

Preface

What kind of woman dances naked for money?

The first time I went into a strip bar 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. Hopelessly naive, and a former ballet dancer to boot, I said to Charles, “Oh, dancing, wouldn’t that be fun.” He looked puzzled, and said, “It’s not that kind of dancing, Bernadette.” Then I understood. “Well, I want to go anyway. I’ve never been to one before.” But Charles wasn’t interested. Later that afternoon, when he had left for work, I bravely marched in alone. My first impression was that the place was very dark. Heavy metal music blared from the speakers, a thin scattering of men hunched at the bar, while one customer sat at the stage, a woman gyrating her crotch in his face. One patron asked if I was the next dancer. I fled, feeling vulnerable and afraid. He thought I was the next dancer, and I realized I could have been. I was young and sufficiently attractive. I had even studied dance most of my life—ballet, Pointe, modern, and jazz—so I felt oddly qualified for the job.

The next time I entered a strip bar was in Las Vegas. I was twenty-eight, a graduate student attending an academic conference and exploring future research projects, and I was considering studying exotic dancers. By coincidence, there was a dancer/academic on my panel who agreed to go with me to an all-nude dance bar off the strip. This club was decorated exclusively in shades of dark burgundy. Walking in was like entering a giant vulva. Although I was in researcher mode and avidly entranced with the space, I still felt uncomfortable. I first noticed that the dancers lacked rhythm and grace; they literally could not find the beat. This lack of skill was incredibly distracting. Nor did their acts reflect any trained aesthetic, consisting largely of random gyrations in front of men, interspersed with apathetic meandering around a pole in the middle of the

dance floor. These listless performances were accompanied by faces masked by boredom and contempt. My companion from the conference, however, saw something I had missed. She repeated throughout the evening how nice the place was, how tasteful, how empowering dancing was for women. It seemed important for her to convince me that the club was classy, the dancers powerful women carving out their own fate. As the evening progressed, our communication only deteriorated. She became defensive, and I felt threatened. Clearly our different perceptions of the same environment sprang from our dissimilar life experiences, for she was an exotic dancer and I was not. I wondered then how dancing naked for money changes one's view of strip bars, influences one's perception of how women and men interact, and impacts how one understands the saliency of cultural taboos, especially what is considered "respectable" femininity?

Since then, after meeting, interviewing, and growing close to women who work in strip clubs, I have gradually become more comfortable entering and socializing there. Dancers are individuals whose motivations I well understand. Most are intelligent risk takers, surviving in a world where women have limited economic options. In this world, 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 supplied me with large sums of cash, an attentive audience, and free booze doesn't really sound so bad.

At the same time, however, my research has confirmed rather than disproved my original sense that sex work exacts a high cost from those who engage in it. Outside the club, dancers combat social stigma daily. They avoid discussing their work because, when they do, others react with a mixture of shock, disgust, and salacious curiosity. Dancers have trouble finding housing. They do not easily form or keep friendships or intimate relationships with those who are not dancers or otherwise in the business. Inside the club, dancers cope with many other difficulties: men who assume they are prostitutes or who are abusive in other ways; the ever-present smoke-filled air, bright stage lights, and deafening music; and an environment that encourages excessive drinking and provides access to illegal drugs. Also lost in most personal narratives and academic research on exotic dancing is an exploration of stripping as an economic exchange between dancer and customer. In other words, stripping is work. And, like

all work, sex work requires emotional labor.¹ The emotional labor required of sex workers, moreover, is more demanding than that of individuals in most other professions. The costs of this emotional labor on a dancer's self-esteem, together with the environmental hazards and social stigma, make up what I dub "the toll" of sex work, which I discuss at length in the chapters that follow.

Much of the scholarship and popular discussion of stripping addresses the issues of control, power, and agency that dancers have, or do not have, over their lives.² 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? To my mind, however, the issue of who has "control" or "power" in the strip bar—the man buying a sexual fantasy or the woman delicately extracting a man's entire salary—seems beside the point. After all, depending on one's political orientation or how one defines these slippery terms, different and incompatible pictures emerge. Victim or villain? Slut or sinner? Like most people, exotic dancers are complicated. Simply characterizing them with a one-dimensional label—good or bad, sinner or saint, whore or mother—perpetuates the stereotype and neglects the more subtle nuances of good and bad, exhilarating and devastating, not to mention the mundane, boring, rewarding, funny, ironic, annoying, and downright weird aspects of being a stripper. *Stripped* breaks down this polarized binary of exploitation or empowerment, slut or victim, that frames most academic and feminist work on the sex industry, as well as popular myths about the lives of strippers because the unnatural dichotomy defining stripping as either good *or* bad is simply inadequate to the task of understanding the lives of dancers.

We can only unpack the complexities of stripping by talking with many dancers and letting their narratives drive our understanding. I particularly wanted to know what the women who dance naked think about their jobs. My goal in this book, then, is to slake popular curiosity with an even-handed, multifaceted examination of the current lives of exotic dancers in the United States. I am also motivated by the desire to add to the general library of information about stripping—a little-studied aspect of women's work lives. Unfortunately, as Lily Burana noted in her witty book *Strip City*, "In stripping there is no sense of continuity. Women take their stories with them when they go."³ 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. Although strip

clubs are a burgeoning industry in the United States, now employing more women than at any other time in America's history, we still know little about the women who work in them. And, as you will read in the following pages, the experiences and insights of exotic dancers have much to teach us about women's lives, the cultural construction of sexuality, and what it means to live in a male-dominated society.

Exotic dancing is just beginning to develop a devoted group of sensitive researchers, including Katherine Frank, Wendy Chapkis, Ron Weitzer, Jill Nagle, Lynn Chancer, and Carol Queen, among others.⁴ Even so, there are few collections of stripper narratives, no rigorous "history" of stripping, and no work that systematically explores how, over time, the career of stripping changes the women who dance; in short, little public knowledge about dancers and dancing that is not titillating or condemning exists. Attentive to this gap, *Stripped* explores the ideas and experiences of dancers at *every* stage of their careers in the sex industry—from novice to experienced dancer to ex-dancer. To accomplish this, I examine both women's daily experiences in strip bars—unpacking the emotional vicissitudes of an evening's work—and the ways that dancers' feelings about their labor evolve over time. For when we see popular culture's representations of exotic dancers, in mob movies and crime dramas, or even visit a strip bar on a Saturday night, we glimpse only a snapshot of a woman completely defined by her nudity and her relationship to a brass pole. We have no idea how she ended up on that pole, why she dances, and what she thinks about her work. In *Stripped*, I pull apart the mind-numbing stereotypes of strippers as stupid, sleazy, whore mongering, and drug addicted, you name it. In their place, I reveal unique individuals expressing complex reasons for their labor and how they feel about tackling that pole, depending not only on their personal history and place of employment but how long they have worked as a stripper.

At the center of this book are interviews with exotic dancers themselves—voices missing from much research on the sex industry. In these pages, dancers describe their own journeys into, and sometimes out of, the sex industry. And although each woman is differently located on her journey, the trajectory of entry into, within, and out of stripping shares strikingly similar features for all the exotic dancers interviewed for this book. A dancer's journey from novice to expert to ex-dancer significantly changes the ways that she perceives her sexuality, gender, connections to others, and overall sense of place in a world driven by the engine of capitalism. Stripping forces a woman into what Gloria Anzaldúa dubbed the

“borderlands”—a liminal location between titillating and scandalous, powerful and powerless. For the exotic dancer is both revered and reviled, subject to the worst of men’s behaviors and yet adored by the same men in extremes women rarely experience outside the sex industry. Simply put, the act of taking off one’s clothes for money has a dramatic and life-altering impact on a woman’s life. In *Stripped*, I take you inside the topless bar and into the lives of the women who feign sexual desire for money. In illuminating their experiences, we will uncover not just the *kind* of women who dance naked for money but how that act changes their lives. I hope that, like me, you will find this exciting, even harrowing journey one well worth taking.