants, allowing, even encouraging and validating women for sexualizing other women as men might.[39]

Finally, participants shared more stories about faith and religion in recent interviews, framing their choices to enter and exit the sex industry within the landscape of their religious/spiritual journeys. While faith is a new context in this edition, high religiosity is not new to Silverton. Silverton is in the Bible Belt. A good example of how researcher positionality affects qualitative work, I believe the topic of religion emerged more freely in recent interviews partly because I am more comfortable with, and more interested in, participants' faith journeys.[40] As I touched on in the preface, in between writing the original and new editions of *Stripped*, I completed another book, *Pray the Gay Away*, exploring the consequences of conservative Christian thought in the lives of Bible Belt gays. To do this, I immersed myself in the religiosity of the region, and made new contacts, including a relationship with the director of a local faith-based ministry that serves women exiting the sex industry. Typically affiliated with megachurches, ministries serving sex workers and survivors of sex trafficking have sprung up across the United States over the past ten to fifteen

years as trafficking draws widespread concern. I will discuss the relationship between sex trafficking and strip clubs in the following chapter.

Why I Research the Lives of Exotic Dancers

When speaking about this research, I am often asked what drew me to it. “Why study dancers?” people inquire, sometimes in bewilderment, sometimes salaciously, and sometimes with an air of disdain. I answer that not only do the experiences of exotic dancers lie at the intersection of a number of personal interests—feminism, sexuality, dancing, and marginalization—their stories also provide insight into many big questions about gender, culture, and oppression I seek to resolve through the act of scholarship. In 2017, women’s bodies are still objectified and commoditized. Women still conform to patriarchal standards of beauty and sexuality. Men (and women) still control women’s sexuality through slut-shaming, uninvited touching, violence, and rape,[41] while consumer culture inexorably tells viewers that how we look should determine how we feel because the most attractive people are those who most conform to patriarchal, racist, and capitalist media-driven ideals.

I believe the workplace experiences described by exotic dancers are an exaggerated microcosm of what young women experience culturewide: the expectation that women be sexually available, self-objectify, look—but not necessarily feel—sexy, and conform to a homogenized, highly groomed, patriarchal standard of pornified beauty. Indeed, among the major differences between exotic dancers and women who do not strip is that dancers actually *get paid* for lengthy grooming practices, being or pretending to be sexually available, and self-objectifying. Central, then, to each chapter of *Stripped* are the voices, stories, and experiences of dancers, helping us sort through these contemporary tensions in women’s sexuality.

1

Becoming a Stripper

> I was scared. I was really nervous. I don't think there's really anything that can prepare you for that. It's just one of those things where you just got to step in the water. You just got to do it. There's no preparing. It was really nerve-racking the first time. I had no idea. I wasn't very graceful. I didn't really know how to move to the music the way the other girls who had been there a while had, and I felt out of place. I felt uncomfortable. I didn't know how to really talk to the men the way that you learn to as time goes on in order to get the money that you need or want. It was really nerve-racking. My first night, I think I only made a few hundred dollars.
>
> —Diana, white and twenty-five, describing the first time she stripped

The single most common reason why any woman starts dancing (and continues) is for the money.[1] Dancers in most locations in the United States make on average two hundred dollars a shift, and, on some days, and in certain clubs, they may make much more. This means that for women with little formal education and few professional skills, like Diana, dancing is one of the best-paying occupations available.[2] Diana started dancing when she was seventeen and quit when she was twenty-three. She explained that she chose exotic dancing as a path out of poverty: "I grew up in a family that didn't really have a lot of resources. We're kind of poor, and I didn't grow up in a really loving, happy, nurturing family. And so, I just wanted to take care of myself. I wanted to have a vehicle. I wanted to just get away." During Diana's childhood, her family struggled with issues related to extreme poverty, especially stable housing. They moved from place to place, frequently sleeping in the living room of relatives' homes, which meant ten people crowded into a two-bedroom apartment. Her brothers never had their own beds, and meals were often sandwiches and cereal. One of the elements of dancing Diana most appreciated was that "I didn't have to worry about food. I didn't have to worry about how I was going to survive the next day."

Natalie, who is white and twenty-nine, also used stripping to ensure her survival. Like Diana, she escaped a troubled home life; in her case, it was an abusive husband. I interviewed Natalie in the conference room at Pearls during a day shift on a warm May afternoon. After I asked, "what led you into dancing?" she launched into a harrowing story of domestic abuse:

> I had a son. I was with his dad. I was a preschool teacher. I was a

> calm, mellow, good girl. And I was with this guy doing, basically, the marriage life without the certificate and the ring, and he ended up being a pretty crazy guy. His dad was a cop, and he ended up being really psycho, abusive, trying to hold me hostage. I lost my preschool job because of him hiding my car down the street. And finally, I couldn't take anymore. My son was three. It seemed way too much, and I was like, "I have to escape from this." Horrible, it was like a *Lifetime* movie. That day, I thought I was going to die. It was August, 2008/2009, when it happened. The bad day, and I ended up going to jail, too. Small town, his dad was a cop. They sent one cop for a domestic call. He hid my phone from me, took my car keys, hid my car keys, trapped me in the house. And my hair was down to my butt, so I had a lot of hair to grab. He was a big guy, too, and I was smaller. So after I was like, "I got to do something for survival." My mom helped out a lot with babysitting and things and kept him away for a while. So I started dancing.

Maureen's mother was not as supportive as Natalie's. Disowned and kicked out of the house for being pregnant out of wedlock at seventeen, Maureen, who is white and thirty-seven, began stripping to support herself and her child. She shared, "I just had a kid, and I didn't want to get in welfare. Actually it was a friend that used to hang out in the bars that got me the job and stuff. He's a fireman. He said, 'Why don't you be a dancer?' I said, 'Well, I'm not old enough.' And they worked around that." Many of the women I interviewed began dancing when they found themselves suddenly in need of quick cash, some after struggling to support themselves through more conventional means and unqualified for better-paying alternatives. Indeed, of the dancers I interviewed for this edition, 50 percent were teenagers when they started stripping.

Obtaining a well-paying job without a bachelor's degree—and, unfortunately, sometimes with one—is increasingly difficult in the twenty-first-century United States. With deindustrialization—the outsourcing of relatively high-paying manufacturing jobs from the United States to foreign countries, along with a rise in service sector jobs (retail and fast food for example)—securing employment that pays a living wage is challenging, and the federal minimum wage is still $7.25 an hour as of June 2016. Delia, who is white and thirty-eight, decided stripping was her most practical option for making ends meet after she had a child:

> I think that my major motivation for doing it was twofold: first, I could make a fairly good living for myself and my daughter, and I think that that was the only thing I had. I could sell myself through dancing, but I didn't think I had the ability to do anything else. I didn't have any education until my daughter graduated from high school. When she went away to college, I went with her. So, I really think that that wasn't such a bad choice at the time, because it was an easy way to make money, and I had fun, for a while. It wasn't much fun after a while, but for a while, it was a lot of fun. . . . I think that one of the reasons I did it was because it was an ego boost at that time.

Like Delia, many dancers enjoyed the attention they received when they stripped. However, the "ego boost" that Delia mentions here—feeling beautiful and sexy while receiving attention and adoration from men—was an unexpected perk of the job, not her main motivator for entering the business. Other women shared that they were attracted to dancing specifically because they found the prospect of breaking a taboo both exciting and liberating.

"I Was Curious. It Was Exciting!"

Performing in strip clubs can be attractive to women with adventurous, experience-oriented, I'll-do-it-if-you-dare-me personalities. Exotic dancing is taboo, but it isn't illegal. It's dangerous, but the financial rewards may be high. And while dancing can be risky, it's also exciting to break social norms. Further, strip club managers, owners, and more experienced dancers encourage an attitude of reckless abandon in those they recruit into stripping. Seasoned staff ply a potential applicant with alcohol, tell her she is as beautiful as any woman up on stage, and ask her, "Don't you want to know what it's like to dance? You could bring home a lot of money for just one stage set." Morgan, who left home at seventeen, was trying to figure out how best to support herself, and not averse to the idea of combining sexuality with work. She shared, "I had several people tell me that it was a good way to make money, enough money to live on. I thought about dancing before, and I worked for a guy named Chris. The name of the company was Playful Entertainment. I'd done the lingerie shows at the hotel they used to have on Monday Night Football." She joked, "I guess my profile fits a certain moral flexibility, but I wasn't absolutely revolted by the idea." Charlotte, general manager of Red Key, started in the industry as a dancer. She tried stripping in response to a dare: "I got dared to come and do an amateur

contest by my sister-in-law. I won. And I made, I don't know, $400 in two and a half minutes or five minutes, or whatever I was on stage. Then the manager offered me a job, and I came back and worked the next night, made $700 on a Friday night and called and quit my other job the next morning." She had been managing a McDonald's.

Candace, who is white and twenty-four, had only been dancing four months when I interviewed her during a day shift at Pearls. I was slightly stunned to learn that the most Candace had made in a shift so far was ninety-five dollars, and sometimes she had left work with no earnings. Why did Candace dance at all, I wondered? As we explored her background, she explained that she grew up in a very religious family and "spent most of her teenage years grounded." Going to work was both an escape from her three children and two dogs, and allowed her to "party while on the job, and completely lose control and nobody's going to care." As Candace's story illustrates, although money is most dancers' main motivation, it is not everyone's. It also makes sense that some women raised in rigid religious households might use stripping to resist familial and community expectations of female virtue.

Joscelyn explained that she was originally drawn to the novelty of strip club environments, and then found that dancing met emotional, creative, and financial needs. She enjoyed exploring a side of life shrouded with taboo. Being in a different milieu also freed her creatively—she designed imaginative costumes, and choreographed complicated dance performances for herself. Joscelyn shared:

> When I first started, it was a whole new world. I had never been in a strip club before. I just had a stereotypical image that I had gathered from TV and media. I had no idea what to expect. I was exposed to lap dancing. It was very interesting. This was totally new to me. At first, when I saw the lap dancing, I was like, okay, there's this woman on stage tying herself in a knot, and these women look like they are having sex with these men in the audience with the gyrations back and forth. I just had no idea what to expect. I also did fashion design, so I would make some of my costumes. And I had that creative outlet, so it was exciting for me. Needless to say, that is where it all started, and that was my little part-time job during school.

Approximately one-quarter of the women I interviewed were dancing while they worked on an undergraduate degree. As tuition for higher education continues to

rise and government funding for education declines, while raunch culture normalizes the sexualization of women, some young women consider stripping a practical way to finance college. For many of those I interviewed, it was only a short step—through an admittedly large taboo—to transition from dressing provocatively for free to stripping for money. As Joscelyn wryly admitted, "I already had all the clothes."

"I Was There. I Got Drunk"

Most clubs require an ongoing fresh supply of dancers because of the extremely high turnover rate in the profession. It is not unusual for a woman to try stripping for a night or two, feel overwhelmed and uncomfortable, and decide working at the factory, the reception desk, or the fast food restaurant isn't so bad comparatively, and quit. Also, dancers regularly switch clubs when their take-home cash dwindles, hoping to get "new girl money" at another place. Clubs apply a variety of techniques to recruit dancers, including economic threats and bribes, flattery, peer pressure, and alcohol. Managers often hire women to wait tables they think have dancer potential, and then encourage them to "get up on stage." Alcohol figures prominently in this transition.[3] For example, Darby was sixteen years old when she started waitressing at Lace and Lashes, a small, working-class club in Silverton. The management at her club wielded both carrot and stick to get Darby on stage: they threatened her with a job loss while plying her with alcohol. Darby shared, "I started waitressing at Lace and Lashes. My girlfriend got me the job waitressing. I waitressed for two or three months, and I got used to the money. And then they got me real drunk one night, and they told me that they 'really didn't need as many waitresses.' They were going to have to cut back, so I 'needed to dance or find me a new job.' They got me a little bit drunker, and I got up there. That's all it was."

Darby's entrance into stripping is a clear illustration of workplace intimidation and exploitation. Management at Lace and Lashes illegally employed a minor, and (illegally) encouraged her to drink an inhibition-reducing intoxicant while threatening her livelihood in order to "encourage" her to dance topless for men two to three times her age. April, who also started at Lace and Lashes as a waitress, ended up on stage after a heavy night of drinking. She recalled that the manager and her co-workers got her very drunk and then urged her to perform. She said, "I was coaxed into doing it. I was so drunk I can't remember exact sentences or exact dialogue. I never thought I could do it. When I started, I thought my boobs are too small. I thought I was too ugly to do it, and then to

have that sort of acceptance was in itself kind of flattering I think." To indicate how common this transition is, April told me that the week I interviewed her three women at the Velvet Lounge had changed from waitress to dancer.

Some women, like Julie, make sober decisions to shift from waitress to dancer. Working in another position in a strip bar offers women the opportunity to observe what stripping entails and to become comfortable in the environment. Julie explained that, after waitressing at Pearls for a few months, she recognized that dancers made more money than waitresses doing less work:

> Waitressing, you work very hard. You're always on your feet; you're on five-inch heels. But dancers get to sit most of the night. Big difference. Waitresses cannot sit. They don't get any breaks. You deal with everything in the club, where dancers don't have to. Dancers are pampered: they sit down, they work when they want to work 'cause their money is all on tips, so they're making their own money at their own pace. You get to party if you want to. You sit down. You can socialize. It's a lot different. Waitresses, no one cares, no one notices you, no one's polite with you. Most men want to spend their money on the dancers. So whereas a waitress is getting seventy-five cents maybe to a five-dollar tip, they're getting a fifty-to a hundred-dollar tip.

Management also reinforces the prestige of stripping relative to other employment in strip clubs by allowing dancers more leeway in their job responsibilities: dancers usually set their own hours, take whatever days off they wish, and, when at work, choose their customers. The alcohol, the flattery, the money and attention all serve to acclimate women into the norms of the strip bar.

Some of the women I interviewed entered strip clubs *planning* to waitress, like Anna and Melinda, to learn upon arrival that the club was only hiring dancers. Anna, who is twenty and biracial, went to Red Key looking for a waitressing job, and when management said they were not hiring waitresses she told herself:

> "I'm not going to be one of those nasty, whore strippers." Came in here, walked out, saw a text message. I needed to make some money. Came back in and said, "I'll work for one night. I need to make some quick money for my books." Ended up making $900 that first night, and I was like, "Wow, this is a lot of money! I'm going to work here

> for a little bit, get my money up, and get out." And that never happened. I'm here two years later.

Melinda, who is white and twenty-four, had a similar experience at Vixens:

> I walked into a bar. I was going to be a waitress. A little hole-in-the-wall, a backside country bar, and I walked in and they told me they weren't hiring for waitresses, but they were like, "We're hiring for dancers." And I was like, "I don't know if I want to be a dancer." They're like, "Try it anyway." So they put me onstage ten minutes later. They had this girl take me in the dressing room and put me in her clothes, and they put me onstage. I stayed, and worked the rest of the night, and made a lot of money. I was pretty happy. I was like, "I guess I'll keep doing this."

Novice dancers are usually heavily tipped their first time onstage. Melinda continued, "Well, I was nervous. They put me onstage, but as soon as guys come up and start handing you money, you start feeling a little bit better about being up there. I was nervous for about two minutes, and then after that, I had a lot of fun because I was the new girl. And when you're the new girl, people will give you all kinds of money so you get all geared up feeling good about yourself. And then, after that, dancing seems a little bit easier."

Normalizing Stripping—"My Mom Danced for Fifteen Years"

Charlotte, manager of Red Key, has seen a great many women begin, continue, and exit stripping. As we reviewed the variety of dancers she has hired, Charlotte named a group I had not included in the original edition of *Stripped*, and one that well illustrates the situations of several women I interviewed, including Maureen, Natalie, and Diana: "undereducated." In addition to the career dancers, college students, and young women who want "nice things," Charlotte explained that the undereducated group "don't feel like they can do anything else. They didn't graduate high school. They don't want to work in fast food. They were probably not the most popular people in high school." She concluded, "I think that this job actually helps that group." Stripping allows such disadvantaged women the financial means to support themselves while providing them with the (temporary) psychologically reparative self-esteem

boost of receiving money and attention for being attractive. Looking closely at my research assistant Hannah (who was present at this interview), Charlotte continued, “If you think about this real hard, you’ll think of a really good example of this—a young lady that’s here today. Girl-next-door, came in literally off the street. She does have children, but she literally came in off the street. She had no money. She had—from what I’ve gathered—a fairly rough life.” Charlotte may have been describing Whitney, whose mother had also been an exotic dancer.

Negative stereotypes about sex workers plague exotic dancers, and managing the stigma of the work is, for many, the most taxing element of stripping. However, having a friend, relative, or partner who dances, and/or encourages one to dance can normalize the process of becoming an exotic dancer, making it less scary, disturbing, and deviant. For example, Whitney, who is white and eighteen, grew up with a mother who danced for fifteen years. She shared that after she and her friends went to Red Key one night and saw what the work involved, she thought, “Okay, well my mom can do it. I guess I can.” With no higher education, her (dancer) mother in jail, and two children (aged two and three) to support, Whitney explained that she works at Red Key “to take care of my kids.” Of the women I interviewed, two had mothers who had danced, two had sisters who were dancers, and three had friends who started dancing with them, or introduced them to it.

Some, like Danielle, who is white and thirty-two, had male partners that encouraged them to dance. Danielle explained, “My husband showed me what strip clubs were.” Throughout our interview, Danielle repeatedly said that the main reason she stripped was for the attention. Bullied often as a child and adolescent, she craved the approval of others, and was grateful the customers “liked” her. From a small town in Texas, recently relocated to a small town in Utah, Danielle felt excited that her husband wanted her to dance. She explained it “was just fantasies more than anything for him” although, upon inquiring, I learned that he “really didn’t work much” and that Danielle’s dancing income supported them.

John, who is white and forty-eight, also had a family member introduce him to the sex industry when he was underage: his biological father. Adopted as an infant by his stepfather, John described a close relationship with his adopted father. But, like many adopted children, he was curious about his biological parent, and his mother facilitated a meeting between them when he was sixteen. John was surprised and impressed to discover that his biological father lived in a mansion in California with the “largest collection of Ferraris in North America,

limos, and two yachts." Then he learned that his father owned a number of high-end strip clubs. John explained, "He actually pioneered the business going from a 'go-go bar' to a gentleman's club, and was very well known in the industry. They had huge clubs, big clubs, with celebrities, everybody coming into them. They had clubs in Florida, California, and Hawaii." Young, impressionable, and eager for his biological father's acceptance, John began working for him first doing cleaning, and other odd jobs, then bartending when he turned twenty-one, security, management in his mid-twenties, to eventually becoming a club owner himself. His father wanted him to learn "the whole business." John worked in (or owned) strip bars in California, Hawaii, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Florida, and Kentucky over the course of twenty-seven years. John called men who live off the income of dancers, like Danielle's husband, "pimps" and "deadbeat dads." Some classify such individuals as "traffickers."

Sex Trafficking

Of the possible pathways into stripping, trafficking is the most obvious illustration of oppression and exploitation. The Department of Homeland Security defines trafficking as "a modern-day form of slavery involving the illegal trade of people for exploitation or commercial gain."[4] Globally, trafficking consists of taking (or luring) people across national borders to work (in brothels and strip clubs as well as domestic and agricultural labor) while holding them against their will for no wages.[5] After moving from Utah to Chicago to dance, Danielle observed a group of Polish women who possibly fit this profile at one club. She recalled, "Even though they don't do sex or anything inside there, there's a lot of Polish girls that are eighteen and nineteen years old working in these clubs as groups. They come in as groups and they leave in groups, and they're not friends or anything like that; and they communicate a lot with these owners." Trafficking is a political issue that, on the surface, unites otherwise divergent coalitions of groups including, for example, political conservatives and liberals, and conservative Christians and some feminists. Almost everyone agrees that human trafficking is immoral, and thus anti-trafficking legislation easily gains political traction.

Since the United States passed the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act (TVPA) in 2000, followed by Trafficking Victims Protection Reauthorization Acts in 2003, 2005, 2008, and 2013, issues of human trafficking have garnered much national attention. Most reading this have likely passed roadside billboards with photos of distressed-looking women that feature text

such as “Human Trafficking is Modern Day Slavery. Know it. See it. Report it,” with an accompanying hotline number. During a stop at a rest area in Tennessee in June 2016, I observed flyers posted on the back of stalls in the women’s restroom alerting visitors to be attentive to possible signs of trafficking (e.g., is she dressed appropriately for the weather? Does she have tattoos of her pimp? Is she not allowed to control her own identification? Does she show signs of physical abuse?).

Over the past decade, criminal-justice authorities have widened the frame of trafficking to include people within national borders forced to give all their income to a third party—in other words, a “pimp.” A recent slew of state laws now provide special protection to people most vulnerable to such exploitation: children. As of 2017, over thirty states in the U.S., including the one that contains Silverton, have passed “safe harbor” laws. These laws shelter minors by categorizing those under the age of eighteen arrested for sex work as “victims of trafficking.” I believe classifying underage teens as “victims” is a vast improvement over labeling them “criminals.” At the same time, state, national, and international trafficking laws create the following unintended negative consequences for sex workers, racial minorities, and immigrants.[6]

First, trafficking laws are unequally applied to poor people and people of color in the Unites States.[7] Second, for those already opposed to sex work for moral or ideological reasons, trafficking laws can serve as justification to erase or ignore the dimension of consent: all sex workers become “victims” in need of rescue.[8] For those who choose sex work, who are not coerced, the victim framework is, at best, condescending and, at worst, may cause them to lose much-needed income, or even face deportation. In practice, trafficking laws can help those trying to escape an exploitative situation while complicating matters for those who freely choose sex work.[9] Finally, who decides if someone is trafficked or a trafficker? Does the trafficked person decide this? A police officer? A judge? A politician? A bystander? A neighbor? An expert on the sex industry? To explore these complexities, I share stories related by two women interviewed for this edition: Lacy and Danielle.

Lacy

Lacy and I met for her interview in her tidy townhouse in May 2015. She is white and thirty-six, and had danced for ten years in Phoenix, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Myrtle Beach, New Orleans, and Silverton. Her father employed in

the military, Lacy had moved often as a child, was always "the new kid on the block," and felt like an outcast at school. Lacy craved acceptance, attention, and a feeling of community. Taking her sister's boyfriend as escort, Lacy went to her first strip bar when she turned eighteen, an under-twenty-one club in Phoenix. Although the club did not serve alcohol, a manager snuck Lacy a few strong vodka drinks (illustrating that, in the eyes of management, female customers are also potential dancers). She ended up dancing that day—*her first time in a strip bar*—and "made more money during that set on stage than I made in a week's worth of work." She explained, "In my heart, it didn't feel right. But in my mind, it made sense, because I also had a mom that was homeless at the time. And I knew that she needed help. In my mind it was me being willing to do whatever it took for my mom. And then, also enjoying it in a sense."

Lacy started dancing full-time a week or so later, bounced from club to club in the Phoenix area, and quickly got invited to model for print pornography. The magazine work did not pay much, but it increased her name recognition and customer base, and created the opportunity for her to become a feature dancer. Magazine credits allow DJs to announce feature performers, as Lacy described: "'As seen in *Hustler*'s *Barely Legal*, *Candy Girl*, *Panty Play*,' and guys want that." Feature dancers are specialty dancers hired by clubs for an evening, or sometimes for a longer period of time, and paid for their stage shows (unlike club dancers, who are classified as independent contractors). Feature dancers perform choreographed dance sets including pole work and floor work. Some do shows with props like whipped cream and toys, others do burlesque. Lacy said she was "starstruck in Phoenix." She met a number of celebrities and was invited to be a regular featured guest personality at a local radio station. While enjoying her growing fame, Lacy's life took a sudden turn when she met "Caroline" one day at the radio station. They were chatting when Lacy mentioned, offhand, "there are no good men left."

> Caroline said, "Well, I have one." I said, "But he's yours." She said, "I'll share him." I said, "Share him? Why would you want to do that?" She said, "All men cheat anyway. At least this is open and honest. You don't have to read between the lines." That's appealing to me, because I had been done wrong so many times in relationships. At least I didn't have to wonder what was going on. So that night, she was like, "We'll have a sleepover. We'll all crash out on the floor and watch movies, pop some popcorn," and nothing sexual happened, and it was just like a feeling of family, like, when you get high together and things like

> that. And he made me promises. Now, I realize he was manipulating me the way I would manipulate customers. “What are your biggest fears?” Of course my answer was, “not being taken care of and just wanting to be able to provide and go to college one day.” “Well, I can help you do that. Let me manage your money. L.A. is great. Let’s go to San Francisco first. I’m from the Bay Area. You can work in San Francisco. The clubs out there are great, great money.” And so I was like, “Okay!” Here comes the impulsiveness. Well, lo and behold, you know, I’m working at clubs in San Francisco. They’re expecting way more.

“Jim” took Caroline and Lacy to San Francisco, introduced them to the area strip clubs, and then “turned them out on the streets,” which means that he expected them to do street prostitution. Jim was also among the entourage of an up-and-coming music band, so Lacy continued to mingle with celebrities. Jim, who is black, told her, “I can introduce you to all these people.” By this time, Lacy was stripping and working as a street prostitute, and giving all of her money to Jim. She explained that she had become his “bottom bitch,” in other words, his favorite girl. At the same time, she was not permitted to look another black man in the eyes. Lacy said, “If I made eye contact with another African American male, I was out of pocket so to speak.” “Out of pocket” is a pimp term that refers to a worker who is out of line, in trouble, and likely to be at least threatened with physical violence.

Following the band, they moved to Los Angeles, and Lacy began working in some of the strip clubs there. Lacy explained:

> I was making about $700 a night, but then he put the stipulation, “If you don’t bring home at least $1,000 a night, you have to sleep on the floor.” I saw him beat Caroline one night. She was walking the tracks on Saint Boulevard with a black eye. I remember working in the club and seeing her walk by with a black eye, and I knew I had to get out.

A bouncer at her L.A. club offered to let Lacy stay with him if she decided to leave Jim. One evening when Jim was occupied with a band release, Lacy took $1,000 from his wallet and escaped. While one would wish this was the conclusion of her association with Jim, it wasn’t. He called. He told her he loved her. He begged her to come back, and when she did, he brutally beat her, raped her, and kicked her out with only the clothes on her back. All this happened

before she turned twenty-one. Lacy made her way east, traveling to her mother, eventually landing in Silverton.

Danielle

Danielle also endured much violence, but none that she described from her husband. As I wrote earlier, Danielle's husband introduced her to strip bars, encouraged her to dance, and lived off her income. Other than to share this brief description, Danielle did not otherwise talk about him except to say, "We split up a couple of years after I started dancing." The two boys they had were put up for adoption, as neither was able to care for them. Struggling with a severe addiction to crystal meth, Danielle decided to go to Chicago—a place she had always wanted to visit—for a change of scenery and, hopefully, a break from the drugs. Where main stage dancing was the only type of live adult entertainment allowed by state regulation in Utah, Danielle learned private dances were the main money-makers in Chicago. In need of cash, and aware that other girls were performing "extras" for customers, Danielle agreed to have sex with a customer in one of the champagne rooms in a Chicago club.

"Steve," one of the owners, caught her, threatened to fire her, and then told her that if she wanted to do that, "he also had a line of girls that was working for him outside the club to go to customers' houses." Danielle said no. Later, she considered "that a lot of the mob-owned clubs has trafficking in it, and the offer I had received with that one owner was a traffic offer." After Danielle rejected this proposal, Steve responded, "Okay, then just do sexual favors with me" to keep from losing her job. Danielle agreed to these conditions and had sex with Steve one or two times a week over a period of a couple of months. This distressed her, but she needed the job, was struggling with severe alcoholism (although she had kicked the crystal meth habit), and could not easily find other employment in Chicago.

Through the Lens of Trafficking

If we use the frame of trafficking to situate the experiences of Lacy and Danielle, probably many of us would perceive Lacy as "trafficked." She gave all the money she made working in the sex industry to Jim, a third party, who threatened her physically if she did not bring home a certain amount each day. Lacy required help to get away from Jim, and only fully escaped the situation by

leaving the state. What about Danielle? Her husband lived off her earnings, and encouraged her to strip, but she described no abuse or coercion, and seemingly split from him without incident. She might have had a close brush with trafficking when working in Chicago, and certainly experienced quid pro quo sexual harassment when threatened with a choice between losing her job and having sex with the owner. I personally believe that Jim trafficked Lacy, while the situation with Danielle is less clear-cut. To me, a "deadbeat boyfriend" does not equal a trafficker unless he is coercive and controlling. Nancy, a Honolulu dancer, described her exes as a succession of "loser boyfriends, who laid around the house all day playing video games." I think expanding the frame of trafficking to include "loser boyfriends" potentially compromises a woman's freedom to choose her own partners. Finally, I perceive Danielle's trade of sex with her boss for continued employment as sexual harassment, and arguably rape, but not trafficking.

Given our national concerns about trafficking, the question remains: how many women are trafficked in strip bars? John, the former strip club owner, said that "nine out of ten girls have a pimp" in Miami. When I asked him about the situation in Silverton, he said that it was different here. "In Silverton and Pittsburgh," he observed "girls are working for drug money for their boyfriends and them, or deadbeat dads." Sandy estimated that 5 to 15 percent of the women she worked with at Red Key gave all their money to a husband or boyfriend. Over the past few years, the Department of Homeland Security has been pairing up with strip club owners and employees to raise awareness about trafficking.[10] An organization called COAST (Club Owners Against Sex Trafficking) coordinates with Homeland Security and ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement), another federal agency, to identify victims of trafficking. John spearheaded one such collaborative effort in Silverton. Concerned by the numbers of pimps he observed in Miami, he invited owners and employees of the largest statewide clubs to participate in a coalition against trafficking. They met with an official from Homeland Security who provided information about signs of trafficking. For example, John explained, "if you're a manager and you ask an entertainer, 'Can I see your ID?' and she has to ask the guy who's not really saying anything or talking much for her ID, that's usually a pretty good indicator."

It remains to be seen how effective such anti-trafficking efforts are at identifying and protecting victims in strip clubs. Members of COAST may, in part, be participating in these programs to improve the public perception of strip bars without much real interest in their employees' well-being. For example, if

strip club owners really wanted to best support their workers, they would pay a living wage and offer benefits, not create a system in which dancers pay them to work. Moreover, the relationship between COAST and ICE is especially problematic from a sex worker's rights perspective as such an alliance could easily result in profiling and scapegoating immigrant women. Finally, whistle-blowers don't last long in an environment potentially rife with illegal activities including the sale and use of drugs, prostitution, pimping, and organized crime. In other words, strip clubs socialize employees into a culture of silence. It seems unlikely that club employees would identify local pimps as traffickers to legal authorities, or want to testify against organized crime, for fear of violent repercussions.

"My Mind Was Trying to Work It Out by Replaying It"

Becoming a dancer entails overcoming personal and cultural taboos about being perceived, in Anna's words, as "a nasty, whore stripper." The women I interviewed shared compelling motivations for battling this taboo: the need to support a child or other family member, to escape a troubled domestic situation, general financial insolvency, a chance to go to school, or a dare. Also, as I will now explore, a few of the women I interviewed spoke at length about how their personal histories of sexual and physical abuse influenced their choice to dance and their lives as strippers. Experiences of sexual and physical abuse (especially childhood abuse) among sex workers is such a politically, ethically, and personally loaded subject, I did not independently address it in my interviews. Only when a dancer broached the subject herself would I explore incidents of abuse, and, even then, I was very careful. Like Katherine Frank, anthropologist and author of the book *G-Strings and Sympathy*, I was conscious that the questions a sexuality researcher asks of participants are colored by cultural assumptions, biases, and stereotypes. Frank elaborates on this issue:

> I began to realize that these basic assumptions about the nature of sex work and sex workers, along with the power differentials that often exist between researchers and their subjects in terms of gender, education level, economic resources and cultural capital, were influencing not only the questions that were asked, but also *who* was studied, in what manner, and how the findings were represented. This is not to deny that some dancers have been sexually abused, used drugs or alcohol, or have difficulty forming intimate relationships—

> just as many secretaries, lawyers, professors, nurses and housewives do. Rather, it is to point out that the kinds of information sought out by researchers and the questions that one asks are in and of themselves political and based on cultural assumptions.[11]

Research that frames sex workers solely as abuse survivors, and victims, can be problematic because it reinforces the beliefs that women are forced into sex work, and any who choose sex work are psychologically damaged. At the same time, *not* including the stories of abuse that participants *want* to share also compromises sex workers' agency. Exploring how abuse influences a woman's decision to work in the sex industry without reinforcing negative stereotypes requires care and caution.[12]

The abuse stories were, frankly, difficult to listen to. I actually stopped Lacy in the middle of a long description of anal rape and broken Bic razors (Jim's retaliation for her leaving him in Los Angeles), saying, "You know, you don't have to tell me all this trauma." I interrupted Lacy then to protect my own well-being, as well as hers. I was becoming increasingly dizzy and queasy listening to her tale, although I didn't say so at the time. Lacy graciously responded, "I don't mind. It's okay. It's okay." I repeated, "I don't want you to relive it. This is not necessary." And she said, "It's in my mind anyway. So reliving it is something that I draw strength from now. It may be hard, but it happened and it's real. You know? So even though, during that time it was a bad situation, I can't take it away. So if it might help others, why not?" She continued:

> But that's when he beat me. We had bought him the $1,000 pair of shoes with the money that we had made. And they had this steel toe, and I remember being wet and naked. And then he told me, he said, "Grab one outfit, not one that you've bought with us, but one that you brought with you." I said, "What about my other clothes that I brought?" He said, "You leave those here. You pick one outfit and you leave. Bitches like you usually end up in ditches dead. You're lucky." And so I picked an outfit, and he said, "If you're not willing to work for me, you're no good for me." So I left, and I went back to [the club], and I remember taking a shower there and using somebody else's makeup. I remember rolling on stage and I felt something take my breath away. He had broken my ribs. So I finished out the night, and later went to a hospital. And I stayed with the bouncer on that air mattress. And he ended up trying things with me, and at this point I'm

> just traumatized. He knew that my mom was sick. She has cardiac problems, as well, and I hated to lie; but I called my mom and said, “Mom, I need to get out. I think he’ll help me. Will you call me and act like you’re in the hospital?” And she did. And he made me promise —not my pimp, but the bouncer—that I would come back, because he loved me. And I left, and I didn’t go back.

Lacy confided that her control issues escalated working in the sex industry, especially after the trauma she suffered from Jim. She said, “I felt out of control, so I sought after controlling men.” She continued, “My nickname was Tyson [for the boxer Mike Tyson]. The customers knew not to mess with me. If one touched me, I wasn’t scared to punch them in the face.”

When recalling how her history of abuse influenced her choice to enter the sex industry, Janeen, an African American San Francisco dancer, described the time she was raped, and then blamed for that rape, as a teenager.[13] This powerful story is quoted at length:

> When I was fourteen years old, I had this horrible incident on the roof with a boyfriend where I had to perform oral sex. And in black culture, when I was growing up, that was the worst thing you could do. If you had sex on someone’s dick, you should just kill yourself, because it was the lowest, most demeaning thing you can do. You can get pregnant at thirteen, but you can’t do that. This was a situation that I did in order to get off this roof. It wasn’t a pleasurable act. I felt I was either going to get raped vaginally or I can do this. That was the option. What happened as a result of this incident is that everybody found out about it, and it became this scandal. It spread in a way that was unbelievable in the neighborhood I grew up in, in Queens. I went to school across town, and it spread there. Someone would say something to me and I would just cry. And had I had a good home environment, I would have been able to say, “I had no choice. Fuck you!” or I could have called the police; but I didn’t have that. The problems have already started before that. My life was already the way it was because of what was going on in my house. So, this spread all over Queens, and I had this reputation wherever I went. I would go outside, people would make slurpy noises and would call my mom and ask her if she knew her daughter was a cocksucker. That relates, because I had that up until I left for college. So, from fourteen to

eighteen years of age, I had that going on, as well as whatever was going on in my house.

I had no peace for four years. But it wasn't just teenagers. It was people's parents saying, "I don't want you playing with her." Because of my reputation. Just this one incident. I was fourteen years old and had never had sex or been on a date, but I'm considered the "Slut of Queens." I think that I was so affected by that, that I was affected all throughout college. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I felt like I was that person. It affected my dating in college. So, I think what went through my head was that everybody says this about me anyway. On some level I was like, "Let me make a choice to take this job. I'm going to make a choice to go make money. People always said this about me. Let me go and really be sexual in a way that I don't seem to be able to be sexual in my personal life." In my head, that's how it worked.

It was my mind trying to work it out and heal it. On one level, it obviously doesn't heal it. But I did have to work it out because the next thing I know I was a lap dancer and was right in the middle of all this stuff. And it exacerbated the problems I already had, but it also forced me to work it out. So, it's a complex issue. When people say, "Do you think it was degrading?" Honestly, yes, I do. But I don't want that to be the end of the sentence, because it is complex. Yeah, it was totally fucked, but at the same time—this is corny—but it was also very spiritual. I played out this whole thing, like trying to work it out. Someone was saying that they had an obsessive-compulsive disorder and they would check things fifty times. And they thought that it was because they were so out of control and beaten up as children that their mind was desperately trying to control something, but had to pick something at random—"Okay, I'll control moving this glass fifty times." My mind was trying to work it out by replaying it.

Janeen described sex work as a complex way to work out past abuse by replaying it. In the clinical psychology literature, this process is called "repetition compulsion," and is a common response to post-traumatic stress disorder. Clinical psychologists theorize that abuse survivors sometimes seek out situations that reflect past abuse in order to gain control over situations in which they once felt powerless. At first, this may even help survivors cope with the trauma. Psychologists Jacob Lindy and John Wilson write,

> The irrational, persistent psychopathology is seen as an unconscious repetition of psychological tensions (conflicts, deficits, traumas) unresolved from earlier times or life-events. The repetition compulsion infuses current-day perceptions, relationships, and self-esteem. As a consequence, the repetitions dictate fixed configurations of affects, defenses, and object relations that do not adapt well to changing current circumstances. These repetitions then become organizers of the ongoing psychic life of affected individuals.[14]

It is likely, then, that some women who endure sexual abuse are consciously or unconsciously attracted to sex work to replay and heal the abuse. Janeen understood her decision to enter the sex industry partly as a way to reframe her degraded sexual self: “People always said this about me. Let me go and really be sexual in a way that I don’t seem to be able to be sexual in my personal life.” Lacy said that “reliving it is something that I draw strength from.” Similarly, Tyler who is white and twenty-three, formerly employed by the navy and dancing in Honolulu, explained to me, “When you’re in the military they grope you anyway, and you don’t get paid for it. Here at [the club], you don’t have to get groped and they pay you.” Sharing their stories of abuse allowed each women ownership and control over her life narrative—i.e., this is what happened and how I became the person I am now. While it makes much psychological sense for an individual to recreate conditions that mimic a past trauma with (a conscious or unconscious) expectation that *this time it will be different, I can make it better this time*, replaying and even gaining mastery of a situation that echoes a past trauma is not sufficient for full healing. Even worse, someone who recreates past conditions of abuse is also likely to endure new trauma.

Becoming a Stripper

Curious how a woman overcomes the social conditioning that stripping stigmatizes and endangers one, I began each interview by asking, “What led you into dancing?” I expected that those I interviewed would have strong feelings associated with their decisions to dance and recollections of the first time on stage, and they did: most were terrified. Many were also intoxicated, had no idea what they were doing, mysteriously found themselves half-naked, heart pounding, holding a pole, and “faked it.” Then a fountain of “new girl” money rewarded their efforts. Women’s decisions to dance shared some commonalities: economic need, the pleasure of doing something forbidden, access to the

environment, healing from abuse, and, in the worst cases, coercion. Most women start dancing when they are very young—when they are more likely to lack economic alternatives, when they are perceived as most attractive by club managers, and when they are best able to function in a physically taxing occupation. Several women, like Lacy, Morgan, and Joscelyn, were intrigued by aspects of the sex industry that encouraged them to be rebellious, sexy, glamorous, impulsive, and adventurous. Also, it sometimes seemed that women just *stumbled* into stripping. For example, Stacy, who is white and thirty-two, said a friend talked her into doing an amateur contest. After driving two hours to get to the club, Stacy had second thoughts when she "saw this girl on stage all spread eagle." Her friend urged her on, saying, "Stacy, we're going to have to do something! We have no money to get home on!" Similarly, Nancy, a dancer working in a Honolulu club, explained, "I ran out of gas in Florida. I had to do something, and I looked it up in the newspaper, and eleven years later I'm still doing it." As new girl money turns into everyday earnings, and entertainers learn the mores of strip clubs, dancers describe a paradoxical mingling of good and bad experiences in the bars.

2

Dancing on the Möbius Strip

I taught my first course on the sex industry in the spring of 2005. A polished draft of the original edition of *Stripped* was at the press but not yet released, and I felt a thrill of excitement at the prospect of becoming an author. The students who took my course that first time were an eclectic, gregarious bunch, ready to jump into the material, and likely also infected by my enthusiasm for teaching the topic. We started the semester with exotic dancing. As we discussed the elements of stripping that dancers described as pleasurable—the music, the money, the dancing, the attention—one of my *male* students piped up, "I want to be a stripper." We all laughed, and I asked the class, "Who also wants to be a stripper?" About two-thirds raised their hands. It was all a little tongue-in-cheek, and their attitudes did change as we covered the negative dimensions of stripping. At the time though, I dubbed this phenomenon "the allure of stripping" and found that, once they got past the negative stereotypes about stripping and strippers, many students felt this allure, at least (like the dancers) briefly. My class, Sex Industry Perspectives, would become, over the years, extremely popular with students, and this concept of "the allure of stripping" is a staple exam question.

Many women, suddenly thrust onto stage, under the lights, knees wobbling, find it unexpectedly pleasurable. And then they discover there are other elements they enjoy about the job (flexible schedule, costuming, daily cash). Given a certain equation of circumstance—lights, costumes, alcohol, music, clients, money—they learn stripping can be exhilarating. The fledgling dancer revels in male attention, displaying her body proudly, collecting "new girl money" under black lights, heady with the music, alcohol, drugs, and a sudden ego boost. Many of the women I interviewed confided that, in the beginning, like Anna, they "*loved* dancing." Anna said, "I love to be on stage. I love to get in my zone. I've done hip hop, ballet, tap, jazz. I love music. So the fact that I can go out and perform makes me happy." Unfortunately, the world of the strip bar is unstable, and the ego-gratification a dancer may feel after an excellent stage set, or an extravagant compliment—e.g., "you look like a young Elizabeth Taylor," as a customer told Melinda—is just one nasty comment away from dissolving into the sting of rejection, or the humiliation of being treated like a piece of meat. In this chapter I explore the dimensions of stripping that women enjoy, those they

dislike, and, using the metaphor of the Möbius strip, show how these good and bad experiences paradoxically merge during the course of a shift. Here, we go *inside* the strip bar and explore the idiosyncrasies of the daily work.

The Allure of Stripping: Money, Money, Money

The number-one thing that dancers like about stripping is the money. Most women expressed that, at least in the beginning, to be given rolls of cash for making conversation, drinking freely, and giving the occasional private dance was very exciting. For many dancers, like Laura, who is nineteen and white, money made stripping also allowed them much needed financial security, and the means to provide some luxuries for their children. Laura said:

> I have a little boy and I'm married. It's helped our life a lot, because financially speaking—I moved out when I was sixteen, had my little boy at fifteen. Financially, I was making $7.25 an hour and things were hard. Whereas now, in two weeks I'm doing a big haunted house for all the kids in the neighborhood. I've put thousands of dollars into it just for the kids, and we're still okay. So we're able to relax a little more. Things aren't as stressful outside of here. Birthday parties, Christmas, wanting to just go to the zoo, or do something—that's a possibility now, and it's really not that hard for me to achieve, because our work is so flexible and we can work as much as we want. So I can just work an extra night and these things are possible.

Some of the women I interviewed also shared stories of men who gave them a large sum of money without expecting any sexual favors in exchange. These experiences are important to dancers not only because it is gratifying to receive a gift of money but also because they reaffirm the woman's belief in the generosity of some clients. Dana's story is typical of these lucrative encounters with clients:

> I had a really good customer come in, a younger guy, and I totally didn't trust him either, he always wanted to go out, and I thought he was married. I still wonder to this day if he was married. But he came in, and on my birthday last year he brought in seven or eight hundred dollars: here you go, no strings attached, no anything. I thought that

> was really neat. Most of them are just like that, people just being nice. An older guy—he was a car dealer—he came in around Christmas time, and I sat with him for a little bit, and he asked me what I bought for my daughter. And I said I hadn't bought her anything yet. I wasn't able to. And he said, "You need to get that baby something, here," and he slaps two hundred dollars on the table. "Tell her this is from me." And I had just met the guy. So it's just people who do nice things out of the blue, out the ordinary. I know it's money things; but it's just the thought that went behind it giving you the money.

Recently single, and working on New Year's Eve, April was feeling a little blue until she danced for a generous customer:

> I was single and I was kind of depressed. He comes in and we go up to the VIP room. We're up there twenty minutes, and he has to leave because he's having a New Year's Eve party, and he gives me $500. So that was pretty cool. That doesn't happen as much as people think—twenty minutes of work—$500. And I didn't do anything. I was a neurology major at the time, and we were talking about the structure of the brain while I was dancing for him, and it was really weird. It was actually the least sexual dance I'd ever done. We were sitting there talking about serotonin levels and dopamine levels and neurons and the limbic system, the temporal lobe, the parietal lobe, all this stuff. I'm sitting here dancing for him, and he just gives me $500 and leaves.

Like Dana, April appreciated that this customer recognized her as a person and, in her case, as an intelligent woman, in addition to giving her a large gift of cash. The desire for money, the *need* for money, and the impact of money on dancers' lives cannot be overestimated. But, as April's reflections indicate, the meaning of money for dancers goes beyond its purchasing power. It may signify, as it did for Dana, that a customer appreciates and can empathize with her struggles.

At the same time, the amount of money a woman makes on any given night is unpredictable, and influenced by uncontrollable factors like the weather, the economy, the time of the month, and the number of other performers working, as well as elements under a dancer's control, like her mood and costume. Working at the Pink Cave, Beverly, who is white and twenty-four, has made as much as $500 and as little as $3 in a shift. Beverly also described nail-bitingly stressful days when she made no money at all for four hours and then, at the very end of

the night (1:30 a.m.), collected $250 from last-minute table dances. Stacy, who is white and thirty-two, wonders how girls working day shift at Red Key even survive. She said, “I’ve seen day shifts where we’ve had one guy come in here and buy one dance.” It’s particularly distressing for a dancer to leave work *owing* money if she does not earn enough to cover tip-out and her house fee.

Although money is the number-one reason women choose to dance—and continue dancing—money is not the only positive aspect of the job. Kelly, who is white and twenty-seven, danced in a peep show in Chicago before moving to San Francisco. When describing what she liked about dancing, she explained that she enjoyed *getting paid* for her sexuality. Kelly felt this was a feminist dimension of the work. She said, “I had this very idealistic, feminist opinion about it at the beginning. I thought it was really empowering; I’m using my sexuality and getting paid what I’m worth.” Western culture socializes young women that among their most valuable assets is their sexuality, especially how attractive men find them. When one considers how much anxiety women suffer over how they look, it makes much sense that a dancer derives a special pleasure from getting paid for something that usually *costs* her money, time, effort, and bad feelings.

“I Must Not Have Been as Ugly as I Thought”

Further, the power rush a woman can receive from dancing is especially potent if she grew up feeling ugly and undesirable. Delia discovered that dancing introduced the possibility that she could perceive herself as attractive: “I had always had a negative opinion about myself—always—and even though it didn’t help my negative opinion about myself in most ways, I didn’t feel ugly anymore. There were people coming and paying money to watch me, so I must not have been as ugly as I thought.” Exotic dancing is particularly rewarding for women who felt they were unattractive in junior high and high school. Many of the women I interviewed, like Tara, African American and Hawaiian native, suffered from “ugly duckling” syndrome. Tara shared, “In high school I was one of those girls that guys never paid any attention to. I was the fat girl, the one that was good enough to be your friend but never anything more. After high school I lost the weight and got into shape, and all of a sudden I had all these guys that wanted to be with me and take me out on dates.”

Danielle described herself as a “complete nerd” and an “outcast in every group that I ever came into contact with.” She had “bad acne and really stringy,

greasy hair." Exotic dancing allowed her to feel attractive and receive what she at first considered positive attention, in contrast to the relentless bullying she experienced in childhood and adolescence. She explained, "I liked the fact that people paid attention to me. People told me I was pretty. I felt like there was something to work for and live for. With all the rejection in my life that happened in the bullying, me in that moment it was like it was a dream come true. I felt like that was love. I had their attention for once in my life; and they weren't saying anything mean to me." Dancing healed some of Danielle's self-esteem issues, though she also described the confidence boost she felt stripping as "a false kind of feeling."

Proudly displaying one's naked body can be a potent act in a culture that repeatedly constrains and degrades women's sexual selves. Meredith McGhan discussed this phenomenon at length in her article "Dancing toward Redemption." She wrote, "I had spent over half my life hating my body. I wanted redemption. I wanted to be someone's fantasy for once. Just long enough to prove that I could be."[1] She continued:

> During my six-month stay at the club, at least two men would tell me I was beautiful every day. I was surrounded by women of different shapes, sizes, ages and ethnicities. . . . Twenty hours a week for six months, I got positive reinforcement for my body—and a paycheck to boot. I had put myself in an environment where I was saturated with praise for my looks, and my old self-image was eroded there little by little, until I became proud of my appearance. . . . I was drunk with validation, the thrill that I had faced my inner demons and walked away victorious. . . . Never had I imagined that my body—my despicable body—could grant me so much control.[2]

April narrated a similar story. Raised by a critical mother who told her she was unattractive and, like Tara and Danielle, having felt ugly and unwanted in high school, April described dancing as "a power trip."

> After twenty years of that, of hearing that, it's still there. It takes hearing how beautiful you are and how sexy you are and taking people's breath away, whether they're drunk or not. If you're hearing it twenty times a day, it's slowly healing you, and you start to believe it. That's how all of the girls are the same. You see, everybody thinks that girls that dance, they have this very high self-esteem and they

> believe that they're beautiful and all that. And that couldn't be further from the truth. It's your other personality there. The longer you dance, the more confident you become. There's almost a pattern of behavior. If you were told fifty times a day that you are the most beautiful woman that person had ever laid eyes on, wouldn't that make you feel better?

Maureen shared, "Sometimes you feel like a goddess with all the men looking at you. It makes you feel good. I like being spoiled with attention, attention you wouldn't get anywhere else. Any woman would." While enjoying an influx of cash, and many flattering compliments, the early-career dancer also appreciates her flexible schedule, workplace control, and the free time stripping allows her to pursue personal interests and manage daily responsibilities.

Flexibility, Free Time, and Control

Students, artists, and especially single mothers explained that the ability to make in eight hours what used to take forty offered them much valuable free time to spend with their children, on their studies, and/or on creating art. For example, Dana, a single mother and former paralegal, was able to support herself and her child working only fifteen to twenty hours a week exotic dancing, in contrast to the fifty-plus hours she used to work in a law office. She explained:

> I like the free time. It's easy, and I can make my own schedule. I don't have to worry about telling someone I can't come in to work today, or worry about finishing a deadline, or making a bid go through. It can be stressful in a regular job. I like the freedom of it. I'm able to do whatever I want. I can live on my own and not have to worry about having someone because I make more than enough money to live on. And I have a little girl; my free time with her is really important. I like to spend as much time with her as I can.

Dana's child was only three years old at the time of our interview, too young to understand what her mother did for a living. Dana planned to stop dancing before her daughter started school, and, indeed, quit dancing about six months after we spoke. For a short while, dancing helped Dana support and spend time with her child. Madison, who is white and thirty, echoed Dana: "I like the

freedom that it gives me in my personal life. I only have to work as much as I want to now. I don't have a schedule. I have two daughters now, so it gives me time to be with them during the week and do whatever I want to whenever I want to."

In addition to offering workers more time *away* from work, the women I interviewed also enjoyed the control they had *over* the work they performed in strip bars. In most establishments, dancers can choose which days they work, call in if they are sick, or simply not show up, with few repercussions. Polly, who is white and twenty, said, "I can pretty much do what I want. I don't like normal jobs." Kelly agreed: "It allowed me a lot of freedom. I could pick my own schedule. I thought my job was cool and interesting. It was a side of life I hadn't seen before, and I was really attracted to it." Stripping, particularly in the less-regulated clubs, is an occupation with somewhat nebulous responsibilities. Workers must dress and look the part of "stripper" of course, rotate onto the main stage, approach customers from time to time, and socialize with and dance for those who want one-on-one interactions. At the same time, and for the most part, dancers are their own bosses (they are independent contractors after all) and most like this element of the job. Melinda, for example, appreciates being able to control when, where, and how long she works, and for whom she will dance:

> The good thing about working in clubs is the money is all up to you. If you want to make $20 that day, then you sit on your butt all day. If you want to make $400, then you're really working hard. Management won't tell you how much you need to work. They won't push you. You have a certain number of drinks you need to sell. If you don't sell them, you pay for them by the end of the night. But that's up to you. You don't have anybody breathing down your back, checking up on you. You have bouncers who keep you safe, but other than that you're left alone to work by yourself. So that's a good thing.

Hence, dancers can drink, laugh, socialize, lounge, visit one another, the DJ and the bouncers, check their makeup, and fix their hair during work hours. No one is checking up on them to make sure they circle the room every half hour hustling for dances. Assuming a decent crowd of customers, dancers are largely in control of the amount of money they make.

The flexibility of exotic dancing—setting one's own hours, and calling in sick without any major repercussion—is valuable for those, like Sarah, who have a disability that prevents them from working a nine-to-five job. Sarah explained

that the unpredictability of her chronic fatigue made committing to a full-time job difficult. She appreciated

> definitely being able to do my work and make it every single day. When I was in college, I missed half my classes because of my health. And I've missed two days of work in the six months I've been here, because my schedule is so lenient. That makes me feel good. It makes me feel like I'm getting over my chronic fatigue and I'm getting control of my life. I don't know what I'd do without that job right now. I really don't know what my life would be like without the Lusty Lady. And the schedule flexibility is definitely the number-one, top best thing.[3]

Dancers all liked the flexible hours, and the relatively high pay per hour, which allowed them more free time. Many also enjoyed the act of performing.

The Pleasure of Performance

The women who had some training in dance, like Morgan and Sabrina, especially liked performing on a raised stage. Morgan studied ballet for ten years. Her favorite time in the club was right at the beginning of her shift, at four in the afternoon. With few customers to entertain at this quiet hour, she passed her whole first set stretching out and warming up to music she particularly enjoyed, unfettered by the pressure to dance to crowd-pleasing Mötley Crüe songs. While no real dancing is required of performers, Morgan felt her dance training increased her appeal to clients. She explained:

> I think that's my thing. I don't have breasts. I'm not blonde. I'm certainly not willing to do a lot of the things a lot of the girls are. I think that's kind of my gimmick. That I can actually dance, as opposed to just walk around and wiggle. 'Cause me walking around and wiggling is just really not all that much to see; I mean I'm pretty well built like a fourteen-year-old boy. I can dance and I like to. I really enjoy it. And I think that that always shows when somebody really enjoys and is kind of spiritually with what they're doing, whatever it is. I like to dance. It's nice to be able to do something that you enjoy in an athletic and artistic way and get paid pretty good money for it.

Sabrina, who is white and twenty-eight, had an unusual trajectory into stripping. Alone among my participants, she did not start stripping for the money. She was in a stable relationship when she first explored exotic dancing, married to a man who brought home an income that supported them both. Sabrina is a well-known burlesque dancer who began stripping to improve her burlesque performances. Compared to burlesque, Sabrina explained that stripping offered her "extra stage time without the pressure of having to do something that's an exceptional quality." She continued:

> I can just go up and freestyle and as long as my butt looks good people will tip me. It wasn't as much about putting on a show, or having a really awesome costume, as hustling people. I figured out what the burlesque performers that came from a strip club background had, that burlesque performers that came from a theater background lack, what I call "visual busking." Busking is a term that sideshow performers use. It's a way of hustling people, getting money out of people. A good club dancer can look at somebody the right way and get them to tip when they're on stage. It doesn't really matter what they look like or how talented they are, if you look at somebody and make the right connection with them, then they'll typically tip you. And you can apply that in burlesque even though people aren't tipping you on stage, you can still make those connections with people in the audience, and it's a powerful thing. In dance and theater, we're taught to keep up that fourth wall. In burlesque, you break that wall, and you really break the wall in the strip joint.

A study of topless dancers categorized one subset of women as "dancers."[4] These individuals shared in common that they had all taken traditional dance lessons for many years, and had considered becoming professional dancers. Among the women I interviewed, Morgan, Anna, Sabrina, and Trina fit this category. Trina, a Honolulu dancer, appreciated that exotic dancing allowed her to support herself with her art form of choice:

> I have my degree in economics and dance; I could be doing anything I want. I've worked in a Fortune 500 company. I've done lots of different work and I know lots of different people where I could network myself to work behind a desk, but that's not my true self. My true self is in my dancing body that is willing to go anywhere, even to

> this place of extremity of dancing. It's the only dance place where you can actually make money as a dancer, as opposed to getting paid six dollars for ten days of hardcore work. It's amazing the juxtaposition of what is valuable.

Trina called herself an "erotic improvisational artist," eschewing the labels "stripper" or "exotic dancer." She felt creating live erotic art was part of her ongoing journey of becoming self-actualized:

> I'm beginning my inward journey, lots of meditation, yoga, dancing, creative expression, lots of writing, lots of reading definitely. I reread my thesis, and at the end of my thesis my last sentence said, "I will continue to journey my life through dance." I was like, "What in the world gives me more meaning than anything else? Dance." It's real for me. It's my path. I was like, "Okay. I want to dance. All right, how am I going to be a dancer and make money at it?" I didn't want to be a teacher in the school system because it's just going to be teaching technique. I don't want to do musicals. I'm not into that. I'm into this authentic expression. I want it to be this inward journey toward healing myself and becoming more of whoever I am.

Although Trina had only worked as an erotic improvisational artist for nine months at the time of our interview, she had danced since she was a child and received her bachelor's degree in dance. Eventually, Trina planned to continue her studies in dance in a Women's Spirituality and Dance program in San Francisco, and then start graduate school at UC Berkeley. Trina was one of several women I interviewed who discussed feeling spiritual while they danced.

Spiritual Stripping

Not only did many describe dancing as profoundly pleasurable, even a "peak" experience at certain times, they also discussed exotic dancing in terms of "spirituality."[5] A study group of psychologists operationalized the components of spirituality and developed the following definition:

> Spirituality, which comes from the Latin, *spiritus*, meaning "breath of life," is a way of being and experiencing that comes about through

> awareness of a transcendent dimension that is characterized by certain identifiable values in regard to self, others, nature, life and whatever one considers to be the Ultimate.[6]

That dancers describe feeling spiritual in strip bars may strike some readers as counterintuitive, as strip bars are not places one usually associates with the divine. Yet dance and movement are central to many faith traditions. For example, in the mystical branch of Islam, Sufism, participants—called whirling dervishes—twirl their bodies round and round to induce a mystical state. Christians worshipping in charismatic traditions dance, feel the spirit move them, and sometimes speak in tongues. Those practicing Shamanism and Rastafari drink mind-altering substances and move rhythmically to a monotonous drumbeat to enter sacred space, a liminal space between worlds in which the normal flow of time and perception is altered.[7]

A few of the women I interviewed described experiencing a kind of transcendent bliss while dancing. For example, April shared:

> I feel very spiritual when I dance. When I'm on stage and I'm there dancing, I feel the most spiritual I've ever felt. A lot of my songs, they talk about God. A lot of people think that's sacrilegious, but not to me. I used to wear crosses around my neck all the time when I danced. I mean I loved it, I loved it, I just felt something just soaring all through my body.

She continued:

> Holding on to the pole, looking up at the ceiling was a spiritual experience. Dancing on stage with those lights and that music and using your body to express. . . . The pole is your instrument. It was phallic for some people but it was not for me. It was the way I got to elevate myself above the club. I would just swing around. The body that God gave you is beautiful and you are using it right then like you have never got to use it before.

Strip bars and places of worship also have some elements in common: lights, music, movement to a rhythmic beat, and ritualized interactions. The main stage is elevated so that customers across the room can see the dancer while black

lights glow on the women's bodies. Stage lighting also makes it difficult for a performer to see any individual customer and, if she chooses, she can focus her attention on her own reflection in one of many mirrors, allowing any individual observer to recede into a sea of distant others. I speculate that some exotic dancers experience ecstasy, flow, and the loss of self-consciousness on stage, perhaps stumbling into "sacred space," and understand this as "spiritual."

Flow

Trina and Morgan likewise described dancing as spiritual, narrating their experiences in the language of "flow." Flow occurs when an individual experiences inherent pleasure in an activity; as psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes, "the experience itself is so enjoyable that people will do it even at great cost for the sheer sake of doing it."[8] In a state of flow, an individual ceases to be self-conscious, the mind quiets, and one feels intensely alive in the present moment. Trina references flow in the following excerpt when describing how sexuality and spirituality can intermingle while stripping:

> Spirituality and sexuality are one in the same when you are not using them to either dominate or control. When you are using them as this commingling dance, if you will, tango of sorts, you're finding a divinity that exists. It's finally a release from the pressures, all the limitations, all the judgments that we hold sacred and valuable to ourselves that keep us from really experiencing and letting everything go in the flow of infinity.

Morgan explored how she (and others) might enter into a state of "induced daydreaming" while dancing: "It's letting go of those secondary thought processes and logic. I've heard people who do transcendental meditation talk about meditation, I hear people who are runners talk about how they feel when they run long distances and there is a transcendental quality. It's the combination of art and athleticism. It's expressing music that you have chosen." To most, strip bars are about bodies, not souls, and the basest expression of lust at that. Exploring how an exotic dancer accesses her spirituality in such a place requires highlighting the *subjectivity* of dancers. In doing so, dancers become more than objectified bodies performing for male desire. A dancer may be tuned out, apathetic, and bored on stage. Or she might be dancing into her spiritual self,

with the sea of faces a distant accompaniment to her worship.[9] The act of stripping occasions elements that might make a performer feel spiritual: she tests her fear, breaks the cultural taboo of embodying the "fallen woman," twirls around a pole, moves rhythmically to music, and is likely on some intoxicant.

The empowering aspects of stripping, *the allure*, emerge swiftly, despite some unpleasant experiences and consequences, for the early-career dancer. She enjoys a sudden cash flow, attention, free time, a flexible schedule, and, sometimes, spiritual actualization. Reflecting upon this period, many women spoke about how exciting it was to dance, how much money they made, how powerful they felt, and how energizing it was to break the taboo about displaying their bodies for money. Those feelings of empowerment and excitement faded, however, in the wake of a twofold process: one, they grew accustomed to the positive elements of dancing (so they ceased to feel as pleasurable) and, two, the difficult aspects of the work became more salient.

Rude Customers

Because strip clubs hover on the borders of respectable society, many who enter them abandon conventions of social etiquette; some customers even abuse dancers physically, verbally, and emotionally. Many assume that this is what they are paying for: the right to treat a naked or nearly naked woman however they like. During our conversations, dancers and other club staff categorized the customers in terms of rude behavior, estimating that about 50 percent were "average rude," meaning they often said things that, in other contexts, would be very inappropriate; 10–20 percent were "asshole rude," meaning they were deliberately abusive, aggressive, misogynist, and hateful to dancers; and 30–40 percent were kind and respectful. Rude clients were so common that every dancer shared stories of abusive customers. Wes, manager of Pearls, said, "It's got to wear on you. There are guys who I know come in here strictly to talk shit to girls, to be mean because that's what they get off on." Rachel, a San Francisco dancer, felt that dealing with rude customers was the hardest part about working at the Lusty Lady:

> The job is bad because you have to deal with the customers, who can be problematic and rude. Most of the time, the customers are okay, but that one bad apple can really ruin your day. I guess they feel like the normal laws of etiquette that govern any other social or business

> interaction are suspended there. It is okay to call someone a bad name or use foul language. They'll say, "Turn around, bitch, I want to see your ass. I'm paying." To have to deal with that at all is a real drawback. That's not something you have to contend with systematically in other jobs.

Required by management to approach all the customers during walk-arounds (mandatory sweeps of the room), Sandy described the following interaction with Kevin at Red Key. After Sandy asked him if he would like a dance, Kevin responded, "I fucking hate coming here. I spend so much money on you girls and I fucking can't do anything about it because I just have to sit there, not touch, and basically do nothing." Sandy replied, "Sorry to hear that," and Kevin continued, "I'm just here because my friends wanted to come. Why would I want to sit here and spend so much money on one dance, or for a girl to talk to me, when I could just go home and jack off on the internet, and watch anything I want for free? Or, I don't know, I could *get laid*." Kevin is only one of many men described by dancers who justify rude, aggressive, and demeaning attitudes toward them. Polly, a white, twenty-year-old dancer from Red Key, told a story about a customer who propositioned and then threatened her, saying: "I don't care. I'm paying for your sexuality, so you'll do as I say." Sandy summed up her thoughts on the customers by saying: "They treat us like robots to ejaculate on."

Sarah and Vera, roommates I interviewed together who both worked at the Lusty Lady, discussed the phenomenon of rude customers in the following exchange:

> **Vera:** If men could be polite to sex workers and women, in general, the job would be absolutely perfect and there would be nothing wrong with it at all.
>
> **Sarah:** I don't know why they don't understand that, because a lot of repeat customers will continue to be rude. I talked to this guy who had been coming to the club who said they were paying for the privilege to be rude to you. Like it's your job, you're being paid to take it. And they think it's the privilege of the customer to give that treatment because they can't give it anywhere else.
>
> **Vera:** And that goes along with what you were saying about what exactly is the woman's role. I think that it's a service and people should treat you with respect. You don't order a waitress around in a restaurant.

You don’t say, “Get my water, bitch, right now.”

Sarah: That’s where I think that’s a little wrong, because some people do order the waitresses around. I think, in reality, a lot of the time, men are truly rude to women, and it’s up to me to make them be polite to me because they want my pussy.

Like Sarah illustrates here, many of the women I interviewed noted linkages between the sexual harassment and abuse they experienced in the sex industry and that which women regularly endure from men—especially the patriarchal assumption that sex is for men, who are then entitled to badger women for it.

Ceaseless Propositioning

Approximately 50 percent of the dancers I interviewed for this edition confided that they felt more comfortable dancing for the customers than talking with them. Some of these were very young women (born-digitals) who were less experienced in the art of chit-chat (especially when they are almost and/or completely naked). But even those with strong conversation skills felt worn out sometimes by endless customer demands for more sex, explaining that rude customers and nonstop requests for sexual favors are stressful to manage. Dancers said that 50–100 percent of customers proposition them. Laura, who is white and nineteen, said that “eight out of ten customers” ask her for more than a nude lap dance. She rolled her eyes and mimicked them:

“Meet me later.” “Where are you going after work?” “What are you doing now?” “Can I get extras in VIP room?” “Please, can I just touch you on the couch? Can we just have sex on the couch? No one will notice.” That’s almost every single customer! It’s very rare to find even just one customer in a night that doesn’t do that. Like today, I lost my customer because I refused to let him touch me, and he left. Even just today and I’ve only had one customer today.

Other common customer propositions that dancers shared include:

“What are you doing after work?”

“Would you want to meet at a hotel after you get off? . . . No? What

about a gas station, though?"

"What do you mean you're not a prostitute? I just want a blowjob. See, I've got money for one."

"You should text me and we should meet up sometime—what's your number?"

"How do you like to treat your special customers like me in the VIP room?"

"What would you do to me for twenty dollars?" (Usually the dancer's assertive, frustrated response is "A *dance* . . . ," but this is almost always followed by one or more of the above questions.)

Propositioning and other inappropriate sexual behaviors from some customers is not a new phenomenon. However, compared with those I interviewed for the original edition, and observations made by contemporary dancers with some longevity in the business, customer expectations for sexual contact have increased. Veteran Red Key dancers noted generational differences among the customers, in particular that enjoying the "fantasy" element of strip clubs was disappearing, especially among younger customers. Stacy, who had danced for fourteen years, and Alana, who had danced for ten years, discussed this in the dressing room:

Stacy: Hey Alana, you've worked here long enough. You remember the days when customers would come in here, they would be nice and friendly, they would ask you for a dance and tip you well, and more of them would enjoy having a conversation with you? When it was about fantasy and not coming in here for sex?

Alana: Ha, yeah, I remember those . . .

Stacy: Remember when they wouldn't ask you for your real name or your phone number? And they wouldn't pester you to go out and meet up with them outside of the club. It was about *fantasy*. Guys would come in here to escape, enjoy conversation with a beautiful woman, and when they had their fantasy, they'd leave. They wouldn't ask you to fuck them in the VIP room or for other favors—that was it.

By choosing to take her clothes off for money a stripper steps outside spoken and unspoken rules for respectable female behavior. The liberating part of

breaking this gender norm includes no longer having to conform to sexist double standards. The scary part is giving up the paternal protection that "good" girls and women supposedly receive from men. Dancers interviewed for this edition are negotiating more persistent and insistent requests for sex and then more disgruntled, angry, abusive customers when they deflect or reject these demands.

Physical and Emotional Abuse

Of all the dancers I interviewed, Sabrina, the burlesque performer, had the most positive attitude about stripping. Stripping taught her new skills, she enjoyed performing, and she had a good opinion of exotic dancers. Sabrina began stripping from a place of privilege; she did not need the money, *then*. When we met she was divorced and had a child to support. Saddled now with credit card debt from her ex-husband, she *did* need money and was considering going back into stripping. When I asked what was holding her back, she said frankly, "assault." Sabrina explained:

> I'm walking up to someone and trying to sell a dance, and they say nasty things for no reason like, "You're too fat," or "No, you're nasty. Skank, Bitch, Whore," whatever. To be verbally assaulted when you're just trying to do your job, that's not fun. And then there have been instances of sexual assault in the club. I had one guy bite my boob. I had another guy lick the side of my face. I had another guy try to stick his finger inside my butt, another guy tried sticking his finger inside my vagina. I had another guy grab my crotch. It's just being touched and grabbed in ways that I didn't want, or having someone pin me down on his lap so that he can ejaculate while I'm giving him a dance. I really don't want to go back and deal with that.

Like Sabrina, every dancer shared tales of fending off clients who tried to touch them. They all have had men kiss them. One dancer told me about having a client shove his tongue down her throat; another put his tongue inside her vagina when she was performing a naked dance. Sandy, Polly, and several other dancers interviewed for this edition also described customers blowing on their genitals during nude private dances. Polly tells customers, "Don't do that or I'm going to stop the dance." Alana's usual line is "stop drying it out." As they discussed customers blowing on them, it struck me that this was a kind of penetration into

a dancer's space, if not her actual body. Dancers uniformly perceived blowing as "weird" and "creepy."

Almost every dancer also shared at least one story of a psychologically disturbing experience she had while working, something that irrevocably colored the way she perceived herself and men in general. April vividly recalled one such night:

> I was onstage one night. I was at Lace and Lashes. Oh, it was such a bad night. It was terrible. Nobody had been there or anything. This guy comes up with a hundred-dollar bill. I was just like, "Thank heavens, my whatever's getting paid." And I go down to get it and say, "Thank you, thank you," and he just laughs, and flips it away, and walks away. I don't think I've ever felt so cheap and just awful in my entire life ever. And I don't have a temper. I did when I was smaller, but I don't lose my temper anymore. I did that night. I lost my temper really bad. I went down there, and I took my shoes off. I was getting ready to hit him with it, and I told him, "I'll have you know I'm a 4.0, I'm on the dean's list." I went over there and said, "I just want to know why you did that. Tell me why you did that." And my bosses, which was a man and a woman, they started coming because I'd never lost my temper before—never—and they could tell something was going to happen. So I went over there and said, "Why did you do that?" He said, "I wouldn't let my daughter do this. You're a whore," and all this stuff. And I was like, "I'll have you know . . . ," and I started going off. And he says, "Okay, okay, okay," and they come over and grab me, and they take me back to the dressing room. I'm beating down the paneling. I'm just screaming and just crying at the top of my lungs, and that was a really negative moment.

It makes sense that this experience—being offered a large tip when anxious about her unpaid bills—raised April's expectations so that the customer's insults stung deeper, tapping a wellspring of rage. She ripped off her shoe and raised the spike heel dagger-like—among the most menacing moves a dancer can make, threatening him with this emblem of her own sexual servitude. April is kind, generous, and easygoing. About a year after our initial interview, she quit dancing, finished her M.A. in counseling psychology, and began working as a counselor for rape victims. She was completing her Ph.D. when I interviewed her for this edition. I share these details of her biography to help the reader put

this incident in the context of her life course. April, like all the women I interviewed, is more than a "nasty, drug-head, whore stripper." She is a person.

Morgan also described an episode in which a client seriously disturbed her emotional well-being:

> I had a guy tell me I reminded him of his daughter. This was at the Cherry Pit during a couch dance. He was from Cleveland, and I was dancing for him, and he was like, "You remind me of my daughter," blah, blah. He was talking about details: "She's got pretty blue eyes like yours and long brown hair like yours." When people start talking about their kids I'm usually like, "You got any pictures?" whatever. But we're on the couch. I'm like, "Really, how old is she?" He looks me right in the eye, and gets this big grin on his face and goes, "Ten." I was like, okay, "That's it. Get up. Out, out. Pay me and get out!" That absolutely—that's the absolute worst, creepiest, grossest thing I've ever had happen to me in a club.

While this was the "creepiest, grossest thing" Morgan experienced some fifteen years ago, it is business as usual for the young dancers at Red Key. As an eighteen-and-older club that does not serve alcohol, it attracts young customers. Because Red Key employs many teenagers, it also attracts older men interested in "barely legal" girls. Several of the dancers described these men as "perverts."

Many dancers at Red Key also told stories of customers putting (or trying to put) dollar bills in their vaginas as they danced on the main stage. Sandy described one night as "a nightmare that came true":

> I was on stage, and I was just dancing. These three customers had been rude, and had been touching Stacy when she was on stage. They tried putting money in her vagina, and I didn't realize this before I got on stage. I don't usually get up close to the customers, and I was probably about three or four feet away from them. They came over the stage, completely reached over, stood up, bent over the stage, reached out, and were holding onto the money but trying to do the same thing. And I kept going, "No, you can't do that here." Finally, I just stopped on stage and stared at them, and I felt myself really wanting to kick them or strangle them or something. And I just stopped and stared at them, and took their money, threw it onto the stage in the back. Just horrible

> things like that. And then, when I came around and was picking up tips and stuff, they blew smoke in my face, and I'm highly allergic. It was just awful. I was really mad, but they couldn't kick them out, because apparently our rule is that they can't kick customers out for putting money in our vaginas but only if their fingers actually touch it, which is completely wrong to me.

Episodes like the ones that Sandy, April, and Morgan vividly describe contribute to the long term toll of stripping.

Rejection

Alongside persistent requests for sex, and the occasional abusive customer, dancers also cope with the emotions raised by rejection. As I explained earlier, most dancers make the bulk of their income from private dances: table, lap, and couch dances. This means that unless they have one or more regular customers present on whom they can count to supply them with money, dancers must circle the room soliciting dances from strangers. In Honolulu, dancers listlessly sit on foam mats waiting for clients to approach them for semiprivate shows on the main stage. Like employees selling anything from wireless service to timeshare rentals, dancers experience frequent rejection. Many dancers described humiliating moments at work when they felt rejected and unattractive. For example, Courtney, who is biracial (Native American and white) and twenty-seven, had been dancing for the past seven years in San Francisco. Propped up on big pink cushions in the Mitchell Brothers Theater, Courtney gestured around the space and said with frustration, "I'm sorry, we're all cute girls!" She was describing a rough period: rude customers, no money, and lots of rejection. She continued, "He'll just be so rude. He'll walk up and put his hand in your face. I took a week off, actually. I haven't been in here in a week, because I was having a rough two weeks, feeling bad, pulling teeth to have any kind of decent day."

April had also had a rough night at work the day before our first interview. She had participated in a contest called the Tiniest Tan Line, a special feature the club organized to attract customers. The Tiniest Tan Line competition was similar to a beauty contest in that all the dancers lined up to be judged not only on their tan lines, but also, of course, on their bodies. Each dancer wrote an introduction for herself that the DJ was supposed to read over the microphone. Because April finished in last place, the contest destroyed her self-confidence for

the evening:

> It ended up ruining my whole night because I got the worst of the worst. I was the first one to be eliminated. They didn't even let me do anything and ad-libbed what I'd written. So it just ruined my confidence for the whole night, and I didn't make any money at all. I mean, I wasn't even caring, I wasn't planning on getting first or even third, but to be the only one knocked out, to have everyone's name read off but yours. It's very humiliating.

Cell phones are a new tool customers can use to avoid and reject dancers. Almost all the customers have phones, and some use their phones as shields to avoid interacting with dancers who approach them. Sandy described customers who, when asked if they would like a dance during a walk-around, looked up from their phones, perused a dancer up and down, smirked, and continued using their phones without even responding. Some did not even bother to look up. Most dancers find this infuriating. Stacy said, "You know, I can handle a simple 'no' or rejection any day, but when *you don't even answer me or don't even look at me*, ugh! Who the hell do you think you are?" Anna described her frustration with this:

> A lot of people are glued to their phones, worried about what they're going to do after they leave the club, or they're aware that they're not going to go home with these women so they're finding someone they can go home with. They're trying to see what's on Facebook. They're trying to see what's on Instagram. They won't get off the stage or anything. They'll just turn and watch the TV. Sometimes, this one really gets me, you walk up and ask for a dance; and they're like [puts cell phone to ear], "Hello? Hold on, I'll be right back. I got to take this phone call," and they get up and walk away. And it's like, "Are you serious? Just tell me no!" That's what people do. You either want a dance from me or you don't.

Dancers observed customers on tip row, the front row of customers sitting at the main stage, texting on their cell phones, and even playing video games. This behavior, this preoccupation with one's phone, also begs the question of why a customer is coming to a strip bar in the first place. If he is texting with his

friends, playing video games, or posting to Twitter, Facebook, or Instagram, why pay the cover fee to see live nude women?

Mandy, forty-two years old, faces rejection more often than many dancers. She worries that the customers think she is ugly and skinny when no one tips her or buys a private dance from her. She said, "Mentally, you think, 'Today, I had to pull teeth to try to make a dollar.' You're up there and you're dancing, and you're either getting into it or you're not, whatever. You're doing what you're supposed to be doing, and then you get rejection. A lot of women say, 'Don't think about them.' But, I'm sorry, if you get rejected so many times consistent, it's going to get to you: 'God, is there something wrong with me?' It's hard on my self-esteem."It's difficult for dancers to externalize this kind of daily rejection—to believe that even if no one wants a dance from them, they are still worthwhile and attractive. They know that getting upset about the rejection only makes it all worse: the more desperate or angry they appear to customers, the less likely is anyone to buy a dance from them. Performing a cheerful front while enduring repeated rejection is an illustration of what sociologist Arlie Hochschild describes as "emotional labor." Hochschild defines emotional labor as face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact that "requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others."[10] Anyone who has ever done sales work understands how exhausting and debilitating it is to be perky, pleasant, and positive when the phone is slammed down in your ear or when someone closes a door in your face. Imagine the strain involved in maintaining a friendly, seductive demeanor and high self-confidence when the product the customer refuses to buy is you. It requires great emotional discipline, or twenty tequila shots, *not* to take it personally.

The Physical Cost to the Body: "You Age in Dog Years When You Dance"

Physically, dancing wears out women's bodies. Dancers work late hours in dark, smoky environments in which they are encouraged to drink large amounts of alcohol. They dance in extremely high heels with little opportunity to get properly warmed up before each dance. April summed up the physical demands of dancing:

> You age in dog years when you dance because it's so hard. You're

> walking around in nine-inch heels. Your body is in this totally different position. Your knees go out. You get out of bed, you sound like an old mattress. You throw up all the time. Your body weight goes up, it goes down, it goes haywire. You drink. And it makes you age faster hearing some of the things that you hear. It makes your mind mature a lot faster.

One way women manage the physical pain of stripping is through alcohol and drug use, and then this too exacts a physical cost. Phoebe, who is white and thirty, echoed April, "This job's really hard on your body. I've already had knee surgery. My back's all messed up. My hip's all messed up. So I feel like I'm forty." Sandy traveled seventy miles each way to go to work. She described driving home exhausted and covered in bruises:

> My legs were completely jelly during the drive home, because it was an hour and a half. Hitting the steering wheel, doing whatever to stay awake. I would come home and see my knees, and they were completely purple and dark, dark purple all around. The floor, the pole would give me bruises on my arms, especially here and here or on my back or sides. I didn't expect the bruising.

Mandy, the forty-year-old dancer working at Vixens, explained that she had an even harder time than some of the younger dancers with the physical demands of stripping:

> Squatting, the bending, constantly in high heels, a lot of bad things. Your feet. I've got shoes that are a size and a half too big, but your feet swell up so much they fill in that shoe when you wear a shoe that high. I take these things off, let my toes breathe. It's hard on you. The lights get intense; so much lighting all the time can get old. When you get onstage you're seeing spotlights in different colors and black lights. Now, see, they have to turn strobe lights off for me. I'll have a seizure with strobe lights. Then the music gets old. It does affect your hearing. People don't realize that you're sitting right underneath that speaker and you're yelling to speak up. Right now I know my voice is loud 'cause I'm still ringing in my ears from the loudness.

Melinda described the physical atmosphere of strip clubs as “wearing” on her:

> It’s dark. The bars are dark. You hear a lot of music over and over and over again. AC/DC, Guns and Roses, Aerosmith, they’re all good bands but geez. . . . Even my own music, as much as I love it, I change it up every now and again because I get so burned out on the same stuff. Every time you’re in that club, you feel like it’s the same day you were in there before because there’s no windows. Nothing changes. It’s always a dark, smoky place with the same music, the same people. I change clubs a lot, every three or four months. I often find myself quitting and going somewhere else, and that’s because I can’t take the scene.

Some dancers, like Morgan and Anna, said they were uncomfortable with the possible exchange of body fluids both from customer to dancer and between dancers. Morgan felt that dancing fully nude increased the possibility of contracting an infection. She said, “You have performers touching themselves onstage and elsewhere, touching objects and touching the customers. If ten people have danced nude onstage before me, and their genital area touched, say, the pole, and then I touch the pole, and touch my face, or something that I am going to eat . . .” Morgan concluded that there are a limited number of viruses that could actually be transmitted that way, but it still made her uneasy. Anna thinks grinding while fully nude on a customer is “disgusting.” She explained, “First off, I don’t want to grind on you nude. Second off, I’m not sure who else grinded on you and if I trust that person is clean. That’s a good way to spread STDs. That’s a good way to get somebody else’s discharge on me, and now I have bacteria in me because of something you did. That’s a big, big risk.” Morgan also suffered a bad spinal injury recently (some fifteen years after she stopped dancing) that she described to me as “likely the late result of the wear and tear of the shoes. I ruptured a disc and the nerve compression resulted in damage that is likely permanent to some degree.”

At some clubs, customers can watch live sex shows. These performances may include penetration with another woman, or with toys. Joscelyn described a unique job hazard associated with live sex shows during our interview:

> To be frank, one of the worst things is doing toy shows and girl-girl shows. The constant penetration when you’re not necessarily aroused can cause internal problems. There were times I had bladder or yeast

> infections. So there's a discomfort. Obviously, if you're uncomfortable, you don't want to have sex, and you're not feeling that great about yourself because you're in pain. And you don't feel well, and one of your body parts isn't working like it's supposed to be working, so there's these occupational hazards that go along with it.

Like most of the dancers, Melinda also suffered bruising, strained muscles, and achy joints. Some of this she felt was her own fault, that she should stretch out more before and after work. However, she also noted that many of the physical issues dancers experience are a consequence of the labor conditions. There is little time and space to do proper warm-ups and cool-downs *between* dances to best protect one's body. Melinda explained, "You'll find yourself doing a lot of dancing for ten, twenty, thirty minutes. If you get in that couch room and you stay there, that's a lot of hard work, a lot of sweating, and then you get out and you might sit for another forty minutes after that and never stretch out. Eventually your body gets more and more wound up, and it starts to hurt." During each couch, table, or lap dance, depending on whether she is dancing for a customer on stage, in a chair, on a couch, in a bed, or in a booth, a dancer must adjust how she bends and squats. The physical positions dancers maneuver into are particularly taxing to their feet, ankles, knees, and lower back. Imagine getting into a half squat and varying it only slightly for three and a half minutes. Imagine doing this for four hours at different squat levels. It's a testament to dancers' flexibility and core strength that they don't fall on top of their customers more often.

The Möbius Strip

It's easy to make a Möbius strip: rotate a long strip of paper one time and glue the ends together to form a ring. You have thus constructed a figure in which the surface and underside blend together. Wearing six-inch heels, drinking shots of Cuervo, dancers delicately traverse a Möbius strip of customer reactions in which each emotion they feel (pleasure, delight, distress, anger) or behavior they encounter (compliments, insults, admiration, assault) may moment by moment transform into something else. The women I interviewed described exciting experiences, and terrible ones, working in strip bars. They felt powerful and mistreated (and sometimes really bored). What the metaphor of the Möbius strip helps illuminate is how good feelings may become bad ones in an instant while working in a strip club. For example, basking in the glow of a great tip, a dancer

may feel like a queen. The very next moment she may feel humiliated and violated when a stranger sticks his tongue down her throat. Anna illustrated this paradox:

> There are a lot of customers that come in here and say, “I have a lot of respect for what you guys do. There’s no way that I could go up there and do that. You guys have a lot of confidence. You’re beautiful.” But there is also always that handful of guys a night that think it’s funny to be, like, “Dance, bitch!” or like, “Turn around and shake that! Throw it in my face!” There’s just rude, degrading things.

Confusingly, dancers experience both positive reinforcement and rejection for the same reason: their sexual bodies. Managing this inconsistency requires a tremendous amount of emotional labor.[11]

Consider the consequences of inconsistency. Someone who is *consistently treated well* in her workplace by co-workers, management, and customers will likely be even-tempered, and generally comfortable. She will, of course, have bad days, but the workplace will not be the primary cause of these. The person who is *consistently treated poorly* by others in a workplace will likely grow increasingly angry, sullen, and resentful. Consistency, whether it is positive or negative, keeps one’s emotions on a fairly even keel, although, obviously, consistent negativity is bad for one emotionally and physically. In contrast, the exotic dancer feels intense pleasure one moment followed by intense humiliation the next, careening from joy to pain. Stacy illustrated this: “There could be fifteen guys lined up and tell you, ‘You are just drop-dead gorgeous! You are just beautiful!’ And you’re kind of, ‘Aw, thank you. That’s so sweet!’ Well, one guy tells you, ‘You’re the ugliest thing I’ve ever seen,’ and you’re done. Your night is completely shot.”

Constantly reminded that a woman’s worth in the world is tied to how beautiful and desirable she is, a stripper must have strong mental discipline to stay calm and centered when dancing on the Möbius strip, a roller-coaster ride of male scrutiny, adoration, and rejection. Most dancers learn over time that the pleasure they experience working in strip bars is transitory and may easily change into disgust, anger, and hurt as clients’ crude propositions continue shift after shift. In this chapter, I have focused on what happens inside strip bars. While these daily descriptions of work include good, bad, and tedious times, early-career performers typically experience the club more positively than more experienced strippers because they are new to the world and its rhythms, and the

stressful parts of dancing add up over time. The key to understanding stripping lies not so much in the *individual* psyches and experiences of the dancers but in the *length of time* they have spent working in the sex industry. Over time, as the number of really awful incidents ticks up, dancers start to feel badly about themselves, *and* find themselves stained with stripper stigma. All this adds up to a long-term negative effect that I theorize in the next chapter as “the toll” of stripping.

3

The Toll

Fifteen years since our last interview, I met April on a very cold morning in January 2014 in my home in Silverton. As we made ourselves comfortable at my dining room table, I asked her what it was like to see her words featured in the original edition of *Stripped*. April confided that she had been a little appalled to find herself saying certain words over and over again, such as "like," and had schooled herself *this time* to "watch her words." April had danced for four and half years, from 1995 to 2000. Now thirty-nine years old and finishing a Ph.D. program in counseling psychology, she shared that she'd hardly been back in the clubs at all since she stopped dancing. As we explored how her perception of her years spent stripping had changed in the intervening period, April summed up the toll of stripping with wit and her usual flair:

> One of the worst things for me and most people I know, you don't have a dime when you're out of it. You've made all this money, but you've tore your body down and there's going to be consequences for a lot of us like bad knees or arches. Some people may get liver damage or brain damage. And then being sexually assaulted, you've got post-traumatic stress disorder. You've got all of those things that happened that can intrude upon your relationships. Something different that I would say today that I wouldn't have said before was how that negatively impacted my self-esteem. I think before, I thought I was on top of the world. I was more aware at a micro level because I was in it. You did have this illusion of power, but then after being out of it, no. You were lambs to the slaughter, and when you're done your body's broke down and your mind, your psyche can't take this anymore. You go on to do something else, and then they bring a fresh batch of lambs in.

As I wrote earlier, dancing has a high turnover rate. Charlotte estimated approximately 30–40 percent of new dancer hires quit stripping immediately, some not even lasting the length of one shift. Those that continue dancing usually do enjoy elements of the work in the early stages. But, as what was once

new, exciting, and adventurous becomes business as usual, and the bad incidents in the clubs accumulate, dancers described becoming increasingly unhappy at work. Some, like April, discern that they are not goddesses to most customers, but "lambs to the slaughter." Outside of work, they realize that others see them as "nasty, whore, drug-head strippers," so they try to hide their jobs from family and friends, as well as acquaintances, medical personnel, landlords, teachers, and potential employers.

Exotic dancing exacted a similar cost on the women interviewed for both editions. Most found that no matter how much they made in a shift—$200, $600, $1,200—the earnings rarely felt like adequate compensation for what the customers were taking from them. Several also discussed having, when intoxicated or in need of cash to cover a bill (or both), done acts they regretted, and then feeling badly about themselves later. Paradoxically, they also described valuing their sexual desirability and overall worth in the world by the daily, unpredictable income of stripping. Most found the stigma—the negative stereotypes circulated about dancers—one of the worst parts of the job. Some described experiences of discrimination in housing and medical care. Several discussed literally getting sick when preparing to go to work.

Many dancers also began to develop a deep disdain for men in general. Alana, who is white and twenty-eight, said frankly, "There's a lot of stress, traumatic stress, where you're constantly dealing with vulgarity, so you become desensitized completely. And you look at all guys like dogs and dollar signs, and it'll affect your love life in that way, too. I was celibate for about four years when I first started dancing." Like Alana, the other women I interviewed explained that stripping complicated intimate relationships. They dealt with jealous partners, reduced sex drives, and years of being single. Overall, the more men treated them disrespectfully, the more they were ostracized by mainstream society, the more their bodies aged, the more monotonous the strip bar became, the more trapped they felt, the lower sank their self-esteem, *the more dancing cumulatively debilitated them*. I call this phenomenon "the toll" of stripping.

"Easy Money Spends Easy": Managing Cash

Imagine a young person, perhaps yourself as a young twenty-something. If you are like me, by twenty-one the highest-paying job you've ever had earned you a dollar or two over minimum wage. You scrape by eating ramen and lentils. Perhaps you have some cast-off furniture from your family, and an old set of

pots and pans no one else wants. You eat on a card table if you are lucky, if not, you sit cross-legged on the floor. Buying a bottle of wine is a big expense, and you really can't afford to do *anything*. You are working at Taco Bell, or Walmart, or a store in the mall, bringing home $225 for a week's worth of work. Then you find out one of your friends is stripping, and you notice she's sporting fancy clothes, and paying for expensive meals out. She takes a vacation at an all-inclusive resort in Mexico, and you are envious. She tells you about the work, saying, "It's not so bad, come and try," so you go to her club, drink a little too much, and get coaxed on the stage. It's a little weird and scary, but you walk away with $200 for five minutes of work, and feel stunned. All that time you spent slinging tacos to grumpy people, you might have been stripping, making ten times the income. You quit your crappy fast food job and take a job dancing with your friend. Suddenly you have cash, *lots of cash*. You are intoxicated with the money, and buy yourself luxury items. You splurge on a really nice gift for your mother, a special watch she has always wanted. You get some classy furniture. You don't worry about your bills because you know you can always make more money tomorrow.

The problem is, if you are like most dancers, you don't plan for your future. You don't save. Plus, your financial obligations have skyrocketed since you began stripping. You moved to a fancy apartment (with a pool!), bought a new car, and started giving monthly checks to your grandmother to help with her medical bills. After a terrible incident with a customer who called you a "dirty cunt" and pinned you on his lap until he ejaculated while the bouncers looked away, you vow to quit. You hate it! You hate the disgusting, slimeball, pervert men, and can't spend one more second in a strip bar! Then you go home and look at your nice new things, and the framed photo of Grandma looking so happy, and your credit card bills, and you realize you simply can't imagine leaving all the money stripping provides to go back to some dreary minimum-wage job. Darby explains why it's so difficult to quit dancing:

> The money gets so addictive. You get so used to having the money, you spend like crazy and you don't save it. You don't think about it. Easy money spends easy. I've got nothing to show for all the money I've made. I've made tons of money. I've had a lot of things. I had a 'Vette. I wrecked it. Everything nice I ever bought, something's always happened to it. And dancers say they'll quit. And then you quit and go to a job, and you might be having benefits, and you might be making seven or eight dollars an hour. You might have a good job, but

> you're sitting there thinking, "I could have made four hundred dollars a night instead of eighty dollars." And you watch all that money go by. And dancers, they get so tired of dancing. They get real tired of dancing so they'll quit for like three weeks, a month, something like that, and then they come back because the money is so addictive. I could quit smoking cigarettes before I could give up my money.

Many exotic dancers find it difficult to exit stripping—even when it is destructive to them—because they need the money. Ellen, a ten-year veteran of the Pink Cave, an upscale club near Silverton, expressed deep unhappiness with dancing to me in a quick conversation at the bar while she was getting her before-shift drink. Dressed in a black bunny costume, ears drooping, mascara already running, Ellen cautioned me, "Don't ever start dancing. The money will trap you forever." With children to support and family members depending on her, she could not give up a job making $200 to $300 a day to take one that paid just $10 an hour. Ellen offered me her hand, palm up, and sighed, "When they find out you dance, everyone wants a handout."

Trapped in Stripping

Some late-career dancers, like Alana and Lacy, told me they advise young women not to start stripping at all, and counsel new dancers to quit immediately. For example, when I asked Alana how working in a strip bar has affected her, she replied, "It's hell, and you don't know until it's much too late. You get stuck. That's why I try to warn the girls, 'Get out! Do not plan to be in this. I said a couple of months, and I'm here ten years later. Don't do this! Go to school! Do it now, do it, do it, do it. Don't wait! Don't do this!'" Lacy echoed Alana, saying,

> Don't fool yourself into thinking you're only going to be in it for six months, or just long enough, because every day you go in there and you make money, you leave. You spend that money thinking, "Oh, I can make it tomorrow," and you never save. You don't plan for your future as much as you want to. That's what everybody desires going into it, but it never happens. So just don't start.

> Danielle tried to quit, but no one would hire her. She said, "I tried so many

times to claw my way out of it, but it never worked. It was the only way that I could pay for my bills." Potential employers repeatedly rejected her applications. She speculated that the gaps in her resume raised red flags, while sharing her past employment in strip bars never resulted in a job offer. Danielle was also registered in a city police registry. She explained:

> I tried many times to pull away from it and either they would ask on my application why I had such a space, and I would just tell them, "personal reasons." They would not hire me. Or, if I would say, "I was a dancer for this long," they would definitely not hire me. So no matter what I did, I couldn't get a job. I was already registered through the police station in Chicago. When they do background checks, I think it pulls up. I don't know how all that works, but every time I tried to get a job, I got turned down.

As one might imagine, all this conspired to make Danielle feel trapped, frustrated, and hopeless. She continued, "I didn't like the fact that I started feeling dirty, hopeless, and used. I didn't like the fact that I was bound and stuck there. It became my identity. When I did have the motivation to look for jobs, I'd get turned down." After so much rejection, Danielle decided it must be her fault —that some part of her wanted to be a stripper. She concluded, "It was my life. I thought there was no way around it, eventually." The more someone like Danielle is treated poorly, the more she learns to expect such treatment; the more she believes she deserves it, the harder it is for her to create positive changes in her life.[1] This is part of the psychological toll of oppression.[2]

How can someone in a low-status but high-earning job soothe this anxiety? Darby bought herself a Corvette. Beatrice vacationed in Hawaii. In *Strip City*, Lily Burana narrates her experience of purchasing a fur coat for herself for her birthday. Advertising campaigns tell consumers that big-ticket, high-status purchases like luxury vacations, expensive electronics, and sports cars are "what we deserve" for hard work. *Many* Americans "prostitute" themselves performing work that leaves them feeling dull, unsatisfied, and unhappy, like the dancers I interviewed, and the slaughterhouse assembly workers in sociologist William Thompson's study of "beefers," to maintain a certain material standing in the world. Then the debt accrued buying these things traps workers in jobs they dislike.[3] Thompson described this cycle:

> Consuming spending patterns among the beefers seemed to "seal their

> fate" and make leaving the beef plant almost impossible. A reasonable interpretation is that having a high income/low status job encourages a person to consume conspicuously. The prevailing attitude seems to be "I may not have a nice job, but I have a nice home, a nice car, etc." This conspicuous consumption enabled workers indirect pride in their occupations. One of the ways of overcoming drudgery and humiliation on the job was to surround oneself with as many desirable material things as possible off the job. These items (cars, boats, motorcycles, etc.) became tangible rewards for the sacrifices endured at work.[4]

What distinguishes strippers from workers in other low-status, high-earning occupations is, one, the persistent stigma associated with sex labor and, two, that their bodies are the tools, products, and currency of this labor.

Tying Self-Esteem to Money

Kelly explained that her feelings about stripping had gradually changed over the five years she had danced. As I wrote earlier, when she began stripping, Kelly appreciated what she considered a feminist dimension in the work. But, as her time stripping lengthened, she noticed she was becoming increasingly out of alignment with the work. Kelly said:

> My self-esteem became tied to how much money I made. And my emotional state as well. So, on days where I wouldn't make money, I felt really bad about myself and I got depressed. On days I made a lot of money, I felt really powerful and on top of the world. That sucked. My worth was tied into how sexually desirable I am. It becomes so much more ingrained in my psyche because I had to encounter it every day I went to work. My rent was dependent on my being sexually desirable.

When money is the means through which a person measures her desirability, she may develop a warped self-image. She might feel, like Kelly, that being paid to be sexually desirable changes one's relationship to one's body. Not that women have uncomplicated relationships with our bodies regardless of whether we support ourselves by being sexy. No matter what one's body shape or size—large, small, chubby, skinny, curved, or perfectly conforming to contemporary

ideals—most women feel that our physical forms are flawed. We also experience our female bodies through the gaze of culture, social media, religion, parents, peers, and, most especially, men.[5] For strippers, even more is at stake: the undesirable dancer may not be able to pay her electricity bill.

Happiness researchers find that a key site of *unhappiness* is making comparisons with others we perceive as doing better than ourselves—e.g., so-and-so has a better car, a better job, a nicer outfit, a friendlier family, got a better grade, went on a fancier vacation, or in the case of dancers, makes more money and has a sexier body.[6] Catherine, Trina, and Sabrina all described comparing themselves unfavorably to other dancers and then becoming upset when they felt they did not measure up. Catherine, who is white and nineteen, had been dancing for a year and a half when I interviewed her at Red Key. Given the many changes that had taken place in Silverton, I was trying to figure out who could touch whom in the strip bar. Catherine explained that the dancers could touch the customers, but not the other way around (although this rule changed shortly after we talked.) Then Catherine described the act of "boobing" customers while dancing on the main stage. Boobing consists of a dancer putting her naked chest in a customer's face and shaking her breasts back and forth. After she boobed one customer, Catherine overheard his friend insult her:

> No one was really tipping that night, but I'm still going to give you guys a performance because you did pay the cover fee to come in. I boobed him and his friend was sitting there; and his friend was like, "You see, bruh? You see what these girls will do for a dollar?" You start thinking about stuff, and it's like, "Look how people think of that." Sometimes when I go home, if I don't make no money that night and everybody else did, I feel like shit about myself. I really do, and it sucks. I'm tired of feeling like that all the time. It sucks sometimes, but there are some nights that you make a lot of money and you just feel like you're the hottest girl alive. But there's good days and bad days. I am getting really tired of dancing.

Trina felt proud of her income until she learned that other entertainers were making over a thousand dollars a night at her club. She worried that, because she did not make as much money as the other women, it meant that she wasn't very attractive. And then she felt dissatisfied with what she did make:

> But for some girls, the more attractive you are, you should be able to

> make more money. Some girls should be able to take home a thousand dollars a night. So for a long time I never felt like I had a good night because I never took that much home. And when I would take six and seven hundred dollars home, I would feel like it wasn't enough because I hadn't taken a thousand dollars home. A good night for me I would say is anywhere from three hundred and fifty and above.

Sabrina also struggled with feeling badly about her body when she did not make as much money as other dancers:

> It's hard not to let dancing take a psychological toll, even though I understand the mechanics of it. I understand the psychological aspect of it. I understand the social aspect of it. It's really hard at the end of the night if I've made two hundred dollars and there's an eighteen-year-old girl with great big boobs and a perfect body and no stretch marks that's made a thousand dollars. It's hard not to be like, "If I looked like that, I'd have a thousand dollars, too!" and to compare yourself to other people. It's hard not to do that, and that takes a toll on you.

Media representations of slender, toned, provocatively posed female (and recently male) bodies spawn a wide range of personal and social problems from body dysmorphia to eating disorders to crippling insecurity. These issues have been well researched by feminists such as Susan Bordo, Sut Jhally, Jean Kilbourne, and Naomi Wolf.[7] But women's sexuality is also a site of power, as the women I interviewed elaborated. For some women, exotic dancing may be the first time they actually experience their bodies subjectively, and this can be liberating. Moreover, stripping encouraged some of the women I interviewed, including Kelly, April, Trina, Beatrice, Morgan, Joscelyn, and Sabrina, to consciously explore a sexual side of their personalities. The paradox is that this exploration occurs in a strip bar, arguably the gut of patriarchy. So while stripping will push some women back into their own skins, claiming that alien territory as her own, over time the structure of the sex industry with its overwhelmingly objectifying male gaze, and rude, abusive customers, forces her to "numb out" and, in some cases, negatively affects her self-esteem.

Blurry Boundaries

Dancers must set firm boundaries with customers to protect themselves. Part of the toll of dancing is struggling to maintain those boundaries. There are many reasons why dancers expand their boundaries past their comfort zone. For example, some women find that they must perform more sexually graphic acts to make the money they desire, especially since the 2008 recession. Stacy explored this:

> I think, because the money is not what it used to be, girls are taking that extra step. I think about it this way. When I first started dancing I thought, "I could never do that." And what did I do? I went on stage, and I was like, "Well, that wasn't so bad." Okay, doing a couch dance, "Oh my God, I didn't think I could ever grind on this strange guy." You do it one time, and you're like, "Wasn't so bad." All it takes is one time for a girl to take that extra step.

Kelly experienced workplace pressures to expand her boundaries. In the late 1990s in San Francisco, city police cracked down on street prostitution. Forced off the streets, many prostitutes started working in city strip bars, offering more than a naked lap dance to customers. This "upped the ante" on the kinds of sexual services customers could demand of all the dancers.[8] Kelly explained how this situation challenged her personal limits working at the Market Street Cinema:

> During the time I worked at the Cinema a lot of changes occurred in the clientele and workers. Prostitution became rampant, and in the end, it was almost impossible to make money without doing more. The Cinema pushed my limits as far as what I would do. And I'm a prude compared to most of the girls that work there. I was doing things I never could have pictured myself doing, including naked lap dances. For me, that was really pushing my limits. But to most dancers, that was nothing.

Danielle, who was also competing with dancers doing "extras" in Chicago strip clubs, described a daily effort to distract and placate customers who expected sexual gratification. She said, "I would rub them and tease them in different ways. We were allowed to put our chest in their face. I'd whisper things to them. I played it as I went, but a lot of times I would just be rubbing their private area

through the cloth." She said she continued to do that until they got frustrated and started calling her names. At this point, she gave some of them hand jobs carefully positioned away from the cameras.

The more money a customer offers a dancer, the more tempting it is for her to stretch her boundaries. Tyler, a Honolulu dancer, explored this:

> Money does things to certain people, but you still have to keep your pride. That's what it all boils down to, because if you don't, you are just losing yourself. You're money; you're not anybody but money. I see how it could be easy to get greedy getting propositions by men. I see how some people turn to outside activities. If you are propositioned by the right person who says, "Name your price," a lot of people will just go for it. Everything has its price like they say, but your pride doesn't.

The dancer who blurs her boundaries, and names her price, has then monetarily valued an aspect of herself—her pride, her sexuality, her character—that culturally we learn is priceless. If she is out of alignment with the act, or endures an insult from a customer like the one Catherine described—"You see what these girls will do for a dollar?"—she will likely feel badly about herself. Further, the more a dancer values her self-esteem and beauty at a certain figure, as Trina explained earlier, the more determined she is to make it—no matter what it takes. The dancer's complicated job responsibilities—arousing men, coping with abuse and contempt, deflecting and neutralizing potentially dangerous situations while extracting as much money as possible—along with pressure from customers and management, drug and alcohol use, and money worries all push dancers to blur their boundaries.

Disdain for Men

I heard it from many dancers: "men are perverts," "men are assholes," "men are bastards," "but Bernadette, that's what men are *like*." You can see dancers' disgust for men sprinkled throughout this book: "Men are such takers of sexual energy," "If it weren't for the clients it would be an excellent job," "Men are horny assholes." The longer the women I interviewed worked in the strip clubs, the more likely they were to perceive the customers, and sometimes men in general, negatively. A dancer develops disdain for men after enduring a variety

of abusive behaviors from them: one client throws quarters at her on stage, another grabs her breast, one drunk pulls down her g-string, a customer who smells like he hasn't bathed in a month calls her a "dirty whore." Perhaps a dancer experiences only one of these really bad incidents with a customer per month (and this is a low estimate). After six months, that's six bad things that men have said and done to a typical dancer; after two years, twenty-four. The allure of stripping—the makeup, music, lights, money, compliments, and attention—fades with familiarity as the number of really bad things that happen in the clubs relentlessly ratchets up. Enduring customer insults and assaults while feigning sexual arousal for men they find physically repulsive encourages late-career dancers to hold men in contempt. Beatrice said, "I'm really bitter toward men. Maybe I'll grow out of that after I stop doing it." She continued:

> I'm constantly turning men down to sleep with them. I'm always subjected to that side of men wanting me in that way. It's tiring to always think that that's all men want. So when I go to the grocery store and a guy looks at me, I'm just disgusted, and I'm like, "I know what he's thinking!" Even when my boyfriend wants to get sexual with me, I feel like, "Oh, gosh, that's all you want!" Because I am so subjected to that at work.

For many dancers, as Darby explained, "Men are just big wallets; they either got hair on them or they're bald. All you see is wallets with feet walking around a club. You go for the fattest wallets you can find."

Beatrice explained that she, and many dancers she knows, feel vindicated taking large sums of money from their male customers. She called it "payback," a form of getting even for the oppression women experience in a male-dominated culture. Beatrice elaborated:

> I totally feel comfortable using men in a way that I wouldn't with women. In general, so many women are used sexually by men, and it starts at a young age. Teenage sex is for boys, not girls. Girls will often have sex with a guy because they think that the catalyst to the emotions they want from the man is through sex. And some girls just don't learn that lesson until they've slept with fifty men. So, in a way, it's payback. You're getting money for a service, and it's still not enough money. It's still not what it's worth. But, if you come home with a thousand dollars and think of all the men who paid you to sit

with them on their lap and talk to them and be fake to and fulfill what they think of women as being. They come in there thinking women are stupid or slutty and they just do this job because they don't have a brain and that's all they can do. And a lot of women let them think that. "Fine, I'll get their money. That's okay if they think I'm some stupid bimbo. But I'll be laughing all the way home with my thousand dollars in my pocket that I made in eight hours." A lot of girls see it that way.

While critiquing the entitled, misogynist behavior of some customers (and pocketing their money) can raise a woman's consciousness about the institutional effects of patriarchy, and this is something I will explore more in chapter 6, generalizing from the behavior of a few to all men compromises a woman's ability to maintain healthy relationships with men. Considering their income, as Beatrice observed, "It's still not enough money. It's still not what you're worth." This came up over and over in recorded interviews as part of the toll of stripping. No price compensates a woman for compromising her values. Some dancers cope with the multiple tensions stripping creates in their perception of men by staying single. Those who dated and had long-term partners reported a variety of problems in their intimate, romantic relationships, particularly jealousy.

Problems in Partnerships—Jealousy

Whether a dancer is straight, bisexual, or gay, she will probably experience difficulties in finding and maintaining a loving partnership. Although most dancers do not have sex with their customers, the job consists of regularly arousing a large number of random men, and, occasionally, women. Because of this, few people feel comfortable being involved in a steady relationship with a dancer, and those that do are sometimes more attracted to the stereotype of a stripper than the actual woman they are dating. Vixens dancers Marcy, Susan, Carol, and Tracy explored some of the complications exotic dancing introduced into their partnerships in a conversation I recorded in the dressing room:

Tracy: It puts a strain on them 'cause you live here more at work than you do at home.

Carol: And you'll hear, "You like it."

Marcy: Or “You don’t act like that at home.”

Susan: “You’re up there bumping and grinding.”

Carol: Or “I see you dancing; you look at him like you look at me.”

Tracy: Or “You wanting that guy the way you danced for him.”

Marcy: I wanted what was in his pocket, baby.

Tracy: I have to explain to mine all the time, “Hey, when you see me, it’s not all be-bopping around and having a wonderful time. I have the dollar signs in my eyes. That is the sparkle that you see, the romance, that is the movement my body is making across the floor.”

The Vixens dancers explained that it is challenging to find men who understand the nature of exotic dancing—primarily that it is work and not a real expression of their sexual selves—and who also do not feel threatened by the sexual gaze of other men on “his” woman.

When the glow of new love fades, many partners make demands on dancers that are incompatible with working in the sex industry. Susan explained that one of her boyfriends began to express jealousy and act possessively over the same behavior that initially attracted him to her: her sexuality and how comfortable she seemed naked or virtually naked. As time passed, her nudity and sexual performances—unavoidable aspects of her job—became qualities that incited his jealousy, not his admiration. Marcy, Susan, Carol, and Tracy thought this especially ironic because the boyfriend originally met her while she was dancing in Vixens.

Sometimes the partner of a dancer, insecure about her fidelity, or perhaps concerned about her safety, tries to persuade her to quit dancing altogether. If she refuses to stop dancing, the relationship may disintegrate.[9] Diana described breaking up with the father of her child: “My daughter’s dad, he didn’t like the fact that I was leaving to be around a bunch of guys, and then I would come in late at night, and then hang out with him. He didn’t like that, which I could understand. Guys were calling my phone all the time, and I’m having to work even when I’m not working. He didn’t like it.” Catherine shared, “Right now me and my boyfriend aren’t getting along; and it has to do with my job. Anytime we’re fighting, it’s always something related to the strip club.” Catherine told me about their most recent fight. The couple had made plans to spend time together after her shift. She was usually finished working by 1:00 a.m. That night, though, had been especially busy (Red Key does not officially close until 3:00 a.m.), and at 1:00 a.m. she was in the lucrative position of selling dance after

dance. Of course, Catherine explained, she was not going to walk away from the money, especially as it had been so slow recently. After the doors closed, she called her boyfriend. When he did not answer she assumed he was asleep, and went out to breakfast with some of her friends. Walking in the house at 4:00 a.m., Catherine found him waiting for her on the couch and they fought.

Dancers face a double bind in intimate relationships: loving partners are usually out of alignment with their significant others' stripping, while those who don't have any issues with the work are often, as Stacy described, "guys that don't treat them right." Some men pimp dancers, and some mooch off of them. Stacy shared what she's observed of dancers' boyfriends:

> They will run through boyfriends. Most dancers, in my opinion, they go after just really bad guys, guys that don't treat them right, guys that will drop them off here and take their money when they get back in the car at night. I've seen a lot of girls put up with shit that there's no way I would put up with. And I don't know if it's because, this goes back to the self-esteem, if their self-esteem is so low they feel like they have to put up with this.

Nancy, an eleven-year dancing veteran, explored these partnership issues over a beer with me in the dressing room of Risque in Honolulu:

> I would attract guys that did not respect me at all. I would get real sick of that too. I'm like, "I'm never going to get a decent guy as long as I'm a stripper." They are always going to have this thought that I'm some kind of a slut or something like that. Even the ones that are okay with it still look at you that way, and don't even realize it. A boyfriend I had before the guy I'm going out with now, his mom was a stripper. He expected so much because his mom did this and that for them. I was like, "I'm not here to support you." I've had so many boyfriends that didn't work, who just sat on their ass and played video games all day and did nothing to make money. It was pathetic; I had to keep paying for everything.

Lesbian couples have their own set of issues to negotiate. Joscelyn explained that her partner was less jealous of the customers than the other dancers:

> It wasn't necessarily that she was jealous about the clients but jealous that I got to go and be with naked women all day and she didn't. And for me it was like, that's definitely a bonus of the job, but it wasn't like I was sitting there groping all of these naked women while I was at work. We're all kind of doing our thing while we're there. She really sexualized it in that way and I think that was hard for her.

Because it can be so difficult to find a partner who understands the complexities of exotic dancing, some of the women I interviewed went years without a serious relationship. They believed it was easier to be single, as Dana and Phoebe both explained. Dana said:

> With me, I push everybody away. I could have a relationship probably with several people, but I push everybody away. It's not that I don't want one. Because I really think that I would like to have a relationship with somebody. But a lot of people have the wrong idea of a dancer in the first place. And then with me, I'm really particular about what I want. However, if a man comes in, they think, "Oh wow, she's a dancer, this is great!" And I'm like, "That's not what I'm all about." I'm afraid of relationships because you never know if a guy you meet is genuine or not. Because so many men that I've met are so full of it that I tend to push people away.

Phoebe, who is white and thirty, said that she's been single for four years:

> It's hard to find a relationship working in the industry. Either they don't trust you—I'll start talking to a guy and if I try to start get serious, they're like, "I can't date you because of your job." They don't understand that for me, it's just dancing, and it's money to support my child. I'm a single mom, which is why I'm here. Sometimes it does get old, and sometimes I don't want to come into work; but my child comes first. So it does affect relationships.

Thus, for some women, being single is part of the toll of stripping.

Reduced Sex Drive

When teaching about the toll, I ask my students, “Who here has ever worked at a fast food restaurant? Raise your hands.” After they do, I inquire, “So, when you leave work, do you go home wanting a burger and fries for dinner?” We all laugh as a student chorus of “No!” resonates through the room. It makes intuitive sense—if you perceive exotic dancers as subjects and people (and not objects)—that, of course, the last thing one would want to do after stripping is have sex. Many of the women I interviewed spoke at length about how the work diminished their sex drives. While they applied makeup, teased, sprayed, and curled their hair, and changed into their costumes, Vixens dancers Marcy, Carol, Susan, and Tracy explained that thinking about sex and being sexy all the time made them want to go home, put on an old robe and bedroom slippers, and watch a movie. Not only is the work itself physically, mentally, and emotionally tiring, April said that being almost naked and *pretending* to be turned on for hours in a row made her want to “cover up in big ol’ quilts”:

> Not one time that I ever danced did I ever get even minutely turned on. It didn’t matter if I was dancing for Miss America. I did not feel anything. You detached yourself from it. I think part of the reason is that you are hung over a lot, and you go home, and you are wore out, and you don’t feel like moving. And people have been trying to pinch and pull at you all night, and you’re tired of that. Your body is sore, and your mind is sore. We would laugh because we would all say we were going back to the nursing home. Because we’d all cover up in big ol’ quilts and just sit around just like big grandmas. You couldn’t put enough clothes back on.

Joscelyn echoed April:

> It’s hard when you’re doing this type of work because it’s sexualized and you’re using your body in that capacity. Because you’re using your physical body, you just don’t feel like being touched. Someone gropes you in the wrong way, and you may have the reaction of slapping off someone’s hand and not realizing it. And you don’t realize that was a good touch, not a bad touch. That’s where it gets hard. It has taken time and healing from some of those bad situations.

Beatrice likened customers to sexual vampires, sucking out her energy,

leaving her depleted no matter how much money they gave her. She elaborated:

> Men are such takers of sexual energy. When I'm there, I expect that; that's what the job is about. I'm giving a side of my sexuality to these men. They are paying me to dance with them and be naked with them. They get some sort of fix or gratification, and I'm constantly giving that. Sometimes it's sexual, sometimes it's more motherly, but I always feel like I'm giving, giving, giving. I'm receiving money for it, but I wonder if it's worth the trade-off. I think I'm worth more than what I make there.

Kelly sadly concurred: "All these guys are touching me, but there's no touch that is *for* me. It's always something I'm giving to them or is being taken from me. But there is never anything for me."

Many heterosexual dancers struggle to discern their real desire from the simulated kind, and then decide feeling desire is not worth the effort, especially since they are completely fed up with men anyway. Unsurprisingly, significant others interpret dancers' lack of interest in sex in a variety of destructive, self-sabotaging, and overall threatened and threatening ways. Lacy explored how her lack of interest in sex created strain in intimate relationships:

> There was tension because you don't feel like being intimate as much. You get burned out on the whole sexual thing. Not saying you don't have those desires, but it's just not as frequent as a normal human being. And going into it, that's all fine and dandy with them, and when you get to that point it's "Well, you were a whore with this person, and you got paid for sex with this person; but you can't even have sex with your own husband." It becomes degrading.

Partners who interpret their lovers' low sex drives in negative ways—that he (or she) has become unattractive to the dancer, that dancing is bad for her, that she is really interested in a customer—sometimes lash out destructively. Her exotic dancing is a weapon an affronted mate wields during fights: "I told you your stripping was going to break us up," "You only want to have sex when you're getting paid," "You're really just a slut after all." Among the most damaging reactions intimate partners have to the complications involved in being with a dancer is to call her a slut. Several of the women I interviewed

spoke about their fears that their romantic partners secretly (or openly) believed this of them, and about their experiences of having significant others insult them like this in anger. April and Dana each articulated that being called a whore hurt them enormously, and was completely intolerable in a relationship.

Stripper Stigma

I make a game out of it in the classroom: try to come up with an occupation that is more stigmatized than sex work. The students and I inevitably fail. We can think of lots of jobs we'd *like* less (prison guard, soldier, executioner, boxer), that seem harder, more depressing, and generally *worse* than sex work (bus driver, data entry, nurse's aid, fry cook, butcher), but none that are as stigmatized. I do not mean to suggest that the occupations I just listed are "bad jobs." How we experience work is subjective and individualistic. While I find data entry boring, and would choose to negotiate a hostage situation over driving a city bus, others would likely prefer bus driver over hostage negotiator, and perhaps prefer both those jobs to mine. Many folks would loathe lecturing to a crowd of twenty-year-olds every day, and rather dig ditches than write articles for publication. Considering stripping, my point is, no matter how much any individual dancer loves her job and is in alignment with it, she still faces enormous stigma from others (more than butchers, and fry cooks, and prison guards).

As is clear from the interview excerpts, dancers dislike many aspects of the work, but most dancers, like Tara, explained that the hardest part of dancing happened outside the club: confronting the constellation of assumptions about who they are because they work in a strip bar. Tara shared:

> The one thing I disliked the most is that as soon as you mention the word "dancer," or "stripper," or "exotic dancer," people automatically have this thought in their mind that "she's a prostitute, and she sells her body for money." It's not even like that. I look at it as there are girls that go to these nightclubs, and they are on the dance floor half-naked, and they are bumping and grinding with guys they just met. Girls are doing it every night, and doing it for free. What is so bad about me getting up onstage and taking my top off and getting paid for it? People don't look at it that way. They think because you take your clothes off for a living you are a bad person.

Sociologist Erving Goffman explored the experiences of stigmatized individuals in his book *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity*. "Normals," as Goffman described the unstigmatized, feel uneasy around those who bear a stigma, those Simone de Beauvoir described as the "other." The stigma may be visual and ascribed, what Goffman calls "discredited"—a scar or limp, or skin color—or the stigma may be "discreditable," behaviors an individual engages in such as criminal activities *or sex work*.[10] Although both groups suffer stigma, many people recognize that discredited stigma is generally outside of one's individual control whereas discreditable stigma is a consequence of one's actions. We are more likely to uphold stigma inflicted upon a group when we perceive an element of choice. Exotic dancers suffer discreditable stigma: they are perceived as freely choosing to do work that marks them as "bad people."

Why *is* stripping so stigmatized? The answer to this question resides in the complex dynamics of gender inequality. A patriarchal social system privileges men and masculinity, and constructs women and femininity as other and inferior. "Good" women and "bad" women are dualistically separated into categories of Madonna or whore.[11] Of course this distinction is absurd, oppressive, and precarious (i.e., a Madonna is only one act or attack away from being labeled a whore). Nonetheless, it persists in institutional, symbolic, and individual forms. Discrimination, stereotyping, and scapegoating each manifest differently depending upon an individual's minority status. But all minority-group members suffer these tools of oppression while being blamed for the oppression they endure. This is because, as theorist Suzanne Pharr writes, "those who exploit and oppress need ways to justify their actions. They need a rationale that shows they are in the right, that the majority both agrees and cooperates with them, and that people get what they deserve through their own merit or lack of merit."[12] As minority-group members (women) engaged in acts deemed "discreditable," exotic dancers are especially subject to stigma, to being labeled and disregarded as "nasty, drug-head, STD-infected whores." Stripper stigma is, then, for many, the most grueling dimension of the toll. It affects every area of a woman's life. She can't leave it at the office, put it on the back burner, or take a vacation from it. The only way to rid oneself of stripper stigma is to quit stripping. And, even then, one is always an ex-stripper, forever haunted by the attendant cultural stereotypes.

In their own eyes, dancers are regular people, "nice girls," struggling to make ends meet the best way they can. They cope with other people's judgments, and potential judgments, in a variety of ways: some hide their work from others;

some openly share what they do; some confess their job to certain friends but do not tell their families. Most quickly learn that people respond negatively when they disclose that they strip for a living. To avoid this, many, like Julie, are strategically vague about their occupations. Julie explained:

> I hate the judgmental part of it. I hate going into a place and interviewing for a job and applying for a loan and that kind of thing, and you have to write down where you work. And right off the bat you're judged. I don't like socializing and have that question asked, because it's not my character to say I strip for a living. I don't say that. I'll say I work in a club.

Morgan preferred to be open about stripping, but was careful when she revealed her work to others. She said that people are more accepting and less judgmental when they have the opportunity to first know other things about her. Morgan shared:

> There's definitely a stigma attached, absolutely. I make it a point not to lie and to not hide what I do. If someone asks, I'll tell them, and sometimes if they don't ask. But I do try to avoid the subject until they've known me for a while so that's not the first thing. Because if that's the first thing, that tends to be the thing. It affects how you're being judged. I don't think it's right. If you're an attorney or a doctor you can walk up to somebody, "Hi, I'm Dr. So-and-So and I'm a chiropractor." But I don't just walk up to people, "Hi, how are you, I'm Morgan and I get naked for five bucks a pop for strangers. Great, great to meet you." If I choose to use something that I do as a way of defining myself right off, I might say, "I'm a student, a pre-med major," rather than a dancer.

Dancers not only face rude questions and sudden rejection in their personal lives when others learn that they strip, they may also experience discrimination finding housing or new employment and obtaining medical care. Maureen spent months trying to find an apartment in Silverton when she first moved to town. She confided:

> It took me six months to find an apartment. I stayed in a motel for six

> months. I tried to get an apartment. I found this one on North Broadway, cute little second-floor apartment, four hundred something a month. I put down where I work, and the lady called me back and asked me, “Was it a strip club?” And I said, “Yes.” And she goes, “Well I just can’t rent to you.” I said, “Why?” “You guys party a lot.” I said, “I don’t.” That’s discrimination.

Maureen is a quiet, shy woman who purposely worked the day shift at Vixens so she could go to bed and get up early, ensuring her enough time to take care of her children. Her dream is to settle on a small piece of land with a trailer. The money that she spent on a motel, and eating every meal out, could have been far better spent investing in her future.

Sarah will tell *most* people she dances, except those who directly have power over her body, like hospital workers. It is one thing to risk rejection from a potential acquaintance; it’s another to take chances with poor medical care. Sarah explained, “The one time I went to the ER after a genital piercing, they asked me what I did for my job. I don’t feel like telling an ER nurse what I do. Or if I go to the doctor.” Lacy did experience stigma and discrimination when she went to the hospital in premature labor with her second child. She said, “They thought I was seeking medication.” After making her wait, and almost sending her home, the hospital staff initiated labor, and her baby girl was stillborn.

If dancers also do other kinds of work, they fear losing those jobs or internships should co-workers or supervisors find out they dance. For example, to complete her pre-med psychology and biology curricula, Morgan obtained an internship working with autistic children. She did not tell the people at her placement that she danced for fear that they might assume she was a pervert and child molester:

> I always have to be ready to field those damn questions when I say what I do. I have to be prepared for people to decide that they don’t like me. Especially women. Somebody who liked me and was getting along with me just fine five minutes ago to, when that comes out, to not like me and not want to associate with me anymore. To not want me to be around their kids. And I hate having to lie. The families whose children I work with, I can’t tell them until or unless I know them well enough to know that they aren’t going to all of a sudden decide that I’m some kind of sexual pervert and start suing me for

> touching their kids the wrong way or something freakish like that. I have to worry about things like that. That therapy is so very, very difficult because all the reinforcements are typically tickling or hugging or picking the kid up and swooping him through the air. Even just being accused of something like that never goes away. That follows you for the rest of your life.

Stacy said she was "embarrassed to tell people that I work" at a strip club. At the time of our interview, she had just started a new job at a cafeteria in her small hometown and suspected one of her co-workers knew that she worked at Red Key. She had been talking with some children at the new job when a co-worker walked by and, Stacy said, "gave me this horrible look." When the boys walked away, Stacy continued, the co-worker "started singing 'I'm in Love with a Stripper.' Anytime she would walk by me for the rest of that day, she would sing 'I'm in Love with a Stripper.' There's nothing I can say or do. I'm not going to stoop down to her level and say something about it, so I pretend like it doesn't bother me, but it hurts my feelings."

Of all the relationships that women worry their dancing will negatively affect, the one that causes them the most anguish is with their children. They fear their children will suffer for having a mom who strips—they might be teased by classmates, ostracized from peer activities, or simply feel ashamed of their mothers. Stacy hasn't told her children that she works in a strip club, but worries her oldest girl already knows, "My oldest daughter, she's thirteen. She knows that I work at a club where girls wear bikinis, but she's not stupid. I've never brought her here, but she knows. And she knows that we don't talk about mommy's job. Coming from a really small town, word gets around. People know things." Dana planned to stop dancing before her daughter started school so that it would never become an issue for her:

> I hope to be out of this by next year. It's a big hope, but my daughter will be starting school. She'll be going to kindergarten, and I don't want to be doing this while she's in school. I hope to be out of it by August. I'm really concerned for her. I would hate it if someone was picking on her because "your mommy's a dancer" or whatever. Kids are so cruel anyway.

Few dancers can easily quit dancing when their children reach school age. Indeed, this is often the time that the child's material needs increase. Marcy,

Susan, Carol, and Tracy discussed these issues while they were getting ready in the dressing room of Vixens.

Carol: I worry about my kids.

Tracy: What kind of stigma they're going to have.

Marcy: I don't mind 'cause I don't feel like I'm doing anything wrong, and my kids have always been older.

Tracy: My kids know.

Carol: Yeah, but you still worry about it.

Marcy: Yeah, you always worry about it.

Tracy: You worry that they're going to get it at school.

In a consumer culture, this worry is tempered by the pressure to buy Abercrombie jeans and the latest digital device.

Morgan stopped dancing and entered medical school as I was working on the first edition. We did a second interview then. As a medical student, Morgan did not hide that she danced for seven years because, she explained, *controlling her story* was her way of diminishing the stigma. Moreover, once she quit dancing, she felt that it was easier to be forthcoming about it. Our culture is more forgiving of young women who have had a "stripper phase" than a "career dancer," especially someone like Morgan who shot from the bottom rung of the occupational ladder to the top. "Stripper phase" is a stigma-reducing concept I use here to describe how family and friends, and even dancers themselves, prefer to interpret their beloved daughter, sister, friend, wife, or self taking off her clothes for money. The story might go: "It was a crazy job she had when she was in art school, or living in San Francisco, when she was dating that motorcycle guy and living in a vegan commune. She was rebelling against everything."

Beatrice, twenty-one and a recent UC Berkeley graduate at the time of our interview, felt that she was nearing the end of her stripper phase. She explained that exotic dancing was an acceptable job to have done for a time, while she was in school, but now that she had graduated, she needed to move on.[13] She said:

> I think that, overall, I've come to kind of see my job in a different light. I used to like it when I first started and I was young and stuff. But since then, I've started to feel bad about it, almost guilty like, "Gosh, in the future, if people find out about my job, what are they

> going to think of me?!" They're going to think that I'm a lewd woman —a lot of people see it as a degrading job. Especially people who don't know about it. It just builds up over time.

A middle-class woman who has quit exotic dancing and turned respectable is the most acceptable version of the stripper phase. It's titillating but not ruinous. "Marrying the job," as an informant described a once close friend who went from exotic dancing to marrying the owner of the strip club, "is something else," something more likely to permanently stain the stigmatized individual. As the participant shared, "Once she married him, I effectively divorced her." Morgan reflected on this phenomenon in our second interview. She observed, "It's okay to say, 'I used to be a stripper, but I got out of it.' It's not okay to say, 'I was a stripper for seven years. I fucking loved it. I had a blast, and I still miss it today.'"

As Morgan just illustrated, dancers and ex-dancers rarely have the opportunity to discuss how the experience of dancing shapes them, let alone that they enjoyed elements of it. This is stressful when the dancer or ex-dancer *wants* to talk about what happened at work. Some, like Catherine, crave conversational space to process the events of the day:

> My boyfriend, when he gets off of work, I will have been here all day, so all I have to talk about is what happened at work, this happened at work, this happened at work. And it's like, "This guy did this, and this guy, he spent so much money. I hope he comes back." I don't have any feelings for these people, but I think about it afterwards. Now he's always like, "Can you just not talk about it?" He would rather not hear about it. He accepts it, because he knows that I'm not going to do anything wrong. I won't. He's willing to accept it. He just doesn't like me talking about it. And sometimes I feel like I have it all bottled up, and stuff that's happened that I don't really like, and I just want to get it out and talk about it. But I can't, because that's my boyfriend. He doesn't want to hear that stuff. So it sucks when it comes to that.

This silencing is part of the toll of stripping. Few other elements of an individual biography are as off-limits for discussion, reminiscing, and processing as a woman's experiences working in the sex industry. It is a form of what I theorize in my second book, *Pray the Gay Away*, as the "condition of inarticulation."[14] Most of us need to talk about our daily lives, and when we

can't, when it is "all bottled up," we, one, struggle harder to release any accumulated stress, and two, may feel resentment toward others in our lives who *do* get to talk about their work. Further, conforming to cultural expectations that stripping is so shameful it is unmentionable forces a woman to participate in her own oppression while also inhibiting her ability to effectively communicate with others (what *does* Catherine talk about with her boyfriend when what she does all day is prohibited?).[15] Finally, the dancer or ex-dancer who is "in the closet" has no opportunity to challenge and refute damaging stereotypes about women who work in the sex industry.

Summing Up the Toll

The toll is present when customer assaults are more salient to dancers than customer compliments, when breaking the taboo about being naked in public becomes commonplace, as the stigma of the work becomes heavier to shoulder, as dancers face issues in intimate relationships, and as they allow their boundaries to erode and feel their self-esteem drop. Dancers describe a process of acculturation into stripping in which they become increasingly cynical, jaded, and ill with the work, and disturbed by the complications stripping creates in their "real lives," especially in their most important relationships with significant others, family members, and friends.[16] As Catherine illustrates, stripping can isolate a woman:

> It's boring now. I feel like I don't have an outside life anymore. I don't know if that makes sense. I still go out and do stuff every now and then, but I feel like everything revolves around dancing now, because when I'm going out with my friends it's all my dancer friends. And then if we're hanging out with guys, it's mostly guys that know that we're strippers and want to hang out with a bunch of strippers. So it's strip club life, period. It's not normal like it used to be. It's hard to explain. Guys look at you like they think it's hot. They want a stripper. "Oh, she's so cool! She's a stripper!" Some guys don't like it. Some guys are like, "You're disrespecting yourself." So it's like you get either/or. You don't get, "Oh, I like you because you draw really good," or something like that. It's always, "Shake that ass for me!" or "You disrespect yourself."

Over time, as Catherine just described, dancers realize that others perceive them through a stripper lens: they cease to be people, and become objects of arousal or objects to scorn. It’s especially ironic that exotic dancers endure so much disapprobation considering the degree to which contemporary Western media culture bombards viewers with sexualized representations of women.

4

Raunch Culture, Androsexism, and Stripping

Maybe you've noticed raunch culture: advertisements with provocatively posed models—naked or almost-naked women selling everything from jeans to perfume to cars. Perhaps you've encountered a pop-up ad for a pornographic website. Possibly you've watched one of the many Hardee's commercials featuring a barely-clad model making out with a burger. If you shop for girl's or women's clothing, tops are tighter, skirts are shorter, and some female underwear and sweat pants sport provocative words or phrases across the bottom like "Juicy." Try entering a Halloween Express store and finding a costume for a girl or woman that *isn't* "sexy" nurse, "sexy" cat, or "sexy" anything. As many scholars have observed, sexually provocative images are increasingly commonplace in Western media—in movies and television, on billboards, in print media and especially on the internet.[1] Clothing, accessories, and body modifications to make oneself "hotter" are marketed relentlessly. Cultural analysts dub this phenomenon "raunch culture" or the "sexualization of culture." So, when *did* Western media culture become so sexualized?

Media analysts observed raunch culture beginning to creep into consumer viewing options in the mid-1990s, gradually replacing images of beautiful models with ones that were also sexy and hot.[2] While there was much objectification of women's bodies in media outlets before this time (e.g., in magazine ads, television programming, and print pornography), consumers did not see the widespread hyper-sexualization that's present now. Women have long contended with the "beauty myth,"[3] many of us comparing our faces and bodies unfavorably with the models we see on television and magazines, but we weren't expected to look "slutty," or frequently urged to release "our inner porn star." The mid-1990s also intersected with the introduction of the internet into the lives of many Westerners.

Early examples of the beginning of raunch include pornography star Traci Lords in a small recurring role in the 1994–1995 season of the immensely popular family series *Roseanne*. Nineteen ninety-six saw the release of the film *Barb Wire*, starring pornographic model Pamela Anderson, and in 1997, Joe Francis founded the pornographic franchise "Girls Gone Wild" and *Maxim*, "The Best Thing to Happen to Men Since Women," released its first issue.[4] By the time journalist Ariel Levy published *Female Chauvinist Pigs*, critiquing the rise

of raunch culture, in 2005, raunch culture had become the *dominant* culture.[5] As media scholar Susan Douglas writes, "Young women today have never experienced a media environment that didn't overexaggerate the centrality of sex and "hotness" to everyday life. This is the way of the world for them."[6] With most born in the 1994–1998 span, raunch culture *is* culture for my current crop of undergraduate students.

Moreover, not only have sexualized representations of female (and male) bodies multiplied in raunch culture, the likelihood of being exposed to media representations of *any* kind have markedly increased with the widespread use of the internet, especially with the introduction of the first smart phone in 2007.[7] As I write this, screens dominate our experience. Westerners daily use computers, tablets, and smart phones, streaming shows (and pornography), playing video games, and connecting through social media. A contemporary college student will likely have a phone, a tablet, and laptop, view PowerPoint slides in the classroom, and watch large televisions in a student center. Compared to previous generations, the contemporary Western student, worker, and child will continually interact with screen technology.

Opinions differ on the consequences of raunch culture in the lives of women and men. While many scholars find much to critique about the sexualization of culture,[8] some argue that institutional analyses of raunch homogenize women's experiences,[9] presenting sexualization "as an omnipresent force."[10] I fully believe that individual young women (and men) are complex, heterogeneous, creative, agentic resisters,[11] and find valuable philosopher Christine Overall's "moral distinction between prostitutes as sex workers and prostitution as practice and institution."[12] In other words, I believe all individuals should have autonomy over their bodies, and the privilege to name their own experience, yet I also think raunch culture constitutes a *problematic practice and institution* because it relentlessly promotes an ideal of female "hotness" with the accompanying message that sexually liberated women objectify themselves. Media outlets market this self-sexualization using the language of "empowerment" and "choice."[13]

To illustrate, a narrative of "empowerment" about a Brazilian wax[14] (complete pubic hair removal) might sound like this: *I made the bold choice to take a little me time and finally got that Brazilian wax I've been secretly wanting! I feel super hot and sexy, like a porn star*. This hegemonic narrative crowds out other possible stories, like "What makes me think porn stars have the hottest sex?" and "Maybe it's a good thing to have a little cushion down there." Further, those unconcerned about their body hair, or those who critique Brazillian waxes, or

breast implants, or thongs, or stiletto heels as uncomfortable, unnecessary capitulations to a sexist social order are framed as frumpy, out of touch, boring, and ugly within raunch culture.[15] While raunch tries to sell self-objectification as bold, edgy, and powerful, to me, a woman taking a topless selfie to post to Snapchat, for a "Girls Gone Wild" T-shirt, or at a college party illustrates conformity to the culture, not liberation from it.

Media scholar Gail Dines observes that there are two choices for women in a hyper-sexualized culture: to be fuckable or invisible.[16] I concur with Dines that this double bind defines many women's experiences in raunch. At the same time, data gathered for this edition suggest a third choice—the *androsexist* option to objectify, sexualize, and evaluate the "hotness" of other women. As I first described in the introduction, androcentric media cultures, which frame much content through the male gaze,[17] socialize viewers, including women, to be androsexist—to like what men like and act like men do, including sexualizing women. I consider androsexism a contemporary evolution of sexism, a form of female assimilation into patriarchal culture. Where before, women were simply excluded from male spaces and confined to certain areas of social life, like the domestic sphere, now women can join men in some activities and professions so long as they embrace, perform, and embody the values patriarchy sets for men, in other words, so long as they uphold the system of hegemonic masculinity.

Under the terms of androsexism, minority-group members (women) who act like the majority group (men) can, sometimes, enjoy a temporary, *precarious* status of "dude."[18] As many of my students explain, it is cool, and expected, that the hip young woman buddy up with her guy friends, "who are," one shared (of course) "better to hang out with than other women (all that drama)," and agree with *the guys* that so-and-so is a 10, "in fact she's so hot, I'd do her." To give another example, during a discussion of sexual harassment in my Sex and Gender class in the fall of 2015 we explored the phenomenon of men, while driving, making sexual comments at women walking nearby—"Hey, baby, hot ass," *etc.* Almost every woman in the class had experienced this sort of harassment. I then shared a story of a being on a date as a sixteen-year-old in the 1980s when the seventeen-year-old boy I was with hooted at another woman out the window *while I was in the car with him*. At the time, I looked at him like he was crazy. In response, a young woman in the class observed that now guys *expect* women to join men evaluating the sex appeal of another female. Indeed, some men act like they are doing women a favor by including them. Obviously, lesbian, bisexual, and pansexual women do experience sexual attraction for other women. I argue here that the kinds of androsexist evaluations of female bodies

that happen in strip bars and elsewhere (in the cafeteria, at the mall, at a night club)—whether by straight or queer women—is less about *desiring women* than it is about *desiring the power that men have* over female bodies. Put more succinctly, it is an androsexist display of dominance. The collective, yet undiscussed, myth underpinning these interactions is that masculinity is so vastly superior to femininity no one wants to be a girl or a pussy, even girls.

Female Customers

I interviewed Charlotte on a cold afternoon in November in her cluttered office at Red Key. Having worked many positions in strip clubs—dancer, waitress, bartender, day manager and, at the time of the interview, general manager—over the past thirteen years, Charlotte shared one of the biggest changes she's observed in the industry: "Now, on a weekend night, I would be willing to bet at any given time that up to 40 percent of my clientele is female. They're coming in alone. They're not coming with boyfriends. They're coming in groups. It's bizarre, and it's not just lesbians. It's the eighteen-year-old thing to do, now! 'Let's go to the strip club!'" Wes, manager of Pearls, concurred, "You get a lot more female customers than you used to. That goes back to going to strip clubs is the cool thing to do. Groups of girls come out together. Bachelorette parties, things like that."[19]

That strip bars may be viewed by some as "cool" now suggests a complicated set of dynamics at play. These include raunch culture and internet pornography accustoming consumers to naked and nearly naked female bodies, and rap music glamorizing the sex industry as a place where much money can be made even while rap lyrics describe actual exotic dancers in very degrading terms. Rap and hip hop music play more frequently in strip bars these days and many of the songs have very misogynist lyrics. Charlotte shared, "I think I have banned officially almost every 2 Chainz song ever made." Wes explained that he limits rap and hip hop music at Pearls "to control the crowd." One example of a 2 Chainz song that Sandy described as "most popular and typical of songs that play" is "Bandz a Make Her Dance" by Juicy J, featuring 2 Chainz and Lil Wayne. Lyrics include:

> She put that ass up in my hands, I remote control it. . . . She leave with me, she got friends, bring three; I got drugs, I got drinks. Bend it over. Juicy J gon' poke it like wet paint. You say no to ratchet pussy,

> Juicy J can't. "What's your real name, and not your stripper name? I'll make it rain on ya like a windowpane." If your girl don't swallow kids, man, that 'ho basic. . . . Drop the top and freak it, that bitch just like a porn star.

When I collected data in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I rarely saw another woman in a strip bar who was not a dancer (and heard mostly Mötley Crüe and AC/DC). In contrast, the employees at Red Key shared that 20–40 percent of the audience at any given time, but especially on weekend nights, are female customers. Wes estimated the percentage of female customers at Pearls to be 25 percent overall. Given that strip bars specifically and deliberately serve heterosexual men, and considering all the issues female customers potentially face getting into the clubs, what explains this trend? I believe the increase in heterosexual female customers at strip bars featuring female dancers is logical in a deeply androsexist culture.

Club employees explained that some female customers come with male partners, willingly or reluctantly, some are lesbians, and some are groups of women participating in bachelorette parties, or simply on a "girls' night out" curious about what goes on in strip bars. Stacy discussed this new category of customer: "When I started in the industry, it was 1999, and there would be a few females that would come in here, but it was nothing like it is now. I was actually just saying the other night, 'It's crazy how the strip club has become a hang-out for sorority girls!'" Over a four-month period, Sandy counted seven bachelorette parties at Red Key, with four to twelve women in each group, saying that "95 percent of female customers dressed like celebrities on a red carpet wearing short dresses or skirts that show their panties." Some female customers openly sexualize the dancers. Sandy described female customers saying ("screaming") "Yeah, get it, girl!" "Show me those titties!" or "I wanna see that pussy!" among other comments to women performing on stage. Some throw money on the stage, like the men do, to "make it rain." When she first started at the club, Sandy said that she found it hard to distinguish the female customers from the dancers, and had some mishaps in which she began chatting familiarly with a woman she mistook for a dancer. She also described female customers making out with one another surrounded by male customers, and female customers giving lap dances to their boyfriends or husbands in the clubs. Laura said that female customers sometimes take their tops off at Red Key. She exclaimed, "There was a girl not too long ago, she was just sitting in tip row with her top off —a customer! Our manager had to go up and tell her to put her shirt back on."

Wes shared that it is commonplace for female customers to take their shirts off. He explained, “One of my biggest pet peeves is when girls come in, they’re partying and they’re having fun, I understand. Now, they want to take their shirt off. Generally, I’ll first offer them a job. ‘You want to dance, I’ll make you a dancer. That’s fine.’ But my go-to rule or my smartass saying, I just tell them, ‘Honey, listen. My girls are trying to sell it, you’re giving it away for free. Put your shirt back on.’” When I asked how often he had to tell women to put their tops back on, he said, “When I was on night shift, it was at least once every weekend, if not four or five times a week.” Why do female customers *do* this? Author Ariel Levy analyzed women’s participation in “Girls Gone Wild” activities as a kind of reflex, what one is *supposed* to do as a young woman (*of course* women want to be hot and sexy and flash their breasts), and only someone interested in a political career might think twice about it.[20] I believe that women absorb the “Girls Gone Wild” message from our androsexist raunch culture, that “partying” and having fun means sexualizing other women and displaying one’s naked body.

The Strip Club as a Workplace

Stripping also suffers the fate of not really being perceived as *work* by many. This includes some radical feminists who perceive sex work as sexual slavery,[21] as well as police officers and judges who criminalize sex workers. For example, in her book *Live Sex Acts*, sociologist Wendy Chapkis interviewed a sheriff who said “calling it [prostitution] a ‘profession’ is a bunch of crap, you know. I think most people define as professional where study and effort are put forth. Having sex is no great accomplishment. . . . It’s like saying when you have breakfast that you are a professional breakfast eater.”[22] Here, this police authority, like many I have heard, delegitimizes sex work occupationally. In other words, he dismisses it as a *real* profession, and demonstrates contempt for prostitutes. In addition to encountering similar stigmatizing attitudes among students, criminal justice workers, journalists, acquaintances, and scholars, I have also observed people erase the work element of sex work by constructing it as “fun” or titillating.

In my daily interactions, I frequently find myself chatting about my research with others. Many men assume an air of authority about strip bars in these conversations. They may not have been in a strip club since 1992, but they believe *they* are privy to the inside scoop, *what really goes on*, they imply, that I, as a woman, could never know. Women tell me stories. For example, one woman, Karen, a friend of friends, with whom I was passing a holiday weekend

on a houseboat, told me about the time she had gone to a strip bar and "got right up on the stage and starting dancing." I smiled and laughed politely while thinking, *how weird is that*. We don't spontaneously get inspired to start waiting tables at a restaurant after the round of salads (although we might sneak a set of silverware from another table if we can't get the attention of our server.) We don't suddenly decide to process credit cards at the gas station after we've finished filling up our tanks. We don't stay at hotels and clean *other* people's rooms. We're usually clear about where our responsibilities lie as workers and consumers. Why is it so blurry in a strip club?

I think there are a number of reasons for this. Much like any establishment devoted to socializing, customers who visit one to relax sometimes assume the employees (bartenders and servers) are enjoying themselves too. Moreover, dancers are skilled at putting customers at ease and pretending like they are having a fabulous time, whether they actually are or not, because that guarantees them the most money. Many people also perceive strip bars as taboo, edgy, and risqué, and as such, may be unfamiliar with the norms governing interactions between customers and dancers, *especially* female customers. Finally, strip bars encourage an "anything goes" attitude as well, and better tolerate reckless, drunken bar behavior than other kinds of public establishments. For men "going wild" often manifests as grabby rudeness and ceaseless propositioning. For women it means following the raunch culture edict to strip off one's clothes, dance provocatively, and kiss girls for men's approval.

How Dancers Perceive the Female Customers

The dancers I interviewed had mixed feelings about female customers. Overall, they estimated that 40 percent of the female customers were rude, unpleasant, and difficult, meaning the women seemed not to want to be in the club, were likely accommodating male partners, and sat with scowls on their faces, glaring at the dancers. Anna said, "If they look at you like you are a piece of trash because this is what you are doing, and like they're going to try to punch you in the face for giving their boyfriend a dance, that's the kind of thing that I don't like." On the whole though, Anna said, "I feel pretty positive about the female customers." She continued:

> A lot of girls come in here and they're obviously uncomfortable with the atmosphere and what's going on around them, but you come over

> and you're like, "Hi, I'm Anna! It's nice to meet you. Do you want a dance?" "No, no. No, thank you." "Well, sweetheart, smile! Have a good time! We're not going to hurt you; we're not going to bite you. If there's anything that you need, let me know and I'll get it for you." And that's when they're like, "Okay! This isn't so bad. These girls are humans. They're actually nice," because a lot of the customers come in here with that mean attitude or that terrified attitude, because they think that we are the bitches.

Anna shared that she prefers dancing for female over male customers. She explained:

> I don't feel as dirty when I'm doing it, because a lot of guys when you're grinding they'll grab your hips. I don't like to be restrained at all, especially when a stranger is grabbing onto me, and I'm not permitted to do whatever I want to do. Girls don't do that. Not all of the guys do that, but girls don't do that at all. Even if they do touch, it's not something that's grabbing you. They might just lay their hand on your shoulder, and of course women are a lot softer than men, so it's a little easier to do it. With women, you do a lot more of the sensual things. I breathe on the ear or brush my face up against their chin. I'm very light with them. That's the biggest difference with men. I'm more rough, more grinding, because they want me to grind on their penis.

Stacy, on the other hand, felt more negatively than positively about the female customers, saying, "To be honest, I'm very stand-offish to the female customer for many reasons." She explained, "The girls, over half of them, don't have any intentions of tipping; they have no intentions of getting dances. They come in here; they dance around on the floor. They will lap dance for a guy that's with them, yet we are the disgusting whores. You never know how they're going to react. She's either going to be in here for her own pleasure or she's in here for him, and doesn't want to be here." Unlike Anna, Stacy felt the female customers were harder to dance for than male ones. Stacy said, "Females are very touchy-feely. They try to bite and lick, and you have a hard time with some of the girls that come in here. There was a girl the other night saying that when she was on stage a girl tipped her, and when she bent down to give her a kiss on the cheek the girl bit her and left teeth marks on her neck!"

Approximately a third of the dancers I interviewed for this edition said that they avoid female customers entirely, one-third were neutral, and one-third, like Anna, preferred the female customers, felt they improved the atmosphere of the club, and enjoyed doing more sensual dances for them. The dancers who did approach tables of women, or tables with women, did so carefully. No one wanted to deal with jealous, unhappy women. Like Stacy noted, female customers also spend less: they tip less and buy fewer dances.[23] In my observation, women do not want to pay for sexual arousal or sexual satisfaction. Given the harassment and double standards women endure for our sexual selves, including the wage gap and second shift, sex is something women tend not to want to pay for. It also makes sense that some female customers are inappropriately touchy, as women are, in general, less familiar with the mores framing a sex-for-sale transaction than are men.

Additionally, whether a dancer had one or more bad experiences with a female customer colored her opinions. While listening to dancers describe upsetting encounters with female and male customers, I observed that bad experiences with men far outnumbered those with women. Still, it seemed, overall, that bad incidents with female customers made bigger impressions on dancers than those with male patrons.[24] Why might this be? I think bad male behavior is so normal in strip bars, dancers *expect* men to be jerks, and are pleasantly surprised when they are not. I further think it's possible a dancer feels *more hurt* by one bad experience with a woman than those with twelve men *because* such an event is unusual and thus more significant, and because, I believe, women expect more emotional support from one another than they do from men.

Those in dominant groups rarely understand the oppression of minority-group members who share knowledge and experiences in common. Consequently, minority-group members *expect* more empathy, kindness, and support from one another than they do those in the dominant group, and feel more painfully betrayed, then, when a member of their own group treats them badly. In other words, I believe negative judgments and actions *between* members of a minority group hurt more than those from a dominant-to a minority-group member. Here, I am exploring the mechanics of domination, in particular the effects of horizontal hostility within a group, through the lens of gender inequality and exotic dancing, but I believe this expectation exists within other minority groups as well.[25] For example, a lesbian may feel more betrayed when the only other lesbian in her office throws her under the bus, unfairly blaming her for a work issue, than she might by a heterosexual doing the same act. The person of color

may be more distressed by the only other racial minority in the program ignoring and disdaining her or him than by experiencing such behavior from a white colleague. In the strip bar, while it is rarely mentioned, dancers and female customers share in common a minority status in a patriarchal social system. Perhaps grabby female customers shouting "show me your pussy" partly do so to distance themselves from this knowledge, to avoid attending to what they have in common with exotic dancers: the vulnerability of a female body in a rape culture.[26]

Internet Pornography and a Weak Economy

Part and parcel of raunch culture is freely available, and increasingly violent, internet pornography.[27] While thoughtful conversations about the uptick in the depiction of fetishized acts in gonzo pornography (e.g., facial abuse and double penetration) are rare in mainstream media outlets (and indeed difficult to initiate at all largely because such discussions make people uncomfortable, defensive, and/or irate),[28] pornography gets many *mentions* in television shows, movies, music videos, and advertisements. Jokes or plots referencing pornography can be found in the following television shows: *American Horror Story*, *Law & Order: SVU*, *How I Met Your Mother*, *Sons of Anarchy*, *Big Bang Theory*, *Family Guy*, *2 Broke Girls*, *Switched at Birth*, *Robot Chicken*, *The Office*, *Workaholics*, *Broad City*, *Brooklyn 99*, *True Detective*, *Jessica Jones*, *The X-Files*, *Futurama*, *South Park*, *Scrubs*, *House*, *Seinfeld*, *Will and Grace*, *The Sopranos*, *30 Rock*, *Modern Family*, *Raising Hope*, *My Name Is Earl*, and *Supernatural*, among others. Further, premium cable channels like HBO and Showtime frequently show scenes of soft core pornography in series like *Weeds* and *Game of Thrones* and the majority of recent R-rated and unrated movies include graphic nudity, soft-core pornography, and/or crude humor relating to sexuality.[29] Whether or not any one individual seeks out internet pornography, most young people encounter it through pop-up ads and circulated YouTube videos, while studies show that 70–80 percent of young men watch it regularly.[30] Among my undergraduate students, approximately two-thirds shared that they first encountered internet pornography, mostly by accident, before the age of fifteen.

So how does the easy availability, and widespread viewing, of internet pornography affect the lives of exotic dancers? Both Wes, manager of Pearls, and John, former strip club owner, believe that internet pornography lowers dancers' earnings. Wes explained, "I can 100 percent attest to the fact that girls used to make a lot more money than they do now. Big part of that is the internet.

Used to, to see the amount of pornography that you can see now on the internet, you had to go to the video store, to that little seedy room with the beaded curtain. Now you can get everything you want as far as a naked girl is involved right at your home without leaving the house, and that has negatively affected the strip club business." John said, "I believe overall revenues decreased not because of the economy so much, but because people can go on the internet and see more than they can see in the strip club. And it's for free. So the novelty of a strip club has died down a lot."

Most of the dancers, especially those who had been working for several years, expressed frustration with how hard it had become to make a living just through stripping. Many club employees credited their decline in earnings to a weak economy and increased competition for customers. Alana described the changes she observed in her ten years of dancing:

> When I first started dancing, there was so much more money to be made with this job. I mean, I was nineteen and had already owned a house. I *had a house* when I was nineteen. When I first started, I was making $100,000 a year. Now, it's barely $10,000, and I've been dancing for over ten years. That's a 90 percent pay cut in my salary. I blame the economy like everyone does, of course, but also the customers knowing they can get more for their money somewhere else —just down the road; and I just won't do that.

This concept—that customers are "getting more down the road," and dancers are doing "extras" in the private rooms—came up over and over again in interviews. Finding elements of prostitution in strip bars is not *new*. Exotic dancers periodically "do more" in strip bars depending on structural factors—city ordinances, police crackdowns on street prostitution, weak rules in strip bars, and changes in the economy—and individual circumstances—intoxication, financial distress, and pressure from customers. However, an overall increase in prostitution among dancers *is* new for Silverton, and this creates added stress for workers. John said that as internet pornography siphons off customers, "the 'new entertainer,' I would call her, has to work twice as hard to make the same amount of money or less, and therefore, they become desperate. And when they become desperate, they do things they shouldn't do."

Dancers explained that customers frequently reference internet pornography when refusing to purchase a private dance. Stacy shared that she's approached customers who, when she asked them if they'd like a dance, responded, "Why

would I want to get a dance when I could just go home and watch porn?" Similarly, Laura said at least one customer per shift rejects an invitation for a private dance with a variation of, "I can just get porn on the internet." Of course, these customer reactions beg the question, "Why are you in a strip bar then?" Laura clarified that some men visit strip bars "because their friends drag them out." Sandy speculated that Red Key had become "more like a hang out spot" to meet dancers and presumably find someone interested in sex rather than a place devoted to fantasy and conversation. Sandy explained, "They come in and want to get a dancer to go home with them, instead of just coming in for fantasy and fetishes. It's not like that anymore. They don't want to get dances from a stripper. It's more like they want to just take her home." The fact that this rarely happens—a dancer leaving with a customer or joining one later—does not deter men from repeatedly pestering dancers to do so.

Sandy talked a lot about "hookup culture." Hooking up includes any type of sexual interaction without the expectation of romantic intimacy or commitment.[31] Some speculate that hookup culture, which involves much alcohol, ritualized grinding on a dance floor, and little conversation, is replacing dating for young people.[32] While forms of hooking up have existed since the 1960s, partially because of the sexual revolution, scholarly and journalistic explorations of college students hooking up began in the mid-to late 2000s, coinciding with the early literature on the rise of raunch culture.[33] Sandy believes raunch culture, internet porn, *and* hookup culture together raise customer expectations about what they can purchase in a strip bar.

Pornography *in* Strip Bars

Commonplace, widespread exposure to graphic sexual imagery, and the ability to access such images instantly on mobile devices, creates new complications in strip bars. Five dancers discussed customers looking at pornography on their cell phones *while in the clubs*. These included downloaded pictures and videos. One customer told a dancer that he had seen her in a pornographic video, and then pulled it up on his phone to show her. Several dancers shared that customers regularly show them "dick pics," pictures of their genitals, off their phones. Courtney, who is white and twenty-seven, works at the Mitchell Brothers Theater in San Francisco. During our interview at the theater on a Thursday afternoon in August 2014, Courtney said that not only has she seen customers looking at pornography on their phones, but that "we have a big porn room in here too." The porn room is a new addition to the club. After I asked her what

kind of pornography plays there, Courtney responded, “All different kinds. It can be pretty raunchy.” She paused and said neutrally, “It’s interesting.” I tried to respond neutrally as well, but I expect my face registered surprise. Courtney continued:

> It’s kind of weird, and we give guys a hard time when they come and sit in there all day and watch porn. “There’s, like, real people here!” But sometimes, you can give lap dances to guys when they’re watching porn, you know what I mean? That happens sometimes, but I don’t know. Sometimes there’s a guy in there doing things, and then you’re like, “You’re not supposed to be doing that in here!”

Shortly after this exchange, Courtney heard her name over the loudspeaker and had to dash off mid-interview to dance on the main stage. Suddenly abandoned in a room decorated with huge pink circular cushions, I tried to catch the eye of one of the two dancers biding time among the pink pillows. Both studiously ignored me, bodies curved into their phones, their demeanors unequivocally chilly.

Sighing, I decided to go watch Courtney perform, and observe the customers’ reactions to her show. Walking to the feature room, I bumped into the manager, smiled, showed him my book, and asked him if he’d like to speak with me about changes he’s observed in the business. He smiled politely in response, and said he was too busy to talk right then. Pretty sure I had gotten the brush-off, I made my way to the stage room and sat in the back row in an aisle seat, choosing the one closest to the exit should I want to leave quickly and quietly. Watching Courtney perform for a large, older gentleman on tip row who was mock hitting her *with a cane*, of all things, the creeping dread I often feel in strip bars intensified. Mentally shrugging off my reaction to this symbolic assault, I turned my attention to how I might maneuver to the stage to tip Courtney without making a spectacle of myself, tripping over a wheelchair blocking the path, and avoiding the attention of the cane wielder. As I contemplated the minutiae involved in this potential encounter, a male customer approached and sat in the seat right next to me. Since the room held only a handful of customers, and there were rows of empty seats around me, I felt immediately uncomfortable. To me, this behavior signaled aggression, and stalking. Sighing again, generalized dread transformed into a specific aversion, I slipped out of my aisle seat, exited the stage room, and decided to check out the porn room.

No one was in the porn room when I entered. Like a modern movie theater,

the seats were stadium-style, and the screen was large. I was curious what kind of porn would play, wondering if it would be violent. It was not. I made myself stay and watch for a while to see if it changed, but it did not. The screen featured a beautiful, Playmate-type woman, posing provocatively, fingering herself, in a sensual environment. Although I was both bored and stressed out, I made myself stay in the porn room until the stalker followed me in there too. *Why was he following me?* The theater employed younger, prettier, and way more naked women who were *interested* in entertaining customers. I scooted out of the porn room through a side door, again skirting the male customer, and made one last attempt to speak with the manager or any of the staff. Everyone refused to talk to me. The atmosphere of the theater had grown cold and hostile. Considering the experience later, I recognize that while I did not feel particularly endangered in the club, I did feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Sexual harassment is supposed to make women feel this way.[34] It was an enormous relief to leave the Mitchell Brothers Theater, step into the sunshine, and walk swiftly back through the Tenderloin district to my hotel.[35]

Female Sexuality in Raunch Culture

Patriarchal social systems, like raunch, distort the ways women perceive their sexual selves. Very few of us are immune to the potent socialization processes that occur in our families, schools, workplaces, religious institutions, and the media involving female desire and virtue. Further, these cultural institutions present us with a wide array of contradictory messages about sexual arousal and behavior, such as: *Sex is dirty and shameful but also fabulous and life altering. Everyone is doing it, and everyone doing it is gorgeous and thin. It all happens in a passionate embrace, under the sheets. It's magic, but you should wait until you're married or become a born-again virgin. If you do it you're a slut, and if you don't you're a prude. You should be hot like a virgin porn star. Anal sex does not count as sex, so you are still a virgin if you do that.*

No wonder we are confused.

It's difficult for young women to sort out these messages. Girls are supposed to be sexy—for boys—but not too sexy, because to be labeled the wrong kind of slut is a terrible fate. Leora Tanenbaum explored the widespread sexual harassment and policing of young women's sexuality in two books: *Slut! Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation* and *I Am Not a Slut*. Both books brim with gruesome, if commonplace, tales of the teenage torture of young

women. Indeed, Tanenbaum shares the disturbing statistic that two out of five girls nationwide have had sexual rumors spread about them.[36] With the advent of cell phones and social media, such rumors now spread instantly, and all correspondences potentially have a permanent digital imprint. For an exotic dancer, managing cultural contradictions about female sexuality is complicated by the stigma of the work—i.e., she is definitely the *wrong kind of slut* to many. In spite of this, many dancers feel that at least they own their sexuality enough to charge a price for it. Unlike some young women on social media, at college parties, and night clubs, an exotic dancer is not displaying her body for free.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, women *still* lack full bodily autonomy. Such autonomy must include both sexual freedom—the choice to have or not have sex with whomever one chooses—as well as freedom from sexism—full reproductive control and the ability to move unimpeded by harassment, assault, and abuse through social environments[37] or, as Carol Vance articulated, freedom from danger and the freedom to experience pleasure.[38] What, then, do stories from exotic dancers, strip club employees, and customers tell us about the sexual pleasures and dangers women experience in 2017? Unfortunately, the pleasures are few, transitory, and precarious: dancers continue to describe receiving attention (and money) for being perceived as sexually attractive as positive.[39] Similarly, in the culture at large, women express interest, and pleasure, in being the object of a desiring gaze,[40] and some believe it is a sign of progress that they can have sex "like a man,"[41] which is to say lots of anonymous, uncommitted sex.[42] Some women also enjoy costuming themselves according to the dictates of raunch. A woman who sets the goal of looking sexy, meets this goal, and receives affirmation from others who say, "Wow, you look hot!" might experience feelings of accomplishment and efficacy.[43] Applying makeup, using a flat iron, and emphasizing one's sexual attributes (looking hot) is something one can achieve through work and effort. Further, because the culture encourages women to practice feminine grooming, makeup, and styling throughout their teen years, many women are skilled at doing so.[44] Indeed, many girls today watch YouTube tutorials hosted by other teens who give step-by-step instructions on how to professionally create a "flawless face" and "contour." These YouTube videos enable contemporary teenage girls to far surpass the makeup results my peers and I managed in the 1980s, e.g., the clumsily applied electric-blue eye shadow and the eyeliner *inside* one's lids. With such internet tools at their disposal, very young girls can make themselves up to look much older.

At the same time, I perceive these pleasures as double-edged. To the degree

that women measure their attractiveness and sexual desirability against an unrealistic (not to mention racist, classist, and ableist) media standard of "fuckability," with many simply unable to compete at all—e.g., those with large bodies, disabled bodies, older bodies, and queer bodies—I consider the pleasure attainable in such sexual self-display fraught and capricious.[45] Moreover, measuring one's self-worth, attractiveness, and desirability through the eyes of another, and/or a highly groomed, big-haired, and physically taut cultural standard, is, I think, psychologically compromising.[46] Were raunch only one out of a range of possibilities in which women might situate their physical and sexual selves, I would perceive it as much less problematic. But raunch *is* the dominant culture, relentlessly repeating a hegemonic discourse that acts of sexualized self-objectification are personally liberating, or "empowering," thus reframing conformity as choice and freedom, Orwellian-style. In the absence of viable alternatives, raunch is not a choice. Choices occur when one can pick among a range of options. I liken raunch culture to the carbonated beverage Mountain Dew. One super-sweet, strangely colored, highly caffeinated, frankly unhealthy glass of it from time to time is fun and tasty. It pairs well with popcorn, for example. But, imagine a world in which one's only beverage option was Mountain Dew—the accompaniment to all one's meals, to gulp after exercising, to sip at Mountain Dew bars during happy hour. In such a dystopia, most of us would feel sick and lethargic, gain weight, get cancer, and *still* be thirsty. Similarly, I believe raunch culture causes many to feel poisoned, and thirsty for emotional intimacy and real sexual pleasure.

Androsexism: A Danger in Disguise

I believe a life-long socialization into raunch so accustoms young Westerners to the sight of naked or near-naked women, they cease to find such displays remarkable, and *expect* women to sexualize themselves and one another. Young women seem numb to the fact that they are repeatedly exposed to naked versions of their sex, while young heterosexual men are so accustomed to having their real or imagined desires culturally centered, continually reinforced, and adroitly genuflected to by women, they think being surrounded by naked women is normal too. So young people give a collective shrug about frequenting bars "with naked girls running around."

Perhaps as compensation for this poor state of affairs, the conditions of androsexism permit women the "pleasure" of the male gaze, including rights to police *other* women for their "lumpy" bodies, and sexually objectify those who

most conform to the pornified cultural standards. Thus, the primary new "pleasure" my interviews reveal is a danger in disguise: the possibility to critique and evaluate *other* women's bodies from a disembodied, superior, or temporarily male position, like Anna illustrates in her description of a type of female customer: "She'll let the pretty girl sit there and be all buddy-buddy with her, because she knows that her guy friends are going to think she's cool because she sat there and talked to the pretty stripper versus being mean. However, when a not-so-attractive girl walks by, she is like, 'Oh, what is she a stripper for? She is not pretty! She shouldn't work here.'" I consider this a kind of "tolerance trap."[47] A woman who conforms to the distorted stereotype that is raunch, who self-objectifies and sexualizes other women, who, under the terms of androsexism, is condescendingly allowed to adopt the behaviors and attitudes of men in male-dominated settings, will be tolerated in some male spaces, until well, she doesn't, and then she is vulnerable to abuse and hostility.[48] This androsexism, cloaked as "progress," spawns a number of other dangers as well: shrinking imaginations, women's capitulation in their own oppression, androsexist entitlement to female bodies, and horizontal hostility among women.[49]

The End of Raunch Culture?

How raunch culture might end, or diminish, is difficult to imagine. Only a quarter-century old, raunch has grown at the pace of the internet, on all the screens we use in daily life. Given the wide array of social problems facing humans—war, poverty, violence, and climate change—perhaps androsexism and raunch culture do not figure high on this list. But, as a professor surrounded daily by young people saturated with screen technology, I see the negative consequences of pornified raunch on their relationships with one another and on their self-esteem. (In my more gloomy moods, I have darkly pondered that if humans *do* endure an apocalyptic event disrupting our global media, one upside would be an end to Hardee's commercials, gonzo pornography, and the *American Pie* movie franchise.)

I believe humans are *better* than our media depictions: smarter, kinder, sweeter, and, yes, much sexier. I also believe women are more powerful when we care more about how we *feel* than how we look, and when we measure ourselves according to our own standards and values, not those of raunch culture. Finally, androsexism can only exist when one accepts the patriarchal equation that men and masculinity are superior to women and femininity. This we can reject. One need not be a "dude," "bro," or "guy" to be a sexual subject.

One can be oneself. I suggest young people inspect the convoluted absurdity of raunch, turn it off when they can, and use their inner guidance, not media standards, to determine how to best experience pleasure, foster feelings of sisterhood, and manifest liberation.

5

Surviving Stripping

How *do* exotic dancers handle the stigma of being perceived as "bad sluts," manage grabby customers, and make money in a stagnant economy? What bolsters their esteem and allows them to maintain their equanimity when spiraling around the Möbius strip? What techniques enable dancers to *survive stripping*? Among the range of strategies dancers explored during our interviews, alcohol and drug use was the most commonly used route to improving one's mood in a strip club.[1] Alcohol alleviated the boredom, softened the noise, blurred the rude men, and soothed achy joints. Plus, drinking is a *job requirement*. With the exception of those working in alcohol-free clubs, it is next to impossible *not* to drink in a strip bar.

Drinking happens this way: imagine a stressful job you've had in which you dealt with difficult customers, an uncomfortable workplace, and capriciously enforced workplace policies. Now imagine that your supervisor not only *allows* you to drink alcohol while working, s/he *encourages* it. Further, you learn that customers treat you better, and you have more fun, when you enjoy a few shots of Absolut or Cuervo, or a bottle of champagne, with them. Your regular customers already know your favorite beverages, and many order one for you without even asking your permission. Also, you are required to sell a certain number of drinks per evening (though they can be alcohol-free) to meet a workplace quota. Finally, you discover that the more alcohol you consume *the more money you make*. Who among us would remain sober under these circumstances? I'm pretty sure I couldn't do it. I want to start drinking heavily as soon as I enter a strip bar.

Virtually every dancer discussed alcohol as an occupational hazard. In the clubs that serve alcohol, management expects the dancers to accept drinks from the customers because alcohol purchases make up the bulk of their profit. To alleviate the problem of drunken workers, clubs manufacture ways for dancers to order nonalcoholic drinks without alerting the customers. Dana explained the fake-drink system at Pearls:

> You can buy fake drinks, though, if they want you to drink. They have little slang terms you can use to let the waitress know that you don't

> want alcohol. So if you want an Absolut and cranberry, you just give her this little phrase and she knows to make it a virgin drink. [For example, “Absolut and cranberry, house special please.”]

Unsurprisingly, customers do not want to pay for fake drinks, and many are savvy to the tricks dancers use to stay sober. Some forcefully ply a dancer with alcohol in the hopes that she’ll give more uninhibited dances, and/or have sex with them later. Such customers may insist on ordering hard-to-fake drinks, like shots, for her. Dancers also use drink offers from clients as a test of their interest level. If a customer is too cheap to buy her a drink when she sits down with him, she expects he will not spend money on private dances.

While I purposefully did not initiate conversations about alcohol and drugs in interviews because I considered the topic controversial—one that might reinforce negative stereotypes about dancers, and subsequently reduce our rapport—dancers’ use of drugs and alcohol came up over and over again, unsolicited, in participants’ descriptions of their workplaces. For example, Morgan described the pattern of drug and alcohol use on any typical night when she worked at Lips:

> Let’s say you have a few people who are sober for whatever reason, say they just don’t drink, and then you have the people that are habitually so fucked up on their drug of choice that they can’t stand, and have been to the hospital three times out of the club for overdosing or whatever. There are a lot of people like you would see in a normal bar that don’t necessarily even use any recreational drugs, but if it’s here and somebody’s buying, I might have four, five, six drinks throughout the night the same as they would if they were out. Then you’ve got people who use, to whatever degree, recreational drugs, which I think fall into categories as well. You have cokeheads, pills, the benzo people, and the opioids—the people who like Valium and Xanax.

April took umbrage with my *lack* of questions on the topic, frankly saying that alcohol and drug use was “intrinsic to my lifestyle as a dancer.”[2] After I explained my reasons for not asking about dancers’ use of intoxicants, April responded that in ignoring this issue, I was missing an essential element of dancers’ experiences. She elaborated, “That’s like interviewing a superstar and saying, ‘We’re not going to talk about the money.’ That’s intrinsic to who you

are. Like saying, 'I'm going to ask you about being a student, but we're not going to talk about the homework.' That's intrinsic to your identity. It allowed me to do the things that I did and continue to do what I was doing. That was central." Nor did April consider herself unique. She said, "Everybody I was around, there's only one girl I ever met that was in recovery that didn't use. But if nothing else, we consumed copious amounts of alcohol. You can't mentally do that work sober. You can't. If you really get girls to talk about it, I mean, it's unfathomable. It's unfathomable." April believed "99.9 percent" of the dancers she worked with drank, and of these, 80 percent drank heavily. Leaning forward, she earnestly explained, "Once again, to truly understand what we had to do, you had to be altered. This is what I saw, and this is what I lived, with these girls. They drink, and they drink a lot; and that's how we survive."

Both April and Lacy outlined a pattern of alcohol consumption in which a dancer builds up an enormous tolerance over time. For example, April described one night in which she had thirteen flaming Dr. Peppers (a shot composed of three parts amaretto and one part high-proof alcohol set on fire then dropped into a pint of beer), on top of her usual, pre-shift four shots of tequila. This particular evening she was driving home, smoking a joint, when the police pulled her over. Amazingly she passed all the sobriety tests (the backward ABCs, the bumper test, the eye test, the walk test), *except* the Breathalyzer. Under the circumstances, the officers concluded the Breathalyzer was broken, and they let her go. The heavy drinking took an emotional and physical toll. April described cycling through feeling powerful to feeling remorseful, concluding, "I was just so sick all the time from all the drinking. I was hung over for four years." April warned:

> If you're a raging alcoholic, you do not need to be doing this, because if you have blackouts, you end up prostituting yourself. I've seen a lot of girls get lost doing it, doing a lot of bad stuff. Everybody makes mistakes. You make mistakes from the moment you start. You just constantly learn. I did a lot of stuff that I regret. I may have regretted that I did thirty shots the night before. I may regret that I ate at White Castle after work.

Like April, Lacy said that she typically drank ten to twenty Goldschläger shots or Purple Hooters a shift. After she got a DUI, Lacy discovered pain pills.

Alan, Melinda's live-in partner, who also worked in strip clubs including Red Key, where he was a DJ, believed the nonalcohol clubs were an improvement

over the ones that served alcohol "because you don't have the opportunity to be perpetually fucked up." Still, I found that in the clubs that do not serve alcohol, like Red Key, or that do not allow dancers to drink, like the ones Danielle worked in Utah, dancers used other intoxicants. Danielle became addicted to crystal meth in Utah, and only kicked that habit when she moved to Chicago. There, she became the "raging alcoholic" April described, and drank "twenty to twenty-five shots in a shift." She said, "I drank from morning to night and night to morning." Danielle set up a cab service during this period, and paid the driver a weekly rate to get her safely to and from work. Alana believes that any dancer who lasts six months is on some type of drug. She explained:

> Whether it's alcohol, weed, pain pills—they will be on something. You cannot do this job without it. And it's not even, "Oh, you've got to be high to do it." Especially for people like me that have arthritis, endometriosis, all these conditions—your body just hurts, and you tear your body up doing this. You're not doing it to get high and you don't get high. You have to self-medicate to do it, just to walk.

While Laura did not discuss taking drugs, she did share that the customers, especially the young ones, *talked* about drugs incessantly. Laura explained, "The younger customers, nineteen to twenty-nine, they are very excited to be here. They're very rowdy. They're here for a party-type atmosphere. They're out to party, have fun—and they're the ones that are really bad about 'Come party with us. Come party with us. Do you do drugs?' They're normally the ones that immediately come in and want to sell drugs, or buy drugs, or have you come home and do drugs with them." Laura said frankly that the young men "don't talk about sex and pornography as much as they talk about drugs."

When I asked Wes, manager of Pearls, what were the biggest changes he's observed over the past ten years, he said, "Biggest thing that I have noticed that's happened in this business that has caused people to make less money, customers to have less fun, me to make less money, everything; and that is the drug of choice. Anyone talk to you about this, yet?" I said no, and he proceeded to fill me in:

> Here's what happened. Back when I first got into this business, I got in on the very end of cocaine. Cocaine was magical for this business. Girls did cocaine, they were up; they were partying; they were having fun. The goal of how much money they needed to make was higher.

> Cocaine was more expensive than the drug of choice today. And again, that drug made them happy. It made them party. It made them keep going, stay longer, work longer. The guys had more fun with them, so they kept spending. It just created a better situation. I'm not advocating drug use of any kind. But now, the girls who do drugs, generally most all of them do either some sort of downer pill or heroin, pain pills, OxyContin, Xanax.
>
> That shit's cheap; and all they want to do is get enough money to get that fix, go home, and go to bed. You can get high as shit for eighty bucks on heroin for two days where enough cocaine to party for a few hours is 250 bucks. So these girls either make enough money to get their fix and they're gone, or they already had enough money to fix whatever, and then they spend the whole day nodding off and not partying.

Danielle concurred about coke use. She said, "a lot of people used crystal meth and coke." Obviously, such drug use is illegal and not something most management would allow on the work premises. At the same time, management needs dancers to work, and knows that the work is stressful. They tend to turn a blind eye to drug use as long as they don't see it. Dancers use drugs in the dressing room, the bathroom, before work, or in their cars. Danielle explained:

> The managers' policies were, "Don't let it get out of control, and don't do it if we walk in. If we see you, we have to report it." Or, "We know what you're doing, but if we visually see it, or see it as a problem, then we have to let you go. Other than that, do whatever you want to do." That was pretty much the policy, so a lot of the girls used in the bathroom because the managers didn't want to walk back there. If they saw it they would have to say something.

Not including alcohol and marijuana, Wes "conservatively" estimated that 70 percent of dancers are on some type of intoxicant.

I asked Lacy to walk me through the life of a hypothetical new dancer, an enthusiastic student for example, in school full time, and dancing to support herself. We call her "Brandy" (from the introduction). How long would it take Brandy to begin using more substances than was healthy for her? Lacy responded, "three to six months." Together, we paint a picture of how Brandy's

drinking and drug use might accelerate. Not much of a partier when she starts dancing, Brandy is surprised by how easy it is to drink on the new job: it's fun, it's Saturday night, everyone is doing it, and, besides, customers catch on to fake drinks quickly. A couple of months in, Brandy is struggling with some hangovers, but taking uppers—diet pills, amphetamines, Aderol, or Ritalin—solves this problem. She can still study for her classes. After another couple of months, Brandy's drinking increases. Where five drinks had been all she could tolerate, now she can drink ten. One time she really overdoes it and is definitely too drunk to drive, and wonders how she is going to get home. She confesses this dilemma to a dancer friend in the club who responds, "Shoot, honey, take a line here and you'll be fine." So Brandy does a line of cocaine and, *miraculously*, feels sober and alert. And now she wants more cocaine.

Brandy is still going to her classes (she loves her art major), but missing many of them, and this is making her anxious. Plus, she's behind in her course work. She hasn't been in the head space to create art. She vows not to drink at work anymore. And then, that very night, when the place is god-awful depressing and boring, Brandy reconsiders, "Oh, I don't think two will hurt me. I'm hung over anyway." Soon she finds more reasons to drink. She barely sits on a customer and feels a wet spot, or one licks her nipple, and she freaks out in the dressing room. After a few shifts spent struggling not to drink, Brandy discovers that every night is a skirmish with alcohol, and she often comes out the loser. Eight months in, Brandy is fighting to balance school and work, battling drunkenness and the allure of cocaine every shift, while noticing that the customers are really getting on her nerves. She wonders if they were always this sexually aggressive, or if she is just now detecting it. Brandy begins to regularly chase alcohol with cocaine. And, since they are simply too overwhelming and depressing to contemplate for long, the demands of school fade into the background of her life. Brandy squeaks by with Cs and Ds only her second semester into the job, and decides to take a break from school until she figures out how to get her life together.

In this hypothetical case, drawn from the testimony of many dancers, alcohol and drug use enable Brandy to survive stripping, but, obviously, also create a new set of issues. My data finds that drug and alcohol use is a problem for dancers, but not for the reasons illustrated by stripper stereotypes. The stereotype of the "nasty, drug-head stripper" individualizes and pathologizes drug use and, mistakenly, reverses the order of events—i.e., bad, stupid, drug-addicted women become strippers.[3] It is more accurate to say that the environment of the strip bar facilitates drug and alcohol abuse *after* women begin working in strip clubs. The

bright spot here is that since the context intensifies the usage, once women leave the context, they can leave the drugs as well, and many do.

Surviving Stripping by Setting Boundaries

Exotic dancers daily face aggressive clients who try to get them to do more, say more, take more off, and give them more, more, more. New dancers must, boot-camp-style, rapidly learn how to encourage, deflect, and resist men's sexual advances because strip clubs quickly chew up and spit out women who fail to master this skill set. Stripper training 101 is developing and maintaining clear boundaries with customers.[4] To illustrate, a dancer might establish the following personal boundary: "I don't let customers touch me." In her mind then, she creates a tangible boundary separating herself from the client. This personal boundary serves multiple purposes: it is a clear guideline she can enforce with customers, it strengthens her dignity and self-esteem—she is a nice girl, providing a service; she is not a slut or a whore, and it allows her control over the interaction. For example, as Diana explained her process for weeding out grabby, entitled customers who, she said, could take their measly fifty dollars elsewhere because she was choosy about who touched her (only her regulars, and only in certain places), I responded that it sounded as though she had good boundaries in the club. She laughed ruefully and said, "Yeah, that's probably the only part of my life where maybe I've had good boundaries. Growing up, I never got to be in control of anything. And so, I got to control a lot when I was in there." Finally, should any boundary become inconveniently constricting to a dancer's income or level of intoxication, she can always expand its horizons. She may decide, "It's okay if I let my regulars touch me sometimes, but I would never go out on a date with any of them." Setting boundaries is crucial to surviving an environment in which men continually and repeatedly attempt to solicit unsupervised sexual favors.

Customers frequently test dancers' boundaries. For example, they may offer money, clothes, cars, and breast jobs in exchange for sex. Dana shared one of her standard comebacks to these propositions:

> A lot of them come in and proposition you all the time. "Will you do this? Will you do this? My wife's out of town." And you're like, "How gross are you? You're married and you have a child, and you're still asking me to go home with you?" My whole thing is: I'm not about

> that. [I am] not a whore. Go to the street corner. Not about me. “Not a whore.” I’ve never had anybody reply to that when I say, “Not a whore. I’m not for sale.” They just look at you kind of dumbfounded.

Dancers also use boundaries to manage rude customers. Sarah, who worked at the Lusty Lady, considers her job title “Educator of the Men of San Francisco in Politeness and Kindness towards Women.” She believes her work consists not only of arousing men, but also teaching the rude ones how to better treat women. She explained:

> I don’t put up with their shit. And, hell, they’re just putting in twenty-five cents. They certainly aren’t paying me to do so. If the guy comes in and says, “I want to be raunchy and call you dirty names,” I’ll be like, “Okay, this is how much you have to pay for it.” But onstage, they are not paying for the privilege to treat me poorly. They are paying for the privilege to see my naked body. And I sometimes say to the other girls, “They can be disrespectful towards their mothers and wives and secretaries, but when they come in here, they are going to treat me well, damn it!” And that’s the way I look at it.

Western patriarchy socializes women to be available for men’s sexual gaze[5] and to accept a certain amount of harassment as normal, even desirable.[6] Learning how to protect their personal space and distinguish between what Sabrina called “good and bad male attention” were skills many women believed they would not otherwise have learned, and that improved the overall quality of their lives. Sabrina elaborated:

> That’s another pro about working in the club. I figured out the difference between good and bad male attention, and I never had anybody teach me that. I figured out the difference between a guy actually liking me as a person and respecting me as a person, and a guy just wanting me. Especially when I was young, I didn’t understand the difference between the two, and I think a lot of young girls struggle with that. That, “Oh, he’s paying attention to me—he wants to have sex with me. He likes me, he loves me!” No, he doesn’t! He just wants you. There’s a difference.

Learning how to set boundaries with men was a valuable skill dancers then used *outside* of strip bars. Janeen illustrated this:

> Before I started working at the Lusty Lady, I'd let people talk to me however they wanted, following me for blocks and sexually harass me. But when I started working there, someone followed me from the bar, and I told the management and asked to work during the day. The manager asked what I did when they followed me. I told her, "Nothing." And she said, "If someone's following you, you tell them to stop." I told her, "I couldn't tell them to stop." Then I saw the girls onstage, and they were saying, "Don't tell me what to do. This is my show, leave me alone." I was able to take that from behind the glass to the street, in real life. And that was the first time in my life I was able to have boundaries with people, and the Lusty Lady helped me to have those boundaries.

Morgan concurred,

> The more I dance, the more respect I feel comfortable demanding. This is how it is. If you don't like it, well here's the door. I think that a lot of women are raised in a climate that makes you uncomfortable with saying no, and don't know when to say no and how to say no. And this is something that dancing absolutely teaches you how to say. It teaches you to look someone right in the eye no matter how intimidating they're being or how much money they're giving you, whatever, say, "Fuck you, no!" It teaches you how to be very emphatic.

At the same time, in spite of all their efforts to keep customers at arm's length, dancers will, at times, inevitably fail because some customers deliberately violate dancers' boundaries. In other words, sexual assault is a job hazard. Indeed, some customers make a game out of challenging a dancer's boundaries. For example, one might repeatedly ask her to pull her g-string aside so he can see her genitals, touch her inappropriately, or repeatedly proposition her for sex. These episodes are upsetting for performers both because it is horrible to be teased, manipulated, and assaulted, *and* for what such behavior foreshadows. Cruel boundary violations are a barometer of customer respect for dancers. A

dancer might ruminate, “Will it ever stop? Will it only get worse? How can I make them stop? How come they don’t see me as a person?” Sometimes, after firmly setting her boundaries with a customer, if he continues to disrespect her, even a trivial action can push a dancer to respond violently. Melinda illustrated this when describing a conflict between a dancer and a customer:

> Usually, it’s not a one-time incident that makes a girl finally hit the guy. Usually it’s been, “No stop, don’t do that. Stop,” over and over and over again until the girl just finally hauls out and knocks him. I’ve seen a girl get off the stage. This guy walks up to the stage to tip her and said something rude—like he called her a tramp or a slut or something—and didn’t tip her. He had the money in his hand and walked away. It was just a dollar. It’s not like the dollar was the big deal, but the girl was mad. She got off the stage. The song wasn’t over, and she just walked over and knocked him out. She was just so mad. She walked up, touched him on the shoulder, he turned around, and she was like, “Now who’s your slut?” and knocked him out.

It is not surprising that such conflicts erupt given the stew of primal emotions—jealousy, rage, betrayal, lust, and disgust—simmering beneath, and sometime upon, the surface of the strip bar. While I am not an advocate of violence, I still find myself rooting for dancers who stand up for themselves, like the women profiled here, who, when undergoing customer abuse, physically reassert control with clarity and conviction. Setting boundaries, enforcing them, and knowing when to bend them enable a woman to fulfill these work responsibilities: arousing men, coping with abuse and contempt, deflecting and neutralizing potentially dangerous situations, while extracting as much money as possible.

Othering

In interviews, dancers sometimes followed boundary-setting comments such as “I don’t let customers touch me” with a statement like “The girls who let them do that kind of stuff make it harder for the rest of us.” These observations about “other” dancers are part factual (the girls doing more create a more competitive workplace), and partly psychologically soothing. While problematic for a number of reasons I will soon explore, othering helps dancers survive stripping. Dana and Beatrice illustrated othering in our interviews. Dana said, “Customers

are trained to come in and spend money, but you've got girls that aren't playing the game quite correctly. And they do things out of the ordinary. So it hurts it for a lot of other people." Similarly, Beatrice described the women she worked with at Mitchell Brothers as "talented and smart" compared to "stereotypical" strippers:

> I've seen a lot of very smart women, some putting themselves through school. A lot of girls see dancing as a way to have leisure time to pursue other interests. But I also saw what society thinks of strippers when I was in Florida and Las Vegas. The girls weren't as smart. They weren't students; they were more in it for careers. At Mitchell Brothers, there are a few girls that are career strippers, but for the most part, I think it is a transition for a lot of women, something they do until they figure out what they really want to do or just for the experience, temporarily, for a few years. There are a lot of very smart, talented women here.

Here, Beatrice separates herself and the women working at Mitchell Brothers from dancers in other places, who are better examples of "what society thinks of strippers." In comparison, Mitchell Brothers' dancers are "students" or, as Jenna, another Mitchell Brothers dancer characterized them, "property owners and world travelers." Positively positioning herself in relation to a "straw" dancer who allows customers to do things she wouldn't, a woman like Beatrice creates a psychological cushion between herself and other, "bad" dancers.[7] *Those* girls are the "other," a status Simone de Beauvoir theorizes in *The Second Sex* as bad and inferior people. Othering is not unique to exotic dancers. Members of stigmatized groups frequently other and marginalize each other.[8] Social justice activist Suzanne Pharr describes this behavior as a form of "horizontal hostility."[9] For example, a gay or lesbian accountant might say, "I'm not like those other queer people; I would never dress in drag." Or a middle-class African American may be especially critical of those who dress as "rappers" or "gangstas."

Of all the women I interviewed, Julie engaged the most in "othering." She also repeatedly expressed discomfort with dancing throughout our interview. She said: "I hate it when the customers touch me," "I would never dance nude," "There is nothing good about taking your clothes off and dancing for strangers." In this excerpt, Julie demonstrates othering when she charges the "girls who take it a step further" with giving all dancers a "bad name":

> If it's the kind of club where it's just topless, there is no touching, there are no lap dances, and it's kind of just a bar, respectful atmosphere, it's really no big deal. But the girls that take it a step further and do prostitution in it, then, I think they give it a bad name. And no wonder we feel exploited sometimes, because a lot of women don't take it seriously. They use it as a place where you can make as much money as you can, when actually it should just be something to make money, but respectfully. It might sound a little cliché but I think it's an art form in our club to a point. Because it's not just nasty. I think a woman going totally nude onstage and crawling around is kind of nasty. I wouldn't want to do that. I think, if anything, women give it a bad name.

In this description, Julie locates the site of her exploitation not with the customers, the club, or patriarchy in general but with *other* dancers who do "nasty" things. She believes if women took dancing "more seriously," people would not think badly of *her*. Julie *had* actually seen a woman crawling around the stage naked and it disturbed her:

> I told you I went to the Velvet Lounge one night when they had a "feature." I was embarrassed. I went with a bouncer from work, and we sat on the stage area—and you know how close up that stage is. And I've never ever seen a woman get completely nude onstage. She's crawling around onstage, and I had to turn my head. I was so embarrassed. I don't know why I felt that way. It was just weird for me.

Perhaps Julie felt "weird" watching the headliner perform because she recognized that there was really very little that distinguished her erotic dance from the feature dancer. Further, seeing a woman's genitalia inches from one's face—or, as Susan eloquently expressed, "You got these nude bars sticking their shit right up in a man's face"—the illusion that exotic dancing is "no big deal," just a fantasy and an art form, flickers.

Finally, othering does nothing to improve the general public perceptions of strippers. Most people do not consider exotic dancing a reputable profession regardless of whether the club is totally nude, topless only, located in a good section of town, or a front for prostitution. Most are ignorant of these finer distinctions between strip clubs, and do not care how any dancer constructs

herself. It is unlikely that stereotypes of the 'ho stripper would disappear were no dancer ever to prostitute herself with a client. The vast majority of dancers already do not have sex with their customers, but that has not changed the popular stereotype that strippers are also whores and hookers. To many people, just exposing one's breasts for money is a kind of prostitution in itself. Hence, no matter how hard a woman works to define her status of exotic dancer as something positive and worthwhile, and herself as unlike "those other slutty dancers," she has little control over how the media, churches, parents, teachers, and friends interpret her work. While othering may temporarily alleviate the toll of stripping, it is a problematic long-term strategy because it reinforces, rather than deconstructs, the cultural stereotypes that burden all dancers. At the same time, othering provides psychological relief from painful circumstances and, as such, is eminently understandable.

The Dancer Persona

Dancers also survive stripping by creating a "dancer persona," a self that exists in the clubs with a different name and personality.[10] This begins immediately upon employment. Club management instruct dancers to choose a stage name as soon as they are hired, telling new employees that it is not safe to let customers know their real names. Dancers are largely in alignment with this policy and prefer to use stage names both for safety reasons, and because doing so helps separate the world of the club from their "real" lives. Anna illustrated this: "Once you walk in the door, you are 'Anna' not 'me.' You walk out the door, Anna's left inside. I go out. That's one of the biggest things. You really shouldn't mix these people with your outer lives, because that's going to get you in trouble." Polly explained that lying to customers, and hiding who she is from them, is an act of self-protection. She said:

> Since I've been working this job, if I am somewhere around my workplace I do not go by my real name. I go by Polly, because it's just a protection thing. I left work one night and I went to Subway, which is across the street, and a customer walked in behind me and was yelling my name. It's just very scary, so I've gotten better at lying to them, because it's just protective. I've just gotten better at hiding things since I've been working here.

As I have already explored, exotic dancing is an elaborate charade in which an entertainer must tantalize a variety of customers' desires to keep the money flowing. This means that over the course of a single shift, she will make conversation with men ranging from bikers to corporate executives to professors. To do this, dancers are adept at reading people and performing what they expect. Darby shared, "I've told people I was in school. I've told people I was married with kids. There ain't much I ain't told people. If it makes me money, I'll tell you. I don't believe in lying, but when it comes to my job, it's not me. That's a complete other person. I am not me one bit, 'cause if I'm not myself, it's kind of like I ain't really the one doing it."

The dancer persona allows a woman to do and say things at work that would otherwise violate her moral boundaries. She is not her "real" self—Mary or Claire or Ashley—on stage. She is Savannah or Desiree or Passion. Paulette said that she enjoyed this element of the work: "It's fun to come in and portray somebody different than what you actually are outside of here. It is fun with the fantasy part of coming in and being somebody else. You can be anybody you want in here. Outside, you're yourself; but in here you can be anything that you want to be." Like getting to eat meals for half price if you serve in a restaurant, or exercise for free if you work at a gym, some managers promote the opportunity to explore one's sexuality at work—so long as it conforms to the range of behaviors most men find desirable—as one of the perks of the job. Trying on fantasy selves—sex goddess, head cheerleader, avenging warrior woman—serves multiple purposes: self-protection, play, and psychological separation from the worst parts of the work.

April explored the role "Ariel," her dancer persona, had played in her decision to stop stripping. In April's mind, Ariel was a separate personality that brought both positive and negative elements into her life. For example, Ariel set better boundaries, better protected herself, and was more aggressive and emotionally distant than April. However, April explained, the longer she danced, the more she worried that "April" was slipping away and Ariel taking over—not only in strip bars, but in her "real" life:

> I was having a character conflict because April had just about disappeared, and then, all at once, Ariel was the only person I was dealing with. I was two separate people. I had to learn to integrate the good qualities of Ariel into my life, the good things about her—having self-esteem, feeling good about myself, feeling intelligent, smart, beautiful.

Because, at the same time, Ariel had many qualities April did not like, “I was, I felt, manipulative. My whole job was psychological gain. Taking your clothes off has always been the smallest thing of what I do. Somebody is sitting there, holding their money in two fists, and you got to figure out how to pry each finger back and get it.” Like April, Alana explored how creating a dancer persona caused some dancers to experience an “identity crisis.” Alana explained, “Once you get your entertainer self, then you spend the next—depending on how long you’re in this, let’s say two to six years—you struggle with the identity crisis of ‘Who’s your character self and who’s your real self?’ They intermingle. You start to separate them. You keep them separated for a while. They intertwine, and you forget who’s who.” In April’s case, after quitting dancing, she tried to internalize the best parts of Ariel and leave the worst behind.

The Girlfriend Experience

Customers visit strip bars for a variety of reasons—bachelor parties, boys’ nights out, business networking, performing sexual mastery for other men,[11] displaying wealth, male bonding, to “relax,”[12] and some are seeking conversation, connection, and companionship.[13] Customers interested in a social and emotional, as well as a sexual, exchange with a dancer often end up becoming “regulars.” A regular customer typically develops an attachment to a particular dancer such that he (usually he) consistently visits the club when she is working and pays not only for private dances, but also her bills, luxury items, cosmetic surgery, and for her *not* to dance. Diana, who began dancing to exit a chaotic home, quickly figured out how to make “good money” from her regulars. Within a couple of months of beginning stripping, customers were paying for “everything.” She explained,

> That first month I paid [rent], and then after that you start to get regulars in the club. When you get a regular, you talk to them and they pay things for you, so I never really had to pay rent. I actually ended up moving after a few months into a better apartment, and then eventually this guy had just given me a car and a house; and I was just living in it.

At this point I interjected, “A house? A customer gave you a *whole* house?” I asked if the house was in his name and he just allowed her to live in it rent-free.

Diana clarified, “No, the house was in both of our names. I think it was a way for him to keep me around. I think he thought that I wasn’t going to be in his life anymore if we both weren’t on it.” However, even though her name was on the deed, Diana would have had to sue for half of the house once she quit dancing, and ended her involvement with him, and she was not willing to do that. She said, “I don’t have anything right now other than what God’s given me. I gave up everything that I had gained from seventeen until twenty-three. I let it all go down to clothes to televisions to cars. I got rid of it all.”

Reflecting on her journey, looking back at her seventeen-year-old self, Diana confided that dancing was uncomfortable at first because she “didn’t really know how to play the game,” but she was *interested* in it. From what I can tell, she learned to play it very fast, especially in comparison to Candace, who had yet to make $100 in a shift in four months of dancing. Much of Diana’s income came from regulars who, in addition to buying her gifts, and paying her bills, would say, “Don’t go to work. I’ll give you money.” Diana elaborated, “So it was nice. It was a break for me. Instead of going to work, you’ll give me $700 tonight to go out to dinner with you? Fine.” She said that while her regulars did not pressure her to have sex with them, she knew it was something they wanted eventually. These relationships with regulars were complex, and required much maintenance.

Some of the women I interviewed occasionally dated a customer, or met a boyfriend or girlfriend in the club. Many developed relationships with other club employees that sometimes involved dating, sex, and/or friendship. For example, when Lacy was trying to escape her pimp Jim, a bouncer at the Los Angeles club she was working at let her stay at his place (and tried to have sex with her). Dancers also expressed much appreciation for their regulars. But none shared the kinds of details Diana offered. Diana not only talked to her regulars on the phone, she talked to *each of them* a couple of times a week, adding up to over twenty work calls a week. She also met regulars outside the club, ate meals with them, and even visited with some of their family members. Diana said, “I found out that once I started showing interest in them as a person they actually spent more money on me, and I didn’t have to do as much. They weren’t expecting as much. They want to know that you care about them.” Some assumed the role of her protector. Some were uncomfortable sharing her attention with other customers, and used money to control her actions in the club:

> My regulars didn’t want me to dance. These were older men. They had built a relationship with me emotionally and mentally. They would tell

> me, “Okay, go on stage. When you’re off stage, you don’t give anybody else a dance. You sit with me, and you’ll wear my jacket the whole time. You can cover yourself up.” Or, “Go to work for an hour, but just don’t stay there,” or “You leave.” They got to a point where they didn’t want to be in there with me. They wanted to hang out with me, who they thought I was.

Connecting with customers through weekly phone calls (from a quick hello to a thirty-minute conversation) was a lucrative business practice for Diana because maintaining these connections guaranteed that regulars would come see her at work and pay for her time. Further, staying in contact with her regulars was, arguably, not much different than the kind of customer relations a sales representative might do in a wide range of fields. Still, the calls entailed much emotional labor as they were draining, time-consuming, and interfered with her personal life, especially a potential romantic interest. She shared,

> If I was trying to find a time to hang out with a different guy who didn’t know that I did that, and I’m having to step away to use the phone all the time because I’ve got to pick up the call if they call me, or at least call them back within ten, twenty minutes of them calling me. Just because I want them to know I’m available, I’m there. But it got in the way.

I think Diana cultivated closer relationships with regulars than most other dancers. I believe such intense dancer-customer interactions are relatively rare both because clubs discourage it and dancers, like most workers, get worn out by too much overtime labor. Most clubs also have policies prohibiting dancers from meeting customers outside the premises to safeguard the business from prostitution charges. Some have written policies warning that management will fine or fire dancers for giving their phone numbers to customers. Finally, as John, a former strip club owner explained, no manager or owner wants money leaving the club.

I did not ask Diana if she had sex with some, any, or all of her regulars. Regardless of the answer to this, in other words, whether she did or did not or did a little, she built emotional relationships with many that were real to *them*. Some escorts and brothel workers advertise this kind of emotional work as one of many services customers can purchase called the “girlfriend experience.”[14] During a girlfriend experience a customer seeks “chemistry and authenticity,”[15]

the feeling of being *really* connected to a sex worker. Sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein coined the term "bounded authenticity" to describe the sale and purchase of an authentic emotional and physical connection, like Diana described with her regulars, that is temporarily and emotionally bounded.[16] Exotic dancers have long cultivated these girlfriend-like personal connections with regular customers, though I believe most try to confine such interactions within the clubs.[17]

Some dancers, like Diana, are skilled at creating a feeling of intimacy with customers. April shared this talent as well, calling herself the "resident therapist," explaining that her end goal was for the customers to pay her to talk with them. Others, like Sandy, found it more emotionally damaging to talk with the customers than dance for them or, like Morgan, simply did not want to be bothered to talk with them. Sandy explained:

> I didn't want to talk to customers. I could have made so much more money if I talked to the customers. Most of the customers that I talked to would either be extremely sexist, extremely racist; they would say things that would just get really annoying. They would keep pestering me for sex, basically. They would be like, "Hey, so what's your number? What's your real name? Where are you from?" Any information they could get about me that was personal, they would just keep asking me for it. I wouldn't give it out, because that isn't safe.

I asked her if she considered lying to them, or turning the conversation back to them with a phrase like, "Hey, baby, I just want to hear all about you." Sandy responded that she did not want to lie, and was very bad at flattering chit-chat.

Comparing Diana's and Sandy's attitudes toward and experiences of customers, they have in common that they started dancing when they were very young. Diana was seventeen and Sandy nineteen. Both also came from troubled home lives. Neither was well-mentored in how to be a financially successful dancer. While more experienced dancers occasionally offer tips to newcomers, for the most part each dancer figures out how to do the job on her own, usually through trial and error. Diana and Sandy differed in that choosing customers with deep pockets, building connections with them, and talking with them distressed Sandy much more than it did Diana. Diana danced for six years and Sandy for six months. Sandy was also in college and overall had more social resources to draw on than Diana. In a bad economy, when customers are few and far between, dancers like Diana and April, who forge intimate connections with

customers, will typically make more money than those like Sandy who dislike talking to them. As to whether any individual dancer finds it more or less "emotionally damaging" and/or "too much work" to talk with customers, and weave an illusion of emotional intimacy, versus simply dance for them, the answers vary widely.

Surviving Is Not Thriving

Among the women I interviewed, those who had strong, clear boundaries seemed to best survive stripping. It is possible that maintaining boundaries may protect a dancer from the toll of stripping. In contrast, othering, developing a dancer persona, and the girlfriend experience served more ambiguous functions to dancers. Othering inhibits an individual from recognizing the oppression exotic dancers share and hinders collective resistance. Although it is not a dancer's responsibility to change public opinion about strippers, or collectively unite to improve dancers' working conditions, these are goals that, if pursued, have the potential to enhance individual self-esteem and create social change. Nor are constructing a dancer persona and creating emotional intimacy with regulars in girlfriend-type experiences long-term solutions to the toll of stripping because both engender conditions that can create a core of self-deception and dissociation ("it ain't me doing it"). Finally, although heavy drinking and drug use make the strip bar more bearable, such behaviors jeopardize dancers' safety. Intoxicated women are vulnerable to assault, more likely to prostitute themselves, and at greater risk of addiction and overdose. Ultimately, surviving stripping is a low bar. Under what circumstances might an exotic dancer thrive?

6

Sticking Together

Pathways to Well-Being in Stripping

A recent Gallup survey finds that Americans work, on average, forty-seven hours a week.[1] We work to support ourselves, to create structure in our lives, to connect with others, and to enhance our well-being. Happiness researchers identify five elements that compose well-being: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement.[2] Some may think it a stretch to seek worker well-being in the sex industry especially after the long list of issues and abuses documented in previous chapters. Nonetheless, in this next-to-last chapter I highlight evidence of thriving and well-being for two reasons. One, individual feelings of happiness, and the overall experience of well-being, creates the possibility of future happiness. In other words, the happier, more confident, centered, engaged, and satisfied you feel, the more likely you are to make choices that cultivate thriving. Two, most of *Stripped* focuses on the *problems* dancers endure in and out of strip bars. Here, I am interested in exploring *solutions*. While I cannot erase the foundation of inequality that makes and sustains the sex industry, I can illuminate the best pathways to well-being with the work: personal alignment and positive relationships with others.

Sexual Orientation and Stripping

One avenue to thriving for some dancers lies in exploring their same-sex attractions. Working in a strip bar will not *turn* a heterosexual woman gay, or a lesbian straight.[3] However, strip bars do encourage women to engage in same-sex behavior while exposing them to terrible aspects of male sexuality. I believe this combination allows some dancers to experience real attraction for other women, to learn in fact, that they are sexually fluid, even bisexual.[4] Repeatedly treated like live sex dolls on which people heap scorn, abuse, and ridicule, dancers can counter such objectification by asserting themselves as sexual *subjects*.[5] Many did so by exploring, or relying on, their romantic, emotional, and physical attractions to other women. While close to 100 percent of dancers are

“gay for pay” as Courtney described, when asked, “Of the dancers you know, how many do you think are lesbian or bisexual?” exotic dancers gave responses that ranged from 15 to 90 percent. Their estimates averaged between 40 and 50 percent.

Lacy said that she believed 90 percent of dancers are bisexual or lesbian. When I asked her to separate out those doing girl-on-girl shows for money as opposed to those who were genuinely attracted to other women, she lowered her estimate to “60 to 70 percent.” She qualified, “if they get their pride out of the way and don’t see them as competition. Because I think it’s us having an appreciation of women and a woman’s body and their sensuality on top of what we’ve endured with the male clientele. It’s jolted us toward that.” Of the women I personally interviewed, 50 percent from the first edition of *Stripped* and 40 percent for this one identified as lesbian or bisexual.[6] These are significantly higher figures than most estimates of the numbers of lesbian (10 percent) and bisexual women (20 percent) in the general population.[7] What explains this?

“You Have to Be Sexually Open”

I first visited the Mitchell Brothers Theater in May 1999. It was freezing cold, with a dense layer of fog muffling all of San Francisco that day. I was a weary researcher, marching from sex club to dance bar to interview over a twelve-hour period carting around a heavy backpack with notes, recording devices, three layers of clothing, and a jacket. It was a relief to enter the warm theater after trudging fifteen blocks uphill in the icy wind. Lumpy and tired, I offered my free pass (a gift from Jenna) to one of three large male bouncers and made a beeline to the bathroom to shed some clothing. There was a used condom floating in the toilet that did not want to flush even after three tries. After rearranging my layers of clothing and applying fresh lipstick onto chapped lips, I ventured into one of the performance spaces.

The stage was dimly lit with a stunningly beautiful woman performing, and the room was cast in a dark burgundy glow. The seats were packed close together stadium-style and so tightly spaced that I could barely fit my 130-pound self, burdened with backpack and jacket, in between the rows. I was the only woman present not a dancer. After fidgeting uncomfortably in my cramped seat for five minutes, I was approached by Beatrice. We moved from the performance area to a quiet spot, and spoke for over an hour in the theater, and another two hours the next day. Like many of the dancers featured in *Stripped*,

Beatrice is bisexual. She explained that she became involved in same-sex relationships after working at the Mitchell Brothers Theater. She believed that the close bonds dancers form with one another encourage them to experiment sexually with one another:

> For one, to be a dancer you have to be sexually open. Obviously, you're taking your clothes off, you're playing a role, you're doing this sexual thing, and you can't be judgmental of other things that are not sexually normal. Not that being bisexual or lesbian isn't sexually normal, but in society's eyes it isn't. If you're open to being a stripper, you may be open to other things. A lot of the shows we have are girl-girl shows. If you're working there, you see girls having shows with each other, and it makes it more of the norm, more acceptable. And we all get to be good friends and are sympathetic to each other's emotional needs. We all talk a lot. We have an upstairs dressing room, and a lot of times we just sit up there and smoke and talk and complain about the customers and talk about our problems at home. And it is a very supportive environment. A lot of the girls are really friendly and nice. And a lot of girls end up being lovers. I think that might be unique to Mitchell Brothers.

As Beatrice observed, dancers work with beautiful, naked, or virtually naked, women daily, and most are encouraged to feign sexual interest in other women to titillate the customers. At the same time, they are themselves sexual outlaws whose work involves regularly breaching gender norms. After breaking the taboo about taking one's clothes off for money and discovering that the earth continues to spin on its axis, why not question compulsory heterosexuality? Ten of the women I interviewed began dating other women after they began working in strip clubs. Five of these ten were San Francisco dancers.

Jenna believes that most of us are bisexual, and dancing simply allows women to discover this about themselves. She explained, "Dancing encourages exploration and coming into your sexuality. I think, on a whole, we're all bisexual. I think a large percentage of dancers are bisexual because they have had a chance to explore their sexuality more. They've had to deal with sexuality more than a lot of other people do. It's a natural thing; it's a great thing." Several dancers echoed Beatrice and Jenna. Melinda observed a similar phenomenon among Silverton dancers:

> To sit there and look at women all day long who are trying to be attractive, if you have any bisexual tendencies, you're going to find one that you're attracted to. And you're going to want to do something with that because I don't think you can help it. They're beautiful. They're trying to be sexy. There's going to be an appeal.

Kelly concurred: "Most dancers are bisexual here [San Francisco]. To be a sex worker you have to be comfortable with your sexuality. And it's a highly sexual environment, and you are surrounded by gorgeous women. I think sex workers definitely explore their sexuality." Strip club culture offers workers first-hand experience in same-sex activity, allowing some heterosexual women the opportunity to discover they are bisexual.[8]

"You Meet So Many Assholes and Pricks"

As the women featured here abundantly demonstrate, exotic dancing exposes workers to a repugnant dimension of men and masculinity. Some men use exotic dancers as currency to display their sexual dominance over *other* men.[9] Lacy's experience with her pimp, Jim, illustrates this. Objectified and dehumanized, many dancers feel degraded and disposable, invisible as individuals, just another in a long line of "Stepford" strippers the longer they worked in strip clubs. After being insulted, poked, licked, rejected, assaulted, and propositioned, some dancers think, "The heck with men. Look at all these sexy, nice, funny women. I can find a girlfriend." Stripping causes dancers to feel contempt for customers and, then, for some, for a period, contempt for men in general. Beatrice said this explicitly: "Women get turned off to men working in the job. They see a sexual side of men that they don't like and it makes them more appreciative of women." Darby concurred:

> They get sick of men. There's always one in the crowd, and that makes all the straight ones think about it. They get drunk, and they get tired of putting up with all them men. And they try it, and they like it: "I can have me a woman instead of one of these fucking men." Because putting up with men all the time, it just turns you off towards them. You meet so many assholes and pricks and you think, "God, are all men like this?" And you stereotype men. And you don't have nothing to do with them because they get on your nerves. Then you get with a

chick, and she flips your shit upside down, and there you go.

The unequal trade of flesh that constitutes the sex industry—of men as buyers and women providers of sexual services—places even those male customers who hold dancers in the highest possible esteem into the role of selfish sexual dominators. For some bisexual women then, one route to sexual subjectivity is in the arms of other women.

Lesbian Dancers

For lesbians, the taboo-breaking process can work in the opposite direction. A lesbian considering exotic dancing has already broken heterosexist norms. If she is in need of quick cash, why not try stripping? Some, like Darby, believed that stripping was *easier* for lesbians than heterosexual women: "These little straight chicks, they get drunk, they meet some cutie, and then start dating him. He don't want them to dance no more. I've always found it easier to be a lesbian because you can keep a total emotional detachment. You make a heck of a lot more money. You keep your mind on your money."

Like Darby, Vera and Sarah, friends who traveled from New England to San Francisco to dance at the Lusty Lady, also think stripping is less emotionally demanding for lesbian and bisexual women than for heterosexual ones. Vera said, "I think it would be sad for a dancer who was straight because it would really disillusion her. If I could only be sexual towards men, I'd be in a big problem right now." Sarah agreed, and added that she believes lesbians cope with the abusive clients better than heterosexual women because they don't have to go home to a man: "I think it's good that lesbians do it [dancing], because they can handle men being assholes better. You come home, you're not bringing any of that stuff with you. Whereas if you get off work and you go to a bar and guys are treating you the same way as they did at the club, that's got to suck. I don't ever want to experience that." It may be simpler, and less confusing, for lesbian dancers to separate sexual performance from personal pleasure because men hold no sexual and little emotional appeal.

"A Big Queer Happening"

At the close of our interview, Darby gleefully described participating in an all-woman orgy in the dressing room of a strip bar in Silverton:

> Oh, man. One time in Lace and Lashes we had a big queer happening. All the dancers got suspended, or at least eight of us did. I don't know who started it, but I was in the dressing room at Lace and Lashes. I was kind of young. All of a sudden the lights got flipped off. We all got smashed that night. This was back when everybody used to be real tight. And somebody flipped off the lights, and I got dragged onto the floor for this big gay women orgy. We're back here, we're supposed to be closing up, and nobody's paid their tip-out—'cause at the end of the night you got to take your tip out and pay the bar for working there. Oh god, he opened up the door and flipped on the lights, and my face was the first he saw. I was like all up in this, got somebody back here, somebody right here, couple people here and here. We all got suspended. The dancers just—I don't know, I guess it's where you're around women so much. I really don't know what it is. I think it's where the women put up with men so much.

Many elements are present in this "big queer happening" that invite women to interact with one another sexually: access, attractive women, alcohol, a sexual environment, irritation with men, and perhaps a desire to separate the sexuality one performs for customers with the sexuality reserved for one's pleasure. Exotic dancing challenges both heteronormative and "respectable" paradigms for a woman; then, having broken one taboo, it's easier for her to break others.

As I previously discussed, radical and sex radical feminists often differ in their perceptions of women's experiences in the sex industry. One implication of my findings on the sexual subjectivity of exotic dancers is that it confirms *both* radical and sex radical theories about sex work. In my interviews with exotic dancers, I found much evidence of the radical feminist position that sex work is violence against women. I also found that some dancers resist the violence men do to them by exploring their same-sex attractions. Being romantically involved with a woman can function as a buffer against the insults of male clients and allow a dancer to preserve a not-for-sale sexuality of her own. Dancers who do so support sex radical analyses: they are empowering themselves through a subversive act, taking charge of their well-being, and attending to their personal alignment. Thus, one gift a woman may take away from her time spent stripping is an expanded worldview: the realization that she is capable of experiencing sexual and romantic attractions for other women.[10]

Developing Critical Consciousness

Developing Critical Consciousness

For many, working as a stripper involves shouldering an increasingly heavy pack of social condemnation and sexism. Some women cope with the weight by taking figurative steroids—drugs and alcohol. Some trudge along, adjusting to the mass until they eventually collapse under its impossibly heavy burden. Some pause, put the backpack on the ground, open it, do some serious reorganization, and rid themselves of items they collected that they really don't need any more. Mom's disapproval—toss that one out. Impossible beauty standards—chuck it in the river. Sexual double standard—set it on fire. Competition with other women—it disappears in her palm. Customer insults—"slut," "whore," "bitch"—gone, gone, gone. The more a dancer examines and discards these socially constructed sexist fictions, the lighter the burden becomes. In other words, the more a dancer develops a critical perspective on gender inequality—the more she notices, gets pissed off about, deconstructs, and critiques the injustices she experiences—the more tools she has to survive and perhaps, for a finite period, even prosper. This is because the battlefield of the strip club encourages some women to connect with one another, experience solidarity, critique social inequality, and follow their inner guidance.

Think of the most common words we use to insult women—*slut, 'ho, tramp, whore, cunt, skank, thot*: these terms all reference a women's sexual availability, implying that a woman's sexual organs are themselves dirty and disgusting. A society that routinely denigrates *all* women based on their perceived sexual activity reserves special vitriol for those who literally put a price tag on their sexual bodies. Consequently, working as a stripper significantly ratchets up a woman's daily experiences of sexism. One possible (and positive) affect of such mistreatment is that it can awaken a dancer's critical consciousness. For example, reflecting on what it is about exotic dancing that encourages a woman to attend to social problems, Morgan suggested:

> You have to be damn near comatose after a while to not notice some things like wasted potential and unfortunate patterns that get repeated. A lack of education, opportunities, health care, a lack of lots of things. A lack of respect. It's difficult not to see. This is not universal. This does not happen to everybody. I think some people probably tumble to it more quickly than others.

It is especially effective to do such consciousness-raising with like-minded others, as the Vixens dancers demonstrated. When the mayor of Silverton

proposed legislation to limit contact between customers and dancers, Vixens day-shift dancers expressed concern that, if the proposed ordinance passed, their customer base would diminish and strip clubs would close. Marie and Tracy discussed this:

> **Marie:** If she closes the titty bars down, welfare is going to go up. You're going to have everybody taking food stamps, welfare, social services. She's going to put them on the street, prostitution.
>
> **Tracy:** They're already cutting welfare. There are too many single mothers. There's young girls that are trying to put themselves through college. We have so many bills to pay, and we're not asking the government or anyone to help us. We're paying our taxes, we're doing what's right, and here she wants to come in and destroy jobs for dancers, waitresses, bartenders, bouncers.
>
> **Marie:** And what she's going to do is put them on the street to do prostitution, which will bring up disease, murder, rape. Drug use is going to go sky high 'cause they're going to be out on the street corners pulling tricks.
>
> **Tracy:** What are they going to do? There are so many people out there that can't get jobs—they don't have the education. They have been trying to get off welfare but have been knocked down so far that they can't get off welfare to get a damn job, to even go to school. They say they have all these programs out there for people, but who in the hell do you see getting into these programs?
>
> **Marie:** And then the programs are only for so long. You're allotted only so much time out and then they cut you off.

Tracy and Marie both chose to support themselves exotic dancing rather than take government assistance, or engage in prostitution. Each also preferred the burden of "stripper" over the "welfare" stigma. Although Marie and Tracy did not use the sociological language of "institutional constraints," they recognized that closing local strip bars would not feed a dancer's children, pay for her college tuition, or help her ailing parents. Shutting down strip bars does nothing to alleviate the second shift, wage gap, or income inequality.

In spite of raunch culture representations that glamorize stripping and socialize women to display their bodies for men, few women aspire to be exotic dancers. Stripping is a temporary and imperfect solution to a larger social

problem: a lack of well-paying, flexible economic alternatives for women in a male-dominated, capitalist, racist society. The women I interviewed compared stripping to other forms of labor exploitation, recognizing that working in any low-paying, repetitive labor exacts psychological, emotional, and material costs. For example, Tara, born and raised in Hawaii, quit dancing when she became pregnant, but said she still misses the freedom she had as a dancer and, of course, the money. At the time of our interview, Tara worked at a local mall in the food court. She compared the food court job to dancing:

> My reason for wanting to go back now [to stripping] is for the money. I did it for three years, making my own hours and coming and going as I please. I would go in every night with a set limit in my head: "Okay, I'm not leaving with less than $200 tonight." Whether that took me two hours or eight hours, I wouldn't leave until I got it. Now, I really work hard for the chump change I am getting. It is ridiculous. You have to work twice as hard when it's honest and you have these bosses that shit all over you. When you're in the strip industry no one is bullshitting you. You are there to take off your clothes and make money for yourself. In a regular job, they can't say it like that, but you're their workhorse. You're going to bust your ass for them so they can pay for their Mercedes-Benz and their condo and whatever else they have. And they dump all over you and treat you like shit. For that, I might as well be dancing. At least it's honest, because I know people are there to see me naked. At least I'm not getting lied to my face to keep me there on the clock making them money.

Dancer after dancer reminded me that there are parts of any job that make it difficult. Morgan, for instance, said she would not want to be waitressing at Waffle House for the rest of her life. Joscelyn explained that "there are certain things that other workers have to do in their own jobs, and sometimes it may be demeaning. And you do it anyway because that is what's expected of you and that's what brings in your paycheck." As Lily Burana wrote in *Strip City*, whenever a dancer needs to convince herself that her job situation isn't so bad, she can say, "Well, it beats working at McDonald's."[11] The exotic dancers who demonstrated the highest class consciousness worked in San Francisco. Their experience of labor exploitation motivated them to social action.

Sex Worker Activism

Sex Worker Activism

What conditions allow and facilitate sex worker activism? Why did the first sex worker union in the United States emerge in San Francisco rather than in Boston, Chicago, or New York City? Largely excluded from mainstream social organizations working for racial, gender and sexual equality, sex workers have fought for their own rights, beginning in the United States in 1973 when Margo St. James founded COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics) in San Francisco.[12] Historian Melinda Chateauvert observed that "San Francisco was the center of 'Whore Power' in the 1990s as sex workers came out of the closet."[13] I flew twice to San Francisco to explore how exotic dancers fare in this more politically and sexually progressive region. I imagined working conditions might be better there than in Silverton, in the middle of the Bible Belt. I found the opposite. San Francisco is a more sexually progressive city than Silverton and, for that matter, more than most of the United States. One consequence of this sexual freedom is that there are fewer city regulations concerning public nudity and sexual acts. The downside is that this environment encourages customers to expect more graphic sex for their money. San Francisco dancers also suffer dilapidated dressing areas and bathrooms, high stage fees, no sick time, capricious pay cuts, and sexual harassment. Those I interviewed explained that competition for jobs and customers is so fierce in the region that management feels little incentive to maintain decent working conditions for their employees.

Rachel, a San Francisco sex activist, described the situation succinctly: "San Francisco is a pioneer when it comes to heinous violations of the labor code and horrendous working conditions in the sex industry, especially in strip clubs." Much social movement research finds that activist organizations spring up in response to threats and problems,[14] like "heinous violations of the labor code," so long as organizers have adequate social, political, and economic capital to accomplish their goals. San Francisco, with its history of sexual tolerance and progressive politics, coupled with educated workers unafraid to wield their cultural capital in the service of a good cause created ripe conditions for activism. The unionization of the Lusty Lady peep show dancers was the most famous, successful, and well-documented sex worker victory in the region.

I visited the Lusty Lady at 11:00 a.m. on a Sunday—Mother's Day, in fact. Not the most raunchy time of the day, week, or year, but there were still a few customers entering and exiting the establishment. Entirely unfamiliar with peep-show protocol and disoriented by the sudden darkness, I asked an employee at the front desk to describe how the booths work. Disinterested and curt, he explained that customers enter empty booths indicated by a vacancy light.

Unsatisfied with this level of detail, but certain I would receive no workshop on best practices at a peep show, I gingerly ventured into the cramped, dark, sticky booth and fumbled for a seat. At peep shows, dancers perform inside a mirrored room and are separated from the clients by glass windows. Entertainers are completely naked, paid by the hour, and tips are rare. In contrast to strip bars, customers go to a peep show to look at female genitals and masturbate, not chat and drink. Dancers typically perform a set routine of eight to twelve positions of maximum exposure at an individual customer's booth. To see the performers, customers put money into a machine.

The booth was so dimly lit it took me several moments before I could find the place to insert a dollar bill. As the money entered the machine, a partition separating my booth from the performance space rose electronically. I peered into a mirrored room, dubbed the "fishbowl" by Lusty Lady dancers, containing four women garbed in a variety of lace, denim, heels, feathers, and wigs. Performers wore such accoutrements solely to eroticize and frame their sexual parts, as management required each woman to expose her breasts and genitals at all times. The booths allow customers to see the dancers but not one another. I thought there must be at least one other customer because a dancer was performing at a window in an adjoining area. When my screen rose, the dancers looked at each other and said, "I don't believe it; it's a woman." One woman, Ann, cheerily joined me, and I proceeded to tell her a bit about my project. She quickly ascertained that I hadn't come to stare at her crotch, and settled down next to me to chat. The screen closed immediately. One dollar lasted me one minute. I put in a five-dollar bill and waited for the screen to rise again.

It was difficult to converse with Ann because noise-proofing blocks most customer comments. Customers can hear the dancers, but the sound system drowns out customers. Muting clients is one way to filter obscene and abusive remarks. Straining to hear every word I said, Ann talked with me for the few minutes my five dollars afforded us. She pointed to a white stain on the window and made a disgusted comment about how they should really clean that up. Looking about the booth now that my pupils had adjusted to the darkness, I noticed a box of tissues, a trash can, and several other semen splotches. Later, I considered whether engaging in conversation with Ann, versus watching a pussy show, had been a poor research choice. Maybe I should have acted like most customers, seen the standard show, and noted my own reactions? Ultimately, though, I felt too uncomfortable to peep in the peep show. I wanted to interact with a person, not a crotch. Trying to interact with a person and a crotch, behind glass, with an inadequate sound system was, I felt, too formidable and

inauthentic. My five dollars up, Ann waved enthusiastically as the partition closed and I slipped out into the cold San Francisco morning, relieved to breathe in the fog.

Unionizing at the Lusty Lady

I timed one research trip to San Francisco to attend an Exotic Dancers Alliance meeting held monthly in a union-owned building on Market Street.[15] During the meeting those present discussed the situations of two dancers wrongfully terminated from their place of employment, shared information, and offered support to one another. Joscelyn, whom I first met here, agreed to accompany two less experienced dancers to court the next day. Rachel, also present at this EDA meeting, had been involved in the collective bargaining that led to the unionization at the Lusty Lady. We spoke after the meeting, and she shared her version of the timeline of events leading up to their collective action.

Lusty Lady dancers had been frustrated by a number of issues at their workplace for some time—including a terrible sick time policy and discrimination against women of color in hiring and shift scheduling—before the unionization effort. They were catalyzed into action when they realized that customers were videotaping them without their knowledge or consent. Exacerbating the problem, management did little to stop the practice of secret videotapes, and downplayed dancers' concerns. Their privacy violated, feeling economically exploited, and ignored by management, the Lusty Lady dancers fought back. Rachel described what happened:

> There were a lot of problems that are endemic to the industry anywhere you work, but the one issue that was unique to our workplace, and the issue that united us, was the fact that we work in a peep show. We're in a big box surrounded by windows. Some windows used to be made of one-way glass, and customers would routinely tape us and take pictures and then sell the videotapes and pictures as marketable porn, without our consent, without compensation, and without our knowledge. We would notice when we'd see a flash or the red light on the video camera that they would forget to cover. Lots of times they would get away with their film intact. We complained to management for months and actually found a video with Lusty Lady dancers on it that has since been pulled off the

> market, and the distributor is being sued. But who knows what else is out there or what's been put on the internet without our consent? And the managers didn't do away with the one-way windows for marketing reasons. Their attitude was: if you don't like it, get another job.
>
> So we started meeting and decided to organize the union because we learned that we had no legal protection if we spoke out. We hooked up with the Exotic Dancers Alliance, and they have this loose arrangement with the Service Employees International Union. And the EDA finally convinced an initially reluctant group of higher-ups in the organization. At first, they weren't convinced that we were committed, and they had never represented anyone in this industry. No one has. This is the only unionized strip joint in the country right now that has successfully followed through with a campaign and negotiated a contract.
>
> During the course of these meetings, we discovered that a lot of things that people were bitching about under their breath, in the dressing room, were widespread injustices you would find in any strip joint—from favoritism to erratic and unwritten disciplinary policies. Some people would be harshly punished for things that others would totally get away with.

The unionization at the Lusty Lady required months of effort, and a huge commitment of unpaid personal time and energy. As Joscelyn noted plainly, "We're all volunteers." Both local and national media outlets covered the successful formation of SEIU Local 790 in 1997.[16] After years of contract negotiations, the club's owners decided to close the business. Rather than lose their jobs, in May 2003, the Lusty Lady dancers bought the business themselves and created the first sex worker cooperative. Self-ownership entailed a new set of challenges for the dancers: keeping profits up in a cutthroat market while meeting the financial, emotional, and psychological needs of the workers.

Sexuality researchers (including myself) flocked to the city before, during, and after the unionization to study sex worker activism, while individual dancers involved in the social justice work published their own version of the events.[17] An empowered, explicitly feminist tone characterizes most of the academic and autobiographical writing on the Lusty Lady and the film documenting the unionization, *Live Nude Girls Unite!* Change was in the air. Those involved in the union effort were hopeful dancers in other parts of the United States might follow their worker's rights model and revolutionize exotic dancing across the

country. Indeed, *Live Nude Girls Unite!* concludes with spokeswomen from the Lusty Lady traveling to West Virginia and Alaska to help local dancers organize. After our interview, Rachel mailed me a thick manual of materials about how to unionize in the sex industry, along with a note that I was free to make copies and distribute the information to any dancers interested in learning how to organize effectively.

Unfortunately, the Lusty Lady unionization remains an outlier among strip clubs. I have found no other examples of dancers successfully organizing to improve working conditions in strip bars or peep shows in the United States.[18] I speculate that this is because it is easier for dancers to hop from club to club when they are dissatisfied rather than challenge management at any one place. Indeed, if anything, the likelihood that exotic dancers might unionize in their workplaces has *decreased* since the 2008 economic recession and the introduction of the cell phone. The final straw that provoked the Lusty Lady strike and unionization—being secretly videotaped—is now a commonly accepted risk dancers assume in the era of the smart phone. In 2013, the Lusty Lady closed for good, likely a victim of a sex club monopoly in the city.[19] The landlord, owner of most of the other strip clubs in the city, refused to renew the Lusty Lady's lease.[20] Many grieved when it shut its doors for the last time.[21]

Among those I interviewed, Joscelyn, Rachel, Kelly, and Janeen had each become a sex worker activist, and all discussed this work as immensely rewarding. Sex worker activism enabled *thriving*, thus alleviating some of the toll of stripping. For example, if a dancer, like Kelly, can't tell her parents she is dancing, the customers are driving her crazy, the money is drying up, and her sex drive is nonexistent, she can celebrate, appreciate, and derive self-esteem from fighting for sex worker rights. However a dancer's activism manifests—organizing, counseling, creating performance art, writing a magazine, or forming a union—engaging in sex worker activism can be a path to well-being. Of course, as noted, few exotic dancers are sex worker activists. Dancers much more commonly described *one another* as key to their happiness.

"The Nicest, Funniest People I've Ever Met"

Dancer after dancer shared that meeting *other* dancers and making friends with them was an unexpected reward of stripping. "Cool," "wonderful," "funny," "smart," and "supportive" were adjectives dancers often used to describe one another. Darby shared:

> Women's a good part of it. In a club, it's like living in one big soap opera. It's cool. The women in the clubs, they're all good-looking. Half of them bisexual. You have parties. You're close friends. At Lace and Lashes, it was like one big happy family. Everybody liked each other and hung out. It's changed, but everybody that worked there when I first started agrees. We used to go to amusement parks and everything. The women are just cool.

Janeen, who had stopped dancing by the time I interviewed her, and was generally critical of the toll dancing had taken on her, still had only positive things to say about the other dancers:

> I liked being around women all day long, wearing cool costumes, feeling like it's glamorous. It's free. I can come and go as I please. I don't have to be accountable. I don't have to work nine to five. I get to live in this sort of fantasy world. I used to watch *Wonder Woman* as a child, and she lived on Paradise Island. The strip part wasn't Paradise Island, but the women part felt like it. They reminded me of that. They're totally cool and they're wearing *Wonder Woman*–type outfits. I loved that. I miss that so much.

Sandy found it easier to connect with other dancers than people she met outside Red Key. She explained,

> I really liked the dancers. They were all some of the nicest, funniest people I've ever met, and so many of them were so smart. I connected with them much more quickly than I connect with people outside of the club. I had a lot more in common with them. I get along with people just fine, but starting a friendship is usually more difficult than it was in the club. Just getting to listen to them, too; it was nice. And it felt really good to be protected, too, because I remember one day this customer did something that really pissed me off, and Terry ran off on him; and it was really funny. It scared me, and I was on the other side of the club!

Sarah felt that meeting and growing close to other dancers was one of the best parts about working at the Lusty Lady. She enthused:

> We work with the sexiest, smartest, wonderful-est women in the entire universe. I like everybody that works there. I can sit down and chat with anyone. And I'm not the most sociable person. It's great. We have marvelous discussions in the dressing room about a seventeenth-century Flemish painter or philosophy or our favorite dildos, anything ranging from mundane stuff to really deep stuff. And being onstage with them is wonderful. They are so supportive. If somebody tries to motion to another dancer, your friend onstage will come running over and beat them up, if you don't get to them first. It's just really great to be in that atmosphere.

Morgan joked that dancing with other women was one of the few "fringe benefits" her workplace provided. Many customers enjoy watching women dance for and with each other, and will pay for the privilege. Laughing, she said, "Well, you know, 'Hey, it's a dirty job but somebody's got to do it. Oh no, please, twist my arm, don't pay me to sit here and let this girl dance for me. It sucks to be me.' That's a fringe benefit. We don't have a dental plan, but we have that. We don't have worker's comp but we do have that. *We can touch the entertainers*."

I noticed that dancers do "touch the entertainers"—a lot. I observed much physical affection between dancers in strip clubs: touching, hugging, kissing, and snuggling. I heard dancers compliment each other on their outfits, hair, music, and makeup. I watched them tip each other onstage. It is likely that some of dancers' touching and snuggling is a performance for the customers—to create an atmosphere of pleasure, good times, and affection, and thus encourage customers to relax, hang out, have another beer, and spend money. At the same time, it is also likely that some of their affectionate behaviors emerge because they genuinely care about each other, and feel like the other dancers are "family."

"Girls Here, We Stick Together"

I found that dancers, like gay men and lesbians, create "families of choice"[22] when they are rejected by others. Dancers' families of choice largely consist of other dancers and club employees who share common experiences in strip clubs, and social marginalization in the "straight" world. House dancers that work together over a period of time, like the Vixens and Red Key dancers, grow

particularly close. Sociologist Mindy Bradley-Engen, distinguishing between what she defines as social, hustle, and show clubs, finds that dancers who work at "social" clubs are more likely to develop meaningful relationships with one another.[23] Both Red Key and Vixens fit Bradly-Engen's schema of social clubs, ones that encourage stability and mutually respectful relationships. At a social club, new dancers go through a trial period before they are fully welcomed into a group. Given the high turnover among new dancers, more experienced dancers wait a little while before they emotionally invest in newcomers.

Laura said of herself and her co-workers, "We call ourselves the Red Key family." Anna, also a Red Key dancer, echoed Laura, saying,

> We are a very close-knit family. Now, it doesn't happen at all other clubs. I've worked at other clubs before, because I go and do pole competitions; and I'll work there for a couple of days. And when you're the new girl, you're outcast. Once you've been here and your dues have been paid, you can go away, you can have vacation for two weeks; and you're like, "Man, I'm ready to go back. I'm ready to be back at the club. I'm ready to be back with my girls." And you come in, everybody knows you, everybody's looking out for you. You're very tight once you've been here for so long, and that's what makes me comfortable to be here.

Stacy also waxed enthusiastically about the "Red Key family:"

> I love the people that work here! All the employees, they are my family. They are. I've made some great friends here, mostly the dancers. I love them. I love them. When I sit down and talk to people and talk about, "Oh, she's great! We're family here!" I mean, in the dressing room, there are some arguments. There are fights: "She stole my music!" Just dumb, petty things, but we're family. We really are a family here.

The Vixens dancers also called one another "family." I enjoyed visiting with the Vixens day shift dancers as they dressed for their shift on a warm November morning. Carol had taken a quick trip to a local grocery store to pick up food for everyone, generously offering to bring me something too. They explained that they take care of one another: they cook special dishes for each other, and share

costumes, makeup, hair spray, cigarettes, and marijuana. Vixens dancers also characterized one another with insight and compassion—Maureen was the shy one, Susan would take anyone on, Tracy was the most articulate. As they teased their hair and applied makeup, they discussed their relationships with one another:

Tracy: Girls here, we stick together.

Marie: Family.

Tracy: Yeah, it's family.

Marie: We get mad at each other, but we make up.

Tracy: We're like sisters.

Marie: But then the day shift is like a big slumber party.

Tracy: If we argue with one another, it's time out.

Marie: The next day we talk, and it's over.

Bernadette: How do you work it through?

Tracy: We've been around each other for so long.

Carol: We've all been around each other for so long, we couldn't stay mad at each other for too long.

Tracy: You're used to fighting with your sister, right? And automatically the next day you're fine, or sometimes it will last a week and then it's over with. We do pretty much love each other.

Marie: We keep a lot of contact outside of here too.

Bernadette: And you take care of each other if anyone gets upset or hurt or mistreated?

Marie: Yeah.

Carol: Yeah, you have to, because who else is going to?

Susan: We got each other's backs.

Bernadette: So you watch each other while you're out there?

Marie: Always.

Tracy: Always.

Susan: Always.

Bernadette: Do people ever get upset? Do dancers ever just sort of lose it?

Marie: Yeah, I had to quit dancing for a while.

Tracy: I think we've all at one time or another quit dancing for a while because it gets so stressful in your head. And then you feel like you're going nuts because you can't deal with everybody and everything.

Marie: But then you miss everybody and you have to come back.

Maureen, also a Vixens days shift dancer, echoed the others when we spoke privately: "It's like a little family. We stick together. I don't have friends other than people I work with. Once they find out you're a dancer, you feel alienated. When I walk in the room everybody gets real quiet. I just figure they're not really my friends if they're going to do that. I shouldn't even waste my time. I get mad once in a while. I think it's discrimination 'cause you really don't even know me. Like a book, you got to open it." The Vixens and Red Key dancers explicitly claimed one another as "family." The shared stigma they all endure outside the club increased the desire, and need, for some to bond closely with one another. Many also felt the support they provided one another outweighed petty battles or spiteful moments. At the same time, they did acknowledge that conflicts erupt among them. Families feud as well as defend.

At the same time, some dancers never connect well with their co-workers. For example, Phoebe felt she had little in common with the other dancers, Danielle was bullied by dancers at two clubs, and Diana preferred to keep everyone at a distance. Also, as I explored last chapter, dancers sometimes construct themselves as more virtuous, smarter, or psychologically healthier than *other* dancers to manage stripper stigma. However, even when dancers engaged in potentially conflictual "othering," it seldom dismantled their *immediate* support systems. Usually, the dancers characterized as "bad" and as "making it worse for the rest of us" were not sharing the same shift. I explored these co-worker dynamics with Anna, who had described the Red Key day shift dancers as "family," and then qualified her comment with "it can be cutthroat on the floor." She continued:

If I have the opportunity to make ten dollars more than you do, if I can run out there real quick before you get out there, I know I can convince him to get a dance from me; and that's ten dollars more in my pocket, and you don't get anything. If I don't give him the opportunity for him to see you, and I go out on stage, run out, and take him to the couch, he has no idea you're even here; so he doesn't know if he would choose you over me.

We were sitting in the VIP room at Red Key discussing this. I had just met and interviewed Polly, Anna's co-worker, also another day shift dancer. Interested if friendship and "family ties" might trump the pull of customer money, I posed the following hypothetical situation to Anna: "Say you and Polly are friends. How often might you think: *Polly hasn't made any money today. I want her to make money. I'm worried she won't be able to pay her rent. 'Polly, you go out first and see if he likes you.' Versus, I'm going to run out ahead of Polly*." Anna responded that she and Polly *were* friends, and in fact, that situation had just happened. They had just shared a customer.

Having Each Other's Back

Like soldiers in a combat situation, dancers need each other for protection when customers are hostile and the club feels toxic. Dancers described a number of ways they "had each other's back." One, they warn each other of grabby, abusive, and hateful customers, as Sabrina explained: "The few times there were sexual assault–type things happening, people stuck their neck out for me because they had been through the same thing and it was a relatable moment. Or if there was a guy that was being nasty or doing something to somebody else, we would all band together, this group mentality of 'We have to protect each other,' because nobody else was really looking out for us." Two, they scold customers mistreating other dancers, and urge management to dismiss them. Sandy described several instances in which a dancer (usually an older, more experienced one) stood up for her or another dancer struggling to handle a difficult customer. Lacy said she demanded that management throw out customers abusing her or other dancers, and they would do so, "no questions asked."

Three, most dancers will comfort a co-worker who is having a rough night. I asked Lacy what happened when a dancer got upset—how did the other dancers respond? What did *she* do when faced with a distraught woman? She explained that dancers offer verbal and emotional support, such as "Yes, he is an asshole, and you don't deserve to be treated like that!" They also physically console one another with hugs and makeovers. Face to face with a crying woman, mascara bleeding, blotchy skin, Lacy's go-to answer was tackling the makeup: "'Let's freshen up your makeup. Let's try some different blues and greens, and let's put on some more mascara,' you know. It depends on the situation. It's always makeup. It's just a matter of 'Here, you want some of my perfume? You want to borrow some of my outfits?' Just making them feel that connection again."

While this response may seem, at first glance, superficial, upon reflection it strikes me as eminently sensible. What *can* one do to help an upset woman, scrubbing at her skin because a customer ejaculated on her, who is tearful and hurting? No one can undo the event, and the seasoned dancer knows, in fact, that this happens all the time. But a compassionate co-worker can fuss over and soothe the agitated dancer by sitting her down, gently fixing her makeup, listening to her vent, readying her for a fresh start. It is a tangible response that may help, at least a little, make the distressed dancer feel human and cared for. As I have illustrated, strip clubs can be precarious environments. The mix of cash, nudity, and alcohol when coupled with rejection and abuse is "very stressful in your head," as Tracy observed. Dancers have each other's back—they fix makeup, give pep talks, encourage venting, intervene with management, reprimand customers, share possessions, and tip one another on stage. Having each other's back enhances well-being in two ways: it feels good to be supported and it feels even better to give support to others. This finding is an explicitly feminist dimension of dancing that warrants further exploration as it shifts the focus of analysis from stereotyped conceptions about dancers' competitiveness to evidence of cooperation.

The Hidden Transcript

Researchers have found that cultural practices highlighting female purity and pollution that isolate women—in the menstrual hut, the convent, the prison, the harem, and the *topless bar*—can deepen women's connections with each another. For example, anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo observed that "the very symbolic and social conceptions that appear to set women apart and to circumscribe their activities may be used by women as a basis for female solidarity and worth."[24] Anthropologist James C. Scott theorized that segregating minority group members can facilitate a "hidden transcript"—an in-group discussion of their shared experiences of oppression—provided two conditions occur: one, members are in a sequestered social site free of surveillance, and two, dominators rarely enter the space.[25] Strip club dressing rooms meet these conditions as John, a former strip club owner confirmed. He perceived the dressing room as the *dancers*' space. He said, "I didn't spend a lot of time there, and I didn't like the males spending time in the dressing room. I told them that's a place for them to get away from people. I told them, 'You go back there and make sure nothing's being done wrong or illegal, but don't sit back there and hang out.'" Alone for long periods with only one another for company, exotic

dancers find in the dressing room some space and privacy to digest their experiences with like-minded others, nurture friendships, critique their oppressors, and raise their consciousness.

The more one's peers encourage critical discussion of social inequality, the easier it is to see inequality when it happens, and to *externalize* it. For example, it is psychologically healthier for a dancer denied housing, like Maureen, to understand it as "discrimination," and not something she deserves because only bad women work in strip clubs. Dancers' daily activities—exchanging information about customers while they apply makeup, soothing a co-worker crying over a nasty insult, bringing lunch to a woman whose boyfriend dumped her, being naked and vulnerable and mistreated *together*—create possibilities for such critical reflection. At the same time, while dancers' experiences of domination and coercion are periodically intense and extreme, just experiencing abuse and domination will not, by itself, transform one into a feminist or inspire social justice work. Enduring oppression can raise awareness, but it can also worsen feelings of resignation and deepen internalized oppression. Still, unlike, for example, victims of intimate partner violence, exotic dancers more easily access the hidden transcript: they share a private, communal place where they can critique injustices with like-minded and supportive others.

Morgan, who transitioned out of stripping into medical school, confided that she continues to feel a far stronger identification with exotic dancers—whom she frequently called "my people" in our interview—than she does with her fellow medical students. Morgan said, "I have never met a dancer who was reasonably intelligent who did not have a social conscience." Unfortunately, she could not make the same claim about her fellow medical students. This is unsurprising given that it is more common, and certainly far easier, for members of marginalized groups to recognize their own experiences of oppression than it is for members of the majority to perceive their own privilege.[26] As *Dr*. Morgan explained, "The lessons and values I learned working as a dancer inform my understanding of medical ethics and guide my role as a patient advocate every day. Seeing past stereotypes and assumptions to the human before me allows me to practice medicine in a compassionate manner even in difficult cases, and serves to enhance the nuances of ethical clinical research."

In this chapter, I have explored elements of exotic dancing that encourage thriving and individual alignment—opening oneself to new romantic possibilities, fighting for worker's rights, developing a critical consciousness, and becoming "family" with fellow dancers. These will not mitigate all the effects of becoming a social outcast or the overall toll of stripping, but they can

help a woman maintain her equanimity—for a time. Ultimately though, stripping is not a lifelong career. Dancers eventually age out, if the Möbius strip and toll of stripping do not propel them into other employment sooner. In the final chapter, I explore pathways out of stripping.

7

Exiting Stripping

Most of the women you've met in these pages experienced at least a temporary alignment with elements of stripping: they enjoyed parts of the work, made friends, had new experiences, ventured out of their comfort zones, and made stunning amounts of cash. Like Kelly explained, exotic dance exposed many to an unconventional dimension of life experience, and that was in itself *interesting*. Over time though, the newness of the strip club world fades, and what was once glamorous becomes normal. Then, the fledgling dancer, like Polly, has a really bad experience and her alignment with the work wavers. Polly had only been dancing for a couple of months when a customer groped her during a private dance:

> I've had bad dances, but this one was bad in the sense that he wanted to kiss me, on my body. He kept leaning forward and kissing me. I kept trying to get one of the board guys to come over and watch. But I couldn't find anyone, and I already felt powerless before that dance. I already felt very scared to be alone. Even if it's just in the booth it's still in an enclosed space. They can't really see you. So when he started doing that, I didn't know what to do. It wasn't rape, but it was the closest that I've ever been to that sort of thing. I went into the back and I completely rubbed down. I could not go back on stage. I couldn't go out for an hour and a half.

Visibly shaken, and traumatized, Polly retreated to the dressing room and the company of other dancers who offered more bracing than comforting support. When I asked how the other dancers responded, Polly said, "Well, everyone was kind of like, 'Why are you so upset? It happens all the time.' One of the dancers, Tina, she said, 'I understand. The first time that happened to me, I was the same way.' She told me, 'I'm not trying to be rude, but it is going to happen a lot. I do understand why you're upset. You just need to get in and get out.' All of the older dancers tell me that." About half of the women I spoke with described having "get in, make your money, and get out" conversations with other dancers. For example, Stacy said that her first general manager encouraged dancers to go

to school and prepare for the future, “She would tell us at every dancer meeting, ‘Look, you’re young and beautiful right now, but this is not going to last forever. Go to school. If you’re in school, you bring me papers. Bring me your schedule. We will work something out. We will do something.’”

Yet while the majority of women described these conversations, and I expect that, if asked, *everyone* would agree that getting in, making money, planning, and getting out of stripping quickly is a wise pathway, few did so. As previously explored, the money, the alcohol and drugs, and the stigma interacted to make exiting difficult. Further, the longer women danced, the more they tended to feel ill-equipped for other kinds of work. They felt “trapped.” Then, once a dancer entered the trapped phase, the more she struggled with a general psychological and physical disintegration. Some, like April and Kelly, as I will discuss shortly, developed flu-like symptoms. Others intensified their drug and alcohol use, crossed over into prostitution, and their living conditions became more chaotic. In the worst cases, dancers committed suicide, or died by drug overdose. Danielle worked with two women in Utah who committed suicide:

> One in particular was very, very popular. She was in posters, she was in everything. She was the happiest person, the bubbliest person. People would travel to come see her. I mean, she was so positive, never negative, didn’t drink, didn’t do drugs. She had, I think, two wonderful kids. She would tell people how great her life is, and you believed it. Everyone wanted to be like her, because she was so happy and did not care. She didn’t let the customer thing bother her, or guys looking at her, or anything like that. She was so independent. But she killed herself. Things started coming out after she had died. They said that she was talking to her ex-husband on the phone, and she pulled the trigger while she was on the phone with him, but her last words were “I can’t live like this anymore,” and something along the lines of that. I guess behind the facade she was putting up for people, there were a lot of things in her life that weren’t right. No dancer can tell me straight out honestly that they are fully 100 percent happy and can find some kind of good out of a club, because anyone who is exploited on a stage and stared at long enough and talked to in less than appropriate ways cannot like that. Eventually, it weighs on the spirit and the heart and you become dead to it. And obviously, there was something there behind all that, because she took her life for it. And there was another girl the same way that took her life. You could tell she had her bad

days and then the really good days. And then, I've known girls that have acted that way and then eventually come to find out they come to work black and blue.

Janeen shared a particularly disturbing story about her co-worker Misha.

There was this woman named Misha who was a bulimic. She was a tennis player who was ranked number three in the U.S. when she was twelve years old. And then she became a prostitute and a stripper at the Market Street Cinema. She was severely bulimic. When I met her, she was crazy, but she deteriorated even from that. She came up to me while I was sitting on someone's lap, and said, "They're putting drugs in the candy machine, so don't eat any of the Snickers bars." She was just really delusional.

Her mom owned these exercise studios that were really massage parlors in the back. So I think the kids were really raped a lot by the tricks that were there. So she's going on in the dressing room, screaming that her mother raped her, and I go down to the bathroom—and again there are no fucking doors on the thing because someone OD'd, and so we lost our door privileges—and I see these six bottles of coke, three on each side of the toilet. I was staring at them, and she came up behind me and said, "Get out. Get the fuck out!" So I ran upstairs and got the management: "You have to do something; she's totally lost it. This is not appropriate." The manager then said, "That's Tony's problem." Tony was the night manager, and he was having sex with her. So he was like, "That's not my problem." So I go back down and go into the other stall, and I can hear her guzzling soda and vomiting into the toilet, and she was saying, "I hate me! I hate my life! I wish I was dead!" I had been so numb for so long, and I thought, "Here I am in the fucking Cinema, in a bad wig, in a stall with no door, next to a woman who's saying 'I hate my life' and puking. And no one can hear us. No one is even listening. And nobody gave a goddamn!" And for those few minutes I thought, "I am really fucked! This is fucked up! This is not empowering! This isn't good! This is nothing! This is fucked up! This woman is dying, and nobody gives a shit!"

No one ever listened to her. No one ever heard her. She never got any fucking help. She bought five dollars' worth of gasoline, sat in the

> back of a pickup truck, and lit a fucking match to herself and went up in flames and died. Uck. I'm going to get upset. And still, nobody cared. There are a lot of empowering things I could talk about, but I always wind up talking about her because she went up in flames so that she could be heard, and nothing.

As troubling as it is to contemplate even one woman perishing while stripping, these stories were relatively rare. It is more common, as Wes explained, for dancers to finish college and go into teaching or nursing, or to marry a customer who will take care of them. Some fall in love. If Danielle and Janeen narrated the worst-case scenarios, Morgan illustrates the best. Morgan finished her undergraduate degree while she was dancing and then quit exotic dancing to attend medical school. She worked several years as a biomedical researcher at a hospital affiliated with Harvard Medical School and then did a three-year stint as a medical volunteer in a burn center in an East African hospital. She now works in home health in rural Appalachia. Morgan said, "I do not allow the judgmental attitudes of society at large to dictate my beliefs and advocacy and remain as proud of my first career [stripping] as I am of my subsequent achievements as a published scientific author, funded investigator, and dedicated clinician." Key to a woman's success transitioning into a new occupation and/or a new identity is a support network offering both material and emotional resources.[1] For most, exiting stripping entails digesting a series of personal realizations that one is finished with the work

Catalysts of Change

Studies show that hitting bottom, religious conversions, and the desire to care better for one's children are catalysts for making big and long-lasting changes in one's life.[2] Diana, Danielle, and Lacy experienced all of these: they wanted to do better for their children, struggled with escalating drug use, hungered for peace, and found a support system through joining a religious community. Both Danielle and Diana were in unusually bad shape among my interview subjects: drug addicted, suicidal, desperate, and single. For example, when reflecting on her journey, Diana observed, "The harm was in my heart. It drained me emotionally. I got tired of it." Diana was severely depressed and had become a heavy drug user:

> I was at a point where my using was, I knew that people at my job were going to start noticing. I was vomiting at work. I was nodding in and out. And on top of that my daughter was cursing at me, and she barely knew how to talk. And I'm like, "What's going on?" I didn't know how to show anything but anger and sadness, so she was picking that up from me. So I realized, "I don't know how to fix this," and on top of that, I was trying to make myself feel better about using and trying to escape and almost killed myself using. Something happened to me, and I just said, "Look, this is it. I just need to make a change. Otherwise, I'm going to kill myself."

After four days of "pretty much overdose," Diana said, "I went to church." She had heard of a woman, like herself, who had found a path out of the sex industry with the help of a church community and her own spiritual dedication, and this gave Diana hope. At church she learned of a local faith-based ministry, Refuge for Women, that serves women exiting the sex industry. Two weeks later she "gave up everything and went there." Refuge for Women has several stages of housing for participants, and, at that time, allowed women to bring their children with them. Diana and her daughter lived for six months in Refuge housing receiving material, emotional, and spiritual support. She explained:

> Education-wise, I stayed in college, so I can get a good job. It was more so they helped me figure out how to handle my emotions, like the counseling side of it, the uplifting side. I got to be in an environment that I didn't get as a kid. I got to see what it was like. They taught me how to talk to my daughter. They taught me how to play with her. And then on top of that, I got a spiritual relationship out of it. So that's given me a lot of direction. I give them a lot of credit, though, because I don't know who would have helped me.

Danielle also found her way to the Refuge from Chicago via a local strip club ministry in the windy city. Church ministries in strip bars take a variety of forms. Some insistently testify to dancers about the power of Jesus Christ to save them from their sinful ways, and urge them to attend church. Unsurprisingly, the more aggressively outspoken are such ministries, the less effective they are.[3] Conversations centered on sin and hell tend to distress dancers, and in response, club managers will ban such visitors from the clubs. Other ministries simply bring food to dancers, and offer them opportunities to discuss their lives.

Danielle, who had been praying for support, found her way out of stripping through the outreach of a nonjudgmental church group at her biker club. She shared:

> I ended up six months pregnant, and I had realized that I couldn't stop drinking; and my drinking by that point was probably two regular-sized bottles of whiskey. Two bottles a night. A lady by the name of Amelia came into that same club for almost a year, and she came every Thursday night, faithfully. God told her, around the time that I was praying to God, which is just so funny, that she needed to give me the pamphlet to the Refuge. And she argued with Him. She spent two weeks just arguing with God about it. She thought I'd laugh at her, but she just came in and she handed it to me and I said, "yes," and started bawling. So that was the answer that I had been looking for. That's all I wanted. I wanted to be a good mother, because I gave up four kids. And I didn't want to repeat that cycle again. I didn't want to get back on drugs. I didn't want to cover my pain anymore. I was just tired by this point. I was tired of being used. I was tired of being enslaved to the industry, to the clubs, too. The owners, I got tired of not having a choice anymore in anything that I did. I felt like my life as a dancer had become owned in the hands of the clubs.

Danielle credited the Refuge for saving her life. It provided a safe harbor for her to process her experiences, get help for her addiction, and create a new identity. First though, the Refuge is a physical place women can go that offers the security of food, clothing, and a bed. Only after these material needs are met can former sex workers do the psychological and emotional work of recovery.[4]

After the birth of her daughter, Lacy entered a cycle of quitting dancing, needing income, stripping, doing drugs because she was stripping, and starting the pattern over again. During this period, she found a church that welcomed her without judgments, and she "dedicated her life to Christ" in 2006. She described her church as the "only place that I felt peace, and people loved me where I was at. I felt myself after a night of work going up there to talk to the staff. I was hungry for whatever they had." There was no culminating event that pushed Lacy out of stripping. Instead, she slowly became aware that she was unhappy with her life. Lacy explained:

> When my daughter started kindergarten, my mom was finally set, I felt

> like this fog had lifted; and I was seeing things so differently. I was seeing the girls that I had grown up with in the industry, seeing myself in them and it's like a reflection. You're like, "Do I really look like that? Do I really act like that?" And then you see them getting worse and worse and worse, and you know you're getting possibly worse and worse and worse. Or you were there, and you don't want to go back there. And then you have the support that has lined up perfectly. "I'll catch you when you fall." Most people don't follow through with that. They did. They did.

After ten years dancing, Lacy's resume had a big gap in it. When she was ready to stop dancing her church gave her a job for six months, and then put her through certified nursing assistant school. Again, this material support was crucial to her transition.

The Mechanics of Transformation

I have long been fascinated by the process of transformation. What makes us change? When do we decide enough is enough? How do we dissolve the perceptions that constrain us? Researchers who study the nature of transformation distinguish moments of vivid awareness, the "aha" experiences that suddenly change one's worldview, from slow, gradual change that happens incrementally over time.[5] Dancers described experiencing both these kinds of transformations. For example, during an "aha" moment Janeen decided to quit the Cinema. Watching Misha abuse herself in an open bathroom stall at their ratty workplace had disturbed her but did not immediately wake her from a numb state of resignation. Then one day she caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror:

> I left that day. And then I came back the next day and was like, "I'm fine." Nothing happened. Misha disappeared for months, and I just went right back into being numb. It was one of those utterly horrible moments where I looked in the mirror and caught a glimpse of myself, and my wig was not even on straight, it was to the side, and the wig looked just like Rick James. I was like, "Oh my God, I look like Rick fucking James! Not even a good Rick James!" At least his wig was straight. It was a horrible sight to see yourself. And I went, "You know

what, I'm not going to work at the Cinema anymore."

Similarly, Diana identified a specific moment at her locker in a dressing room at Candles when she made the decision to quit stripping. She shared:

> I remember at one point just realizing, I kept saying to myself, "Why am I here? Why do I keep—? Why am I doing this?" And I started to think of all the pain and things in my life that led me there, and I just remember pausing at some point. I was actually at Candles when it happened. I was in my locker, and I stopped and looked around and everything just went mute. I was looking at the girls, and I don't know why I felt bad. For every one of us, like I felt, I just see nothing but pain at that time.

Nothing in particular had caused this moment of clarity, Diana explained. She continued, "I just remember a feeling like I wanted something deeper. Like, I was getting to a point where I was just so broken and so lost that I think that finally I realized we all were." She stopped dancing three months later.

Kelly and April each narrated a process in which it appears their bodies propelled them out of the work. Both explained, with a touch of bewilderment, that they began to feel *physically ill* as they prepared to go to work. Consider the kinds of physical symptoms you have when you dread doing something: a difficult exam, a public talk, negotiating your locker next to the biggest bully in school, confronting someone about a problem, or going to a job you can't stand. Your heart races, stomach clenches, adrenalin pumps. You may feel queasy, anxious, and light-headed, one could say *sick*. April described this: "At the very end, I was taking vacations and being nauseous, and just doubled over in the tub —because you don't want to go—and vomiting and actually getting sick. It's psychological. You actually feel like you're getting the flu on the days you have to work." After months of getting sick before work, coupled with declining wages when she managed to get to work, as her inclination to hustle and dance diminished, April said the "final straw" happened when she ended a shift *owing* the club money. She explained, "The thing that got really bad for me was the amount of money it was costing to dance. Where you have to tip out a whole big bunch of people, if you've not had a good night yourself you'll leave there in the negative. And you've taken your clothes off all night. When that happened, when I left that club and I owed them money, I said, 'I'll never come back again.' And I didn't."

April's exit from stripping illustrates a slow process of re-perception that needed only a small push to finalize her decision. Further, when April decided to quit dancing once and for all, she was finishing up her bachelor's degree and in a long-term committed relationship. A loving partner, a career path, a new identity, no children to support, and no disruption in housing allowed her to abruptly stop stripping.[6] In contrast, Danielle, Diana, and Lacy all lacked this constellation of resources, support network, and life situation.

Kelly had enjoyed working in a peep show in Chicago but began to feel poisoned by stripping when she danced in San Francisco at the Market Street Cinema (the same place Janeen and Misha worked). At the time of our interview, she had stopped lap dancing altogether and was going through a difficult financial transition—she barely supported herself working sixteen hours a week at the Lusty Lady. It was an improvement, though, as she shared that she felt less infected by the clients' "toxic" demands and consequently healthier as she was now shielded from their touch by a glass partition. Kelly's process of leave-taking echoed April's: gradual change culminating in sudden insight, fueled, in her case, by a nightmare:

> What prompted me to get out was that I kept getting sick. I thought I would plan it all out—pay my bills, save up some money, etc.—but I kept getting sick. I was sick for about six months. I swear I had an allergic reaction to my job. Every time I went to work, I would get sick again. It was like the flu. It was an allergy, but it would really knock me down. And, one day, I just woke up and I said, "I'm never going there again." It was the wrong time. I had been sick for six months. I was totally broke. I owed people money. I was two months behind in my bills. It was the worst possible time to quit. It got to the point where it didn't matter. I just couldn't ever go there again. I had this nightmare about work which woke me up in the middle of the night, and it was so clear to me. I haven't regretted it. I'm broke as hell. The Lusty Lady is part-time and pays low. I'm not even covering my basics, but I need my sanity back. I was just burnt from doing it for so long, and I just couldn't do it anymore. I just don't want to be touched anymore. I felt like, energetically, it was toxic.

Kelly explained that she did not particularly like the job at the Lusty Lady, but continued working there through the unionization because she enjoyed doing sex worker activism. She said, "The unionization was really empowering, and I felt

like I could take my politics from college and do something that was actually going to change something. I felt proud of it. I got really involved in organizing and negotiating contracts. So that was good. It helped me deal with the dancing. I stayed at the Lusty pretty much for the union."

Sex worker activism also led Joscelyn out of dancing. Joscelyn stopped stripping partly because she was blacklisted at all the major clubs in San Francisco and partly because she found it increasingly difficult to work under the conditions that she was fighting to change. As she became aware of the ways management mistreated dancers, the work became intolerable. Joscelyn explained:

> It was really hard being an activist, knowing I'd filed these complaints, and then go back into the job the next day and see these conditions right in my face. So towards the end of my employment, it was really difficult for me to go into work. The last month of my employment, I must have called off half of my shows and didn't go in because it was so overwhelming. And even though I was making money, it was hard for me to justify it because I really felt like my integrity was sacrificed.

Joscelyn completed her master's degree in social work and held a leadership role in the Exotic Dancers Alliance. She did grant writing for the EDA and worked with the Health Department and other community organizations to start a clinic for sex workers. Joscelyn transformed from sex worker to sex worker activist.

"It Is So Politicized That I Can't Even Have a Bad Day"

During our interview, Kelly said she'd had few opportunities to reflect on the difficult elements of stripping. In her public role as a sex worker activist, Kelly felt constrained in what she could and could not say about the nitty gritty details of stripping. Kelly feared that revealing any misalignments with exotic dancing might politically empower those she directly opposed—including conservative Christians and some anti–sex work feminists—and inadvertently reinforce the stereotype that all sex workers are victims. In her social circle, it was acceptable to denounce strip club owners and managers, and decry dangerous and exploitative working conditions, but not to discuss the negative repercussions of striping in one's personal life. Doing so, Kelly explained, made one vulnerable to censure from other sex worker activists. She said, "It is so politicized that I

can’t even have a bad day.”

Janeen concurred with Kelly’s assessment, describing sex workers and sex worker activists in San Francisco as unrealistically positive about the experiences of women in the sex industry. Discussing a one-woman performance art piece she created about working in the sex industry, Janeen explained,

> San Francisco is all sex positive, and that’s the backlash of people being so oppressed. But people go to the extreme and think, “Everything’s fine. Everything we do is wonderful here.” No, everything is not wonderful. I’m sorry, but I look at my own experience, and 99 percent of the women I’ve talked to, I see similarities. And you say one thing, and you hear, “Don’t put people in a box.” So even in my show, I left my sexual abuse part out of it—not on purpose; it just never wound up in the show. I did put child abuse in there. Somebody said they thought it was refreshing that I didn’t put sexual abuse in it. And I was like, “What do you care? You’re not even in the sex industry.” So it’s something I’m struggling with. You got to have a balance between Andrea Dworkin and . . . Everything is not okay. So that’s where I am. And that’s how I’m trying to articulate that and get people to hear me.

Steeped in the politically correct culture of San Francisco sexual politics, Janeen did not actively ally herself with Andrea Dworkin or a radical feminist position on sex work, even though her observations and analysis support radical feminist critiques of the sex industry. When completing the original edition of *Stripped*, I believed that the feminist sex wars were winding down, and that radical and sex radical feminists had begun to better appreciate what the other offered. It was obvious to me that sex radical and radical feminists each illuminated a different dimension of sex work, and further, that their insights work best in concert: women require both *freedom from sexism* and *sexual freedom* for full bodily autonomy. For a while, it appeared that the hurt feelings and finger-pointing had stopped, and a body of scholars, including myself, published findings that blended radical and sex radical feminist theories to situate women’s labor in the sex industry.[7]

Internet Porn and Raunch Culture Reignite the Feminist Sex Wars

Feminist in-fighting *seemed* to be dying down when raunch culture and internet pornography enflamed old wounds, created new ones, and, altogether, triggered many of us. For forty years, radical feminists had fought a campaign against pornography, framing it as violence against women, famously arguing, "Pornography is the theory, and rape the practice."[8] At the same time, some female workers in pornography, like Nina Hartley and Candida Royalle, described their work as feminist, and began to make female-centered adult films. In my own case, while I was never a fan of mainstream pornography, believing most of it was sexist and silly, I felt uncomfortable judging anyone's desires and glad that some women were making their own films (even if I did not much care for them either). As an expert on the sex industry, I felt this was an adequate state of affairs for the time being, though I hoped to see sexist representations of women in all forms die out due to lack of viewer interest over time.

Because I did not like pornography, I did not often seek it out, even when I felt a nagging responsibility to do so—*I should know about this*, I told myself, *I am supposed to be an expert on this stuff*. Then, in what seemed the blink of an eye, the pornography worsened while the audience for it increased. Anyone with the internet and a search engine could find not only sexually arousing material, but content that increasingly featured representations of men brutally abusing women both verbally and physically. It's especially unfortunate that the emergence of internet pornography intersected with the conservative politics of the George W. Bush administration, which earmarked much federal funding for abstinence-only sex education in public schools.

Meanwhile, as soft-core pornography became a regular facet of mainstream entertainment, internet pornography became more violent and bizarre. In 2007 Robert Jensen published *Getting Off*, a book that documented an increase in strange new sex acts in pornography including "double penetration . . . double vag . . . double anal . . . and ass-to-mouth, known as 'ATM' in the industry."[9] Chyng Sun released the Media Education Foundation documentary *Price of Pleasure* in 2008, which also illustrated this violent trend. I brought Gail Dines, a well-known anti-porn activist, to my campus to give a lecture on it in 2008. Still, while I thought this content was awful and patted myself on the back for making any attempt to keep up with it (when I disliked it so much), it took a student project to raise my awareness about its possible affects on young people. In 2013, a group of young women in my sex industry class decided to make a compilation of contemporary pornography for their class project. They did a Google search of "porn" and "sex," chose videos from the first page of results, purposefully excluded what they called "the worst stuff," but did include pop-up

advertisements of pornographic images that “bombarded them repeatedly.” They cut and compiled eight different videos, interspersed with screen shots of still advertisements, and debuted it to the class the final week of the semester.

It is fair to say the vast majority of the class, including (perhaps especially) myself, was horrified.[10] Not only was it uncomfortable to watch pornography in an educational setting surrounded by students, the videos evidenced an unbelievable amount of violence against women. I had already included a trigger-warning in our syllabus, and reiterated it every time we were to view a potentially disturbing image. The student group continued this practice, encouraging their classmates to avert their eyes, or leave the room if they felt distressed by the material. They included the phone number for the student counseling center at the end of the compilation. Sitting in the back of the classroom, I forced myself to stay in the room while watching a woman endure “facial abuse,” violent oral penetration that brought her to tears and caused her to gag. The students shared that this particular video had been immensely popular, receiving over two hundred thousand likes. Each video had been uniquely wretchedly demeaning to women, and I had gagged myself watching them. I will not share all the details of each scenario here, but it is not difficult to substantiate these claims oneself. Afterward, we were all very kind and careful with one another. It had truly been an educational experience for all of us.

A month later, still processing the video compilation with anyone who would talk to me about it (a Herculean task because pretty much *no one* wants to talk about violent pornography), I found myself on a rooftop bar with sex radical feminist and longtime pornography actor Nina Hartley. My second book, *Pray the Gay Away*, had been a Lambda Literary Awards finalist that year, and I had gone to the awards ceremony held in New York City in June. Nina Hartley had announced and given the Lammy Award to the author of the best bisexual book of the year. Later that evening, at the after party, I sought her opinion on the changes that had taken place in pornography over the last several decades. I shared what I had learned from the pornography compilation my students had made, and inquired about the violent trend they documented. Pleasant and cordial, Hartley described pornography in exactly the same terms, even the same *words*, that she used in a 1997 essay published in the anthology *Whores and Other Feminists*. I had assigned this essay to my sex industry class for ten consecutive years and knew its content well. Beginning to feel frustrated but still polite, I responded that surely *some things* had changed in the past fifteen years, and couldn’t she speak to that? Our conversation became strained. Though both of us strove to be collegial, I felt myself grow tense and emotionally volatile

(both sensitive and angry, which is a bad combination) as she continued to speak in circles: *why couldn't she just admit that the content is more violent*, I wondered?

Hartley was flanked on both sides by supporters watching the exchange, and our conversation began to draw a crowd of restless women. Anna, my wife, paced behind me, urging me to walk away. When I used the phrase "degrading to women" to describe the content of the material featured in the student project, I found myself labeled a radical feminist, attacked, and dismissed. The woman standing next to Hartley said, "I like being degraded and I am glad there is pornography out there like that." Another woman comforted me, saying she was sure I "could find something I liked if I tried hard enough."[11] All the nearby women became agitated, and I let Anna drag me away before the interaction could blossom into a full-blown conflict. "Like I need help finding erotica that pleases me," I huffed at Anna as we made our way to the bar to get a much-needed refill. Later, I marveled at how quickly the exchange grew emotional. I share the details of this encounter because I believe it illustrates some of the emotional dynamics of feminist conflicts, especially how painful it is to be out of alignment with other women.

Five months later it happened again, except this time I was only a spectator. I attended a panel on pornography at the annual National Women's Studies Association Conference in November, held that year in Cincinnati. Gail Dines was presenting, along with two other panelists. The room was packed, the energy high before the presentations even began. All three of the papers critiqued contemporary pornography, highlighting gruesome, violent, racist trends, seemingly fueled by the voracious appetite of internet viewers for a "new edge." I felt the audience grow increasingly uneasy as one presenter let linger a slide of an image of a woman face down, with a speculum in her anus, for what felt like an endless amount of time. Little able to escape the projected image in the room with one's eyes drawn repeatedly to the speaker, I observed audience members shift nervously, and look down and away, expressions of disgust on many faces.

As soon as the panelists finished, the audience erupted in angry questions and accusations, most of which were directed at Dines, almost none of which made any sense to me. For example, a few women charged her with racism, which I thought particularly strange since the topic of her presentation had been on racism in pornography. Others accused her of not citing their work in order to deliberately sabotage their careers, since "citations are very important to junior scholars." The volatile Q & A continued for a full twenty-five minutes, until we

had to leave the room. I had never seen such an emotional display at a conference before and revised my opinion that the sex wars had died down. Lacking a way to express our anger at those responsible for the rampant sexism we endure, frustrated, well-meaning, unappreciated, deeply concerned feminists fight with each other.

The Future of Stripping

Pornography is so depressing and demoralizing to teach in my sex industry course, we are all relieved to turn to stripping. At least exotic dancers are live people with some control over their actions! Dancers are scrappy and witty, and occasionally get to speak for themselves, unlike the teen girl in a gonzo porn video following the direction of a producer feeding an audience suffering from a socially constructed obsession with blow jobs. A dancer can tell a customer to go to hell when he verbally abuses her, rather than encourage him to spew more misogyny, and we all root for her. Considering all the cultural changes influencing exotic dance—raunch culture, internet pornography, hookup culture, online dating, smart phones, and deindustrialization—what is the future of stripping? First, I speculate that digital natives may reshape the stripping industry as they age. Many young people display a reduced interest in face-to-face interactions in favor of texting and communicating on social networking sites.[12] Such a change in communication style along with the ease of accessing digital pornography and the increasing prevalence of hookup apps like Tinder eliminate many reasons to visit a strip club. For a customer more interested in sex than fantasy, who does not enjoy talking with dancers unless the subject is drugs or sex—if he can view pornographic videos or images nearly anywhere at any time, why would he go to a strip club?

Second, in a pornified raunch culture, the actual exotic dancer (not the woman taking pole-dancing classes for fitness, or the girl giving her boyfriend a lap dance at a party) resides at the intersection of a cultural paradox: representations of strippers are everywhere in the media and nowhere in real life, the girls *acting* like strippers are good sluts, but the girls who *are* strippers are bad ones, and, finally, all young women are supposed to be as close to naked as possible most of the time. How do the young women trying to make a living by taking off their clothes compete with young women who do so for free? One way is to do more sex work in the clubs. Silverton dancers now do fully nude dances, allow touching, grind customers to ejaculation, and, more surreptitiously, masturbate customers with a hand, and sometimes perform oral sex, and intercourse. This

blurs the line between exotic dancing and prostitution. Dancers are not doing more sex work because they like it or want to. A combination of financial stress and entitled customers, along with the overall pornification of the culture, push dancers to do more to pay their bills. Put simply, in Silverton, dancers are engaging in more sex work for less money than ten to fifteen years ago. I speculate that the future of exotic dancing may be prostitution.

In spite of an overall deterioration in working conditions in Silverton, women still choose exotic dance when it is their best economic option. I have always felt that my own feminist work is to increase opportunities for women, not remove them, and sometimes a woman's best option is stripping. Feminist activism that focuses concurrently on increasing women's control in the sex industry and providing safe avenues out for those who prefer to do other work is, I believe, the most effective praxis. Finally, the more we collectively fight to reduce economic inequality with institutional initiatives that level the playing field between minority-and majority-group members, such as state-funded, free health care, child care, and higher education, the more we make it possible to shrink women's participation in the sex industry. I hope to see it happen.

Notes

Preface

Silverton, a midsized city in the southeastern United States, is a pseudonym, as are the club and dancer names, except for the Mitchell Brothers Theater and Lusty Lady in San Francisco.

For further exploration of strip club hiring practices from the perspective of an applying dancer, see Stone 2014.

Palfrey and Gasser 2010.

Attwood 2006; Dines 2010; Douglas 2010; Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010; Gill 2007; Gill 2008; Gill 2012; Levy 2005; Oppliger 2008; *Sext Up Kids* 2012; Wesley 2012; APA 2007.

Donaghue, Kurtz, and Whitehead 2011; Gill 2012; Levy 2005.

APA 2007.

Douglas 2010; Gill 2007.

Paul 2005.

Wolf 1991; Levy 2005.

Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010; Gill 2007; Levy 2005.

Barry 1996; Chapkis 1997; Colosi 2010; Davis 2000; Egan, Frank, Johnson 2006; Frank 2007; Nagle 1997; Price-Glynn 2010; Wesley 2012.

Anzaldúa 1987.

Burana 2001, 136.

Introduction

Brandy is a composite character derived from the recorded interviews of many dancers who shared such experiences with me. The Velvet Lounge is a pseudonym for an actual site I researched. For other descriptions of topless bars, see Bradley-Engen 2009; Burana 2001; Colosi 2010; Donewald 2014; Eaves 2002; Egan 2006; Mattson 1995; Price-Glynn 2010; Prus and Irini 1980; Ronai and Ellis 1989; D. Scott 1996.

For more discussion on the barriers sex work researchers face in the field, see Sanders 2006.

In Silverton, there are currently eight strip bars. Of these, four still require female customers to be accompanied by a male escort. One of the clubs that does not require a male escort charges female customers a twenty-dollar cover to the males' five-dollar one. Most of the dancers interviewed who worked in other clubs did note a rise in female customers. However, because Red Key both serves a younger crowd, and charges the same cover to female and male customers, it is possible that it attracts a higher percentage of female customers overall. Since all the other clubs serve alcohol, teen girls face barriers to visiting those establishments.

Hannah Mabry's contributions to this project are also recognized in our co-authored paper "Andro-privilege,

Raunch Culture, and Stripping."

Using a snowball sampling technique, I asked each dancer I interviewed to share with me the names of other dancers who might be interested in talking with me. For the original edition I conducted tape-recorded interviews with thirty-six dancers, four clients, one owner, one bouncer, one DJ, and three partners of dancers. I conducted these interviews, including an impromptu focus group, in the dressing room of Vixens, and another focus group in Risque in Honolulu, from April 1998 through June 2003. Interviews were open-ended and lasted from one to two-and-a-half hours. I interviewed subjects in a place of their choosing, usually their home, my home, or a quiet public space like a park or library.

Prior to our tape-recorded interview each dancer signed a consent form that described the interview process and assured her that she could refuse to answer any question for any reason. Using a semistructured interview guide, most of my questions explored respondents' experiences as exotic dancers. I asked each woman why she started dancing and what she liked and did not like about the experience. I asked the dancers to identify, compare, and evaluate the clubs that employed them, their patrons, and management. I elicited specific examples of good and bad experiences at work and sought their impressions of other dancers. I inquired about their sexual orientations, racial backgrounds, reactions of family and friends to the job, and experiences of social stigma or rejection. I also asked each dancer to describe her routine on a typical day. My goal was to gain a nuanced and detailed picture of the life and world of exotic dancers.

All the subjects' names in this book are pseudonyms, except for Morgan, who requested that I use her real name. Most of my female participants were active dancers during the interview period. The exceptions were a woman who danced twenty years previously, a woman currently working for an escort agency who had danced in the recent past, and a woman who had stopped dancing but used it in her performance art. I also sought out and interviewed three women at the Lusty Lady in San Francisco who had been instrumental in forming the very first exotic dancers' union. The interviews with male clients were easier to arrange. I met two of the men in strip clubs. One has been going to the same bar, Vixens, for twenty-five years. The other worked in several clubs as a DJ.

For the first edition, participants included five African Americans, three mixed Hispanic-Asian Americans, two Native Americans, and twenty-six white women, four of whom were Jewish. The dancers in my sample ranged between twenty and forty-two years of age, with most in their mid-twenties. It was difficult to ascertain the socioeconomic background of the dancers I spoke with. Education attainment in my sample ranged from some high school to undergraduate, graduate, and professional degrees, and income ranged from twenty thousand to sixty thousand dollars a year in Silverton, and even higher in San Francisco and Hawaii. Three dancers I interviewed were working their way through college and hoped to pursue graduate degrees. Twelve dancers had already attained a postsecondary degree, most of these bachelor's degrees. The dancers with more education generally tended to work in the more upscale clubs, in contrast to those with less education, who most often danced in working-class bars. Morgan, a college student studying pre-med at the time of our first interview, preferred to perform in a more working-class environment because she felt it was more honest and less pretentious. Or, as she put it, "It's all boobs and beer no matter how you dress it up."

Interview subjects for this edition include twenty-five current and former employees, including twenty-two dancers, three managers, one owner, and a DJ. (These numbers total more than twenty-five as some individual interview subjects worked at more than one job in strip clubs.) Interview questions explored how participants became strip club employees, the pros and cons of the job, their experiences with other clubs, their thoughts about male and female customers and generational differences in customers, their perceptions of the dancers, how changes in the economy influence customer spending and the work climate, their observations about cell phone usage, how they believe it affects them to work in a strip club, and what they would like the public to know about exotic dancers. I asked these questions both during audio-taped interviews and in many informal, untaped conversations with dancers as I sat with them in the clubs.

Ages of interview subjects ranged from eighteen to forty-eight. Nine of the dancers were twenty-one or

younger. Such a young sample is a consequence of conducting much of the research at an eighteen-and-older club that employs and generally serves younger people. Among the women interviewed, time spent working in strip bars ranged from four months to fourteen years. Efforts were made to interview employees with some longevity in the industry. Thirteen interview subjects had worked for more than five years, five had worked one to three years, and seven worked less than one year in strip bars. Twenty of the interview subjects were white, and five identified as mixed-race or biracial. Overall, educational attainment was low. Seven had some college, only one had a B.A., and the remainder had high school diplomas, GEDs, or neither. Younger, undereducated women are oversampled in this data set.

These interviews occurred in the VIP room of Red Key, and a conference room at Pearls. The staff turned down the music and turned up the lights for us to facilitate the process. The drawbacks to interviewing employees at their workplace are that sometimes interviews are interrupted by work matters, and the time feels more pressured.

Carol Leigh (also known as the Scarlot Harlot) created the term "sex work" in 1978 to highlight the work element of the labor.

For further discussion of "students who strip," see Trautner and Collett 2010. In particular, the authors found that the "student" identity shielded dancers from some of the stigma of the work.

This category corresponds to a model identified by Sweet and Tewksbury 2000a.

This group, especially, supports Christine Overall's analysis that what is bad for women about prostitution arises not so much from the sexual acts themselves as from the lack of other economic opportunities in a capitalist patriarchal system (Overall 1992).

Heineman, MacFarlane, and Brents 2012; "Strip Club Statistics," *Statistic Brain*, October 17, 2014, www.statisticbrain.com.

Dines 2010; Heineman, MacFarlane, and Brents 2012.

Schlosser 2003, 283.

Karen Hawkins, "More Women Needing Cash Go from Jobless to Topless," *MSNBC*, March 22, 2009, www.msnbc.msn.com.

In this study, I focused exclusively on strip bars in the United States, largely because an international comparative analysis of exotic dancers was beyond my budget. For insights into the experiences of global sex workers, see Chapkis 1997; Colosi 2010; Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Farley 2003; Hoang 2015; Hoang and Parreñas 2014; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Kempadoo 2004; Parreñas 2011; Sanders 2013; Thorbeck and Pattanaik 2002; Weitzer 2000, 2012.

For more findings on how the performance of gender differs in strip clubs by class, see Trautner 2005.

Ritzer 2000; Hausbeck and Brents 2002.

Dines 2010.

For an exploration of how business laws regulating strip clubs vary, and how these variations affect dancers, see Jackson 2011.

Regulations governing strip club processes vary widely by state, by city, and by individual club within a specific city. For example, Red Key and Pearls, both observational sites in Silverton, have different rules about customer/dancer contact, and different payouts expected of the dancers. Additionally, rules within a single club may change over time. As I was conducting research at Red Key, the club relaxed its no-touching policy to compete with the other clubs. Further, the degree to which a particular club complies with city regulations will also vary. To illustrate, Silverton has a citywide ban on smoking in enclosed public spaces, yet customers and employees in most Silverton strip clubs openly smoke inside. It is less expensive for a club like Pearls to pay city fines than lose customers who want to smoke. Thus, not only can one not generalize from the findings of qualitative data to a general population, when researching strip bars, one cannot generalize even from one club to another in a single city. At the same time, the data I gathered

has some longitudinal validity. I can compare the thoughts and experiences of employees recently interviewed with those researched from 1998 to 2003.

In areas that do not allow private dances, like Honolulu and Utah, customers tip heavily during public dances.

Frank 2002; Frank 2006.

Pheterson 1989.

The April 1982 Barnard conference titled “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” marked the eruption of the sex wars.

Dines 2010; Dworkin 1980.

Chapkis 1997, 20.

Hanna 2005.

Chapkis 1997; Vance 1984.

Barton 2002; Barton 2015.

Chancer 1998.

Barton 2015.

For a more developed discussion of the feminist sex wars, see Barton 2015.

Brooks 1997; Hartley 1997; M. Johnson 1999; Nagle 1997; Queen 1997.

For a book-length exploration of the history of sex worker activism in the United States, see Chateauvert 2013.

For an article-length discussion on the Möbius strip, see Barton 2002. I am greatly indebted to Professor Ellen Rosenman for the Möbius strip metaphor.

Valdes 1996, 162.

Rich 1980.

Fahs 2011; Levy 2005; Schilt and Westbrook 2009.

Barton 2012.

Hlavka 2014; Orenstein 2016; Sales 2016; Tanenbaum 2015.

Chapter 1. Becoming a Stripper

Brooks 1997; Funari 1997; Langley 1997; Lewin 1984; Mattson 1995; Sweet and Tewksbury 2000b.

Ronai and Ellis 1989.

Thompson and Harred 1992.

"What Is Human Trafficking?," *Homeland Security*, www.dhs.gov.

Farr 2005.

The TVPA requires the State Department to produce an annual report measuring countries' anti-trafficking efforts. Countries are classified in three tiers. Tier 1 countries are fully observant with U.S. anti-trafficking policies, Tier 2 countries do not wholly comply but are making efforts to do so, and Tier 3 countries are noncompliant. A country's tier ranking affects its eligibility for certain kinds of assistance. This is then a powerful motivator for a government like Cambodia's, for example, to enact anti-trafficking policies that improve its tier ranking. The application of U.S.-driven trafficking laws in developing countries frequently results in miscarriages of justice when corrupt police and legal authorities are responsible for enforcement. In his study *Human Trafficking in Cambodia* (2014), Chenda Keo found that 88 percent of those convicted (and many wrongfully so) of trafficking were women. In addition to those unjustly charged, others were arrested for prostitution, and of those whose actions fit the definition of trafficking (for example, one case study Keo includes is of a woman who agreed to take a small child to a neighboring country for a small fee), most did not realize they had committed a criminal act.

Keo demonstrates that applying a Western anti-trafficking agenda that little fits the history, economics, and culture of the Cambodian nation-state results in a miscarriage of justice. He explains that a combination of global forces—ill-fitting Western laws—national forces—a corrupt criminal justice system—and individual push/pull factors create a "terrible paradox" (204). Anti-trafficking legislation designed to protect human rights, in particular those of women and children, is actually harming Cambodian women and children. Because women typically have fewer economic resources, they are less able to pay the bribes extorted by law officials. And, when women are incarcerated, their children suffer. Keo found that the Cambodian criminal justice system unequally penalizes the poorest, most desperate, most vulnerable, and most uninformed Cambodians.

Hoang and Parreñas 2014; Lerum 2014.

For a critique of this, see Kempadoo and Doezema 1998.

Agustín 2007.

Mary Emily O'Hara, "Strip Club Owners Are Being Trained to Hand Over Trafficking Victims to Authorities," *Vice News*, October 16, 2014, https://news.vice.com.

Frank 2002, 2.

For a discussion of sex workers' sexual victimization, see Barry 1996; Dines 2010; Dworkin 1997; Farley 2003; Wesley 2002; Wesley 2012. For a discussion of sex workers' control over their choices, see Chapkis 1997; Dudash 1997; Frank 2002; Leigh 2004.

For an excellent analysis of how the stigma of "slut" brands a young girl, causing devastating harm, see Tanenbaum 2000; Tanenbaum 2015.

Lindy and Wilson 1994, 62.

Chapter 2. Dancing on the Möbius Strip

McGhan 2003, 287.

Ibid., 288.

It is important to note that Sarah started work at the Lusty Lady after the dancers successfully unionized. Prior to the union, the Lusty Lady had what one called a “draconian sick policy.”

Sloan and Wahab 2004.

Maslow 1970.

Elkins *et al.* 1988, 10.

Harner 1980.

Csikszentmihalyi 1990.

For further analysis of “spiritual stripping,” see Barton and Hardesty 2010.

Hochschild 1983, 7. The emotional work that dancers do might also be framed with the concept of “professional intimacy” (Ruchti 2012, 10–12). In her ethnographic study of nursing, Ruchti blends insights from the literatures of emotional labor, body labor and paid intimacy to illustrate how nurses do professional intimacy. Ruchti writes, “I define professional intimacy as the set of intimate exchanges among nurses, patients, and family members through which the nurse must balance the patient’s emotional and physical needs in a turbulent work environment” (11). Dancers also have intimate exchanges with and balance clients’ emotional and physical needs in a turbulent work space.

Hochschild 1983.

Chapter 3. The Toll

J. Johnson 2002. Jennifer Johnson noted this among her working-class subjects in her book *Getting By on the Minimum*. Johnson analyzes the way working in unskilled jobs shaped the expectations of the working-class women she interviewed. She wrote, “Women in unskilled jobs occupied a distinctive work world with distinctive conditions; they had not just a little less autonomy, but a lot less, not just a little less pay, but a lot less. And many of these same women had also occupied a distinctive world outside the workplace, a world in which money was scarce, conditions were hard, and jobs offered few rewards. They were offered a minuscule fraction of the monetary and nonmonetary rewards available to middle-class women, but by the time they had entered the workplace, this was what they had learned to expect” (64).

Collins 2000; de Beauvoir 1952; Pharr 1996; S. Johnson 1987; Smith 1998.

Schor 1999.

Thompson 2003, 331.

Bordo 1993; Bordo 1997; Kilbourne 1999; Wolf 1991; Wolf 1997.

Gilbert 2006; Lyubomirsky and Ross 1997; Lyubomirsky 2013; Schwartz 2004.

Bordo 1993; Bordo 1997; *Dreamworlds 3*; Kilbourne 1999; *Killing Us Softly 4* 2010; Orenstein 2016; Sales 2016; Tanenbaum 2015; Wolf 1991; Wolf 1997.

Sociologist Jennifer Wesley observed this phenomenon among her subjects. She described a continual “upping the ante” of stripping income as her informants made moment-to-moment decisions about where to draw their boundaries (Wesley 2003b).

For a detailed autobiographical exploration of the toll stripping takes on partnerships, see Lewin 1984.

Goffman 1963, 4.

Chancer 1993.

Pharr 1996, 28.

Trautner and Collett 2010.

Barton 2012, 88.

For a similar analysis of internalized stigma, see Bell and Sloan 1998.

For other illustrations of first-person narratives that describe the author’s experience of the toll of the sex industry, see Burana 2001; Donewald 2014; Funari 1997; Lewin 1984; Mattson 1995; Moran 2013.

Chapter 4. Raunch Culture, Androsexism, and Stripping

APA 2007; Attwood 2006; Attwood 2009; Dines 2010; Douglas 2010; Evans, Riley, and Shankar 2010; Gill 2007; Gill 2008; Gill 2009; Gill 2012; Levy 2005; McNair 2002: *Sext Up Kids* 2012; Tanenbaum 2015; Wesley 2012.

Douglas 2010.

Wolf 1991.

For a detailed description and analysis of Western media texts through the 1990s and 2000s, please see Douglas 2010.

In 2004, Pollet and Hurwitz published an article exploring a new trend of stripper-inspired consumer habits: girls and women exercising to stripper workout videos, buying thongs, and installing poles in their homes to practice on.

Douglas 2010, 182.

Saini 2013.

APA 2007; Dines 2010; Douglas 2010; Gill 2012; Levy 2005; Paul 2005.

Bishop 2012.

Attwood 2010, 743.

Bishop 2012; Lamb and Peterson 2012; Lerum and Dworkin 2009.

Overall 1992, 708.

Gill 2007; Herzig 2015.

In 2010 at least one-quarter of all women aged eighteen to sixty-eight "had completely removed their genital hair within the past month" (Herzig 2015, 135).

Levy 2005.

Dines 2010, 105.

Mulvey (1975) used psychoanalytic and feminist theory to demonstrate that audiences perceive many films through the eyes of men, in other words, the "male gaze." The male gaze includes both visual and content elements. Visually, the camera will linger on sexualized parts of a woman's body, sometimes panning her body up and down. When a woman appears in a narrative, she freezes the moment in erotic spectacle. In terms of content, under a male gaze women are secondary characters serving as a catalyst for the hero's transformation not her own. Mulvey theorized that the female presence in most films is passive and eroticized. The heroine does not act with the agency of the hero. The power of the male gaze comes from knowing without being known, seeing without being seen, invulnerability watching vulnerability—a social construction that defines knowing and seeing and invulnerability as the exclusive right of men.

Amy Shields Dobson also explores a contemporary androsexist trend as "laddishness," writing, "A certain kind of 'laddishness' has then perhaps become a crucial, even compulsory, part of the performance of post-feminist 'new femininity.'" Dobson argues that performative shameless laddish behavior by women "may be one of the few options available to young women in the face of intense social and cultural scrutinizing, and often sexually objectifying gazes" (Dobson 2014, 144, citing McRobbie 2008). In other words, acting like a lad or dude is one of the few forms of resistance available to women in raunch culture. While I agree that many young women may perceive their own laddish performances as pleasurable at times, and likely preferable, especially in comparison to embodying the plucked, pornified, feminine perfection represented in the media, I think adopting the status of dude or lad perpetuates a patriarchal hierarchy that places the

feminine below the masculine.

For further data and discussion on dancers' strategies for approaching and avoiding female customers, see Wosick-Correa and Joseph 2008.

Levy 2005.

Barry 1984; Barry 1996; Jeffreys 1997; Moran 2013. Feminist philosopher Lori Watson also explores the argument that "sex work is not work" like other work because those who do sex work do not have the following basic work protections: worker safety, protection from sexual harassment, and full civil rights (Watson 2014).

Chapkis 1997, 150.

Kassia Wosick-Correa and Laura Joseph found that female customers were likely to purchase only one private dance and stop tipping after this. Dancers also shared that they were less likely to try and con female customers because they believed women would not buy the hustle, i.e., "Hey, honey, you're so sexy, let's spend a half hour in the champagne room." The most profitable female customers are those accompanied by a man willing to spend a lot of money (Wosick-Correa and Joseph 2008).

Psychologists find that people also recall unlikely experiences more than common ones. Daniel Gilbert writes, "The fact that the *least likely experience* is often the *most likely memory* can wreak havoc with our ability to predict future experiences" (Gilbert 2006, 220).

Pharr 1996; Schwalbe 2008.

In *I Am Not a Slut*, Leora Tanenbaum argues that girls call other girls sluts partly to protect their own reputations (Tanenbaum 2015).

Bridges *et al.* 2010; Dines 2010; Hardy 2008; Jensen 2007; Maddison 2009; *Price of Pleasure* 2008.

I observe that discussing the content of contemporary internet pornography makes many people uncomfortable. I have found that people will joke about porn, but rarely discuss the violent turn it has taken. Many are simply unaware of the content, and instead have a vague 1970s idea of it, e.g., a bored housewife gets together with a sexy plumber. Also, many people are not interested in learning the specific acts that take place in gonzo porn because they consider pornography use private and/or too vulgar to discuss. Some who *are* familiar with the content see it through the lens of their own experience. For example, during one conversation I had with a woman about contemporary pornography she said, "I'm glad there are images of women being degraded in porn because that turns me on." I will discuss the struggle to talk about pornography more in the final chapter.

Further, pornography researchers and media analysts argue that people become numb to hyper-sexualized imagery the more they encounter it. In other words, seeing the same type of image repeatedly lowers arousal. Thus, image producers continually seek a new edge to attract consumers, and most recently that edge is violence. This can be observed in mainstream (*CSI* shows) and cable (HBO's *True Detective and Game of Thrones*) television, movies, and recently, internet pornography (Bridges *et al.* 2010; Dines 2010; Jensen 2007; *Price of Pleasure* 2008).

Wilson 2012.

Bogle 2008; Currier 2013; Freitas 2013; Hamilton and Armstrong 2009; Lovejoy 2012.

England *et al.* 2007; Freitas 2013; Ronen 2010.

Bogle 2008; England *et al.* 2007; Sessions Stepp 2008.

For an exploration of the challenges female researchers face doing sex work research, see Hammond and Kingston 2014. In conducting my work on exotic dancers, I experienced all of the issues they describe: sticky stigma, fears about my personal safety, sexualization, and skepticism about the work, especially doubts that the topic is worthy of scientific study.

Teela Sanders also explores a variety of issues female researchers experience studying sex work. Among other challenges, gathering data in an environment in which one witnesses (and sometimes experiences)

stark illustrations of inequality can take an emotional toll on the researcher (Sanders 2006).

Tanenbaum 2000, xiv.

Chancer 1998.

Vance 1984.

Barton 2002; Barton and Hardesty 2010; Egan, Frank, and Johnson 2006; McGhan 2003.

Attwood 2007; Holland and Attwood 2009; M. Johnson 2002; Press and Tripodi 2014.

To clarify, I equate "uncommitted" sex with men not because I believe this is how most men like to have sex (I make no claim about men's sexual preferences here), but because this is how Western culture defines and valorizes male sexuality (Kimmel 2008).

Levy 2005.

Breines, Crocker, and Garcia 2008; Holland and Attwood 2009.

Hakim 2010.

Barton 2002; Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991.

Ramsey and Hoyt 2014.

In her book *The Tolerance Trap*, Suzanna Danuta Walters theorizes about problems inherent in using "tolerance" to justify marriage equality. Walters argues positioning such social activism in terms of "tolerance" is a watered-down goal that "allows bigotry to stay in place and shores up irrational hatred even as it tries to corral it" (Walters 2014, 10). While discourses of tolerance are rarely used to frame women's participation in male spaces, I believe Walters metaphor is applicable here as I perceive androsexism to be similarly vexing and problematic. In both cases, the dominant group tolerates the inclusion of minority members so long as they conform to the standards created and maintained by majority-group members. Further, both paradigms—the institution of marriage and masculine supremacy—remain unchallenged and intact while hegemonic discourses repeatedly tell minority members that their inclusion is an illustration of progress and equality.

The Gamergate controversy is a chilling example of what can happen when women challenge sexism in a male space. After critiquing the sexism they encountered in video game culture, several women experienced vicious and sustained misogynist attacks, including threats of rape and death threats. See Chris Suellentrop, "Can Video Games Survive? The Disheartening GamerGate Campaign," *New York Times*, October 25, 2014.

Pharr 1996.

Chapter 5. Surviving Stripping

For further discussion of sex workers' drug and alcohol use, especially the functions drugs and alcohol serve, see Chapkis 2000; Forsyth and Deshotels 1997; Forsyth and Deshotels 1998; Epele 2001; Wesley 2003a.

Drugs were also found to be an "integral part of the occupation" by Forsyth and Deshotels 1997, 137.

At the same time, some women who start stripping may already be drug-addicted.

For additional explorations of exotic dancers and boundary setting, see Barton 2007; Murphy 2003; Perrucci 2000; Price 2000; Ronai and Cross 1998; Spivey 2005; Wesley 2003a.

Bordo 1993; MacKinnon 1989; Wolf 1991.

Benard and Schlaffer 1997.

For analyses of informants who create "straw" women against whom they can compare themselves favorably, see Bruckert 2002; Ronai and Cross 1998.

hooks 1994; Ronai and Cross 1998.

Pharr 1996, 35.

For additional discussion of dancer personas, see Burana 2001; Eaves 2002; Perrucci 2000; Pasko 2002.

Perry and Sanchez 1998.

Frank 2002; Frank 2006.

Egan, Frank, and Johnson 2006; Frank 2002; Frank 2006.

Berstein 2007; Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck 2010; Weitzer 2012.

Brents, Jackson, and Hausbeck 2010, 209.

Bernstein 2007, 103.

Frank 2002.

Chapter 6. Sticking Together

Lydia Saad, “The 40-Hour Workweek Is Actually Longer—by Seven Hours,” *Gallup*, August 29, 2014, www.gallup.com.

Seligman 2011, 16.

Social scientists define three dimensions of sexual orientation: attraction or desire, behavior, and identity (Barton 2012). Of these three, attraction is the least under one’s control. Many of us experience frequent attractions for others, sometimes several times a day, that we do not act or dwell upon. Behavior, alternatively, is largely within our control. We can engage in sexual activity with someone whether or not we are attracted to them, as sex workers well illustrate. Finally, identity is what we call ourselves and, by definition then, is our choice, even if it does not align with our attractions or behavior. For example, public health researchers developed the category MSM (men who have sex with men) to classify men who experience attraction for and engage in sexual behavior with men, but who do not identify as gay or bisexual. Some of us experience our orientation fluidly, but for most of us, orientation tends to be fixed, and certainly far more fixed than behavior. Those who consider themselves Kinsey 0s (exclusively heterosexual) or 6s (exclusively homosexual) are unlikely to change their orientation from straight to gay or vice versa no matter how much prayer and counseling they do, or behavioral techniques they try (including lap dances).

For an exploration of bisexual behavior among women igniting same sex desires, see Rupp *et al.* 2014. Here, I am exploring how previously identified heterosexual women discover that they are bisexual. It is also possible that a lesbian-identified woman could decide she was bisexual while stripping, though no one ever discussed this pathway.

Diamond 2009. For further details on studying the sexual orientation of exotic dancers, see Barton 2001.

Of the dancers Tawnya Dudash interviewed, 50 percent identified as lesbian or bisexual as well (Dudash 1997).

‘Estimates of a general queer population are necessarily difficult because of both fear of identification and also because of the lack of any public or private mechanism for enumerating people by their sexual orientation. The work of Kinsey (Kinsey *et al.* 1948, 1953) and subsequent authors (Fay *et al.* 1989; Rogers and Turner 1991) have developed the measure that 10 percent of Western population groups are predominately or exclusively homosexual in their sexual behavior” (Jones 2001). Assessments of bisexuality are equally difficult to make, with estimates ranging from 10 to 40 percent of U.S. citizens engaging in bisexual activity.

For other research on the sexual orientation of sex workers, see McCaghy and Skipper 1969; Pendleton 1997.

Kimmel 2008. Richard Perry and Lisa Sanchez’s 1998 article “Transactions in the Flesh” supports this claim. Their work documents the subordination, coercion, and objectification their informants experienced in the sex industry. In contrast, Michael Uebel argues a strikingly different interpretation of customer actions, likening strip bars to an arena of masculine debasement in which the clients express a form of masculine masochism in their interactions with exotic dancers (Uebel 2004).

I predict that many of the bisexual women who explore and enter into lesbian relationships while working in the sex industry return to heterosexual relationships some time after exiting sex work because of the struggles involved in being in same-sex relationships in a homophobic culture. If this is the case, what my findings demonstrate is not that the sex industry turns women into lesbians, but that it provides a set of factors that encourage lesbians to choose sex work and bisexual women to explore being involved in lesbian

relationships. This would make an interesting longitudinal study.

Burana 2001, 55.

Chateauvert 2013, 13.

Ibid., 16.

Blee 2012; Chateauvert 2013; Currier 2012; Fetner 2008.

As of June 2005, the Exotic Dancers Alliance was no longer meeting. Those searching for the group online will find a page listing links to resources and information for dancers.

Tom Kuntz, "Dancers of a Tawdry World, United: Organized Labor's Red-Light Beacon," *New York Times*, April 20, 1997.

Brooks 1997; Chateauvert 2013; Dudash 1997; Funari 1997; Langley 1997; Queen 1997.

For a discussion of barriers to sex worker unionization, see Gall 2007.

Susan Sward and Bill Wallace, "Porn King Moves into North Beach: Michigan Mogul Starts Stealthy Takeover of Sex Clubs in S.F.," *SF Gate*, August 13, 1997, www.sfgate.com.

Kate Dries, "The Lusty Lady, the Coolest Strip Club Ever, Closes with Fun Funeral," *Jezebel* , September 3, 2013, http://jezebel.com.

Lily Burana, "What It Was Like to Work at the Lusty Lady, a Unionized Strip Club," *Atlantic* , August 31, 2013.

Weston 1991.

Bradley-Engen 2009. According to Bradley-Engen, hustle clubs employ a lot of women and have a high turnover, aggressive sales, a competitive working environment, and more sex acts. Show clubs are higher-end establishments that emphasize the beauty of the entertainers and limit customer/dancer interactions. Finally, social clubs are local bars that welcome customer and dancer loyalty. Earnings are higher at hustle and show clubs, while worker well-being is higher in social clubs. Bradley-Engen developed a classification schema to distinguish between the three types (24). The easiest way for a worker or customer to distinguish one type from another is to inquire about the standard length of employment, and the dancers' earnings.

Rosaldo 1974, 39.

J. Scott 1990, 120.

A. Johnson 2006.

Chapter 7. Exiting Stripping

Oselin 2014.

Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002; Schlitz, Vieten, and Amorok 2007.

The most disturbing example of sin-centered protesting I heard about was a group picketing a pornography convention in Texas. One protestor held a placard that read, “God laughs at your rape.”

Maslow 1954.

Schlitz, Vieten, and Amorok 2007.

April’s story supports the finding that students who strip have an alternate identity that helps them manage the stigma of stripping (Trautner and Collett 2010).

Barton 2002; Chancer 1998; Deshotels and Forsyth 2006; Egan 2004; Frank 2007; Murphy 2003; Pasko 2002.

Morgan 1978, 169.

Jensen 2007, 59.

Not only did we talk about the compilation after we watched it, I also asked them to write about it in their final exam. A content analysis of their responses found that the words and phrases they most commonly used were: disgust/disgusted/disgusting, bad, worse/worst, cry, young/younger, rape/rapes, degrade/degraded/degrading/degradation, it pissed me off/made me angry, enjoy/enjoying/enjoyed (not that they enjoyed it, but questioned how others could).

While I personally support any person finding and using the erotic imagery they prefer, I believe this attitude—“it is good because it turns *me* on”—does not consider the following consequences: the majority of internet porn is violent, young people can access it before they are sexually mature, it substitutes for sex education for those who grow up in abstinent-only environments, and a majority of people are *not* turned on by the degradation of women. Those who defend contemporary pornography may work in the industry and/or are invested in corporate profits and ideological neoliberal discourses about it.

Bauerlein 2011.

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About the Author

Bernadette Barton is Professor of Sociology and Gender Studies at Morehead State University in Morehead, Kentucky. Her books include *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers* and *Pray the Gay Away: The Extraordinary Lives of Bible Belt Gays*.