

STRIPPING SUBJECTIVITY: DYNAMIC MULTIPLICITY, “COVERT MIMESIS,”
AND REINSCRIPTION/RESISTANCE THROUGH SUBVERSION

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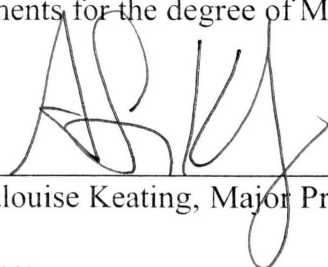
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To the Dean of the Graduate School:

I am submitting herewith a thesis written by Meredith Holland Fortner entitled "Stripping Subjectivity: Dynamic Multiplicity, 'Covert Mimesis,' and Reinscription/Resistance through Subversion." I have examined this thesis for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters with a major in Women's Studies.




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We have read this thesis, and recommend its acceptance:




Dr. Beverly Thompson



Dr. Claire Sahlin, Department Chair

Accepted:



Dean of the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

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This thesis analyzes narratives of female strippers and augments them with personal experience, arguing that strippers, using various strategies, formulate multiply-situated identities which help us to navigate the phallocentric context of the strip club environment. Through use of personae, strippers highlight social constructions of gender roles, forming liminal identities which challenge the cultural tendency towards binary distinctions between either/or categories. The self becomes situational, fostering personal privacy—a key element of autonomy and empowerment. Resistance and empowerment take on new meaning in the club environment, as strippers engage in hidden resistance strategies that are not recognized by mainstream lenses and outside/r researchers; likewise, empowerment is relative to the context, as strippers’ feelings about our work can shift over the course of a night, or a year. Acknowledgment and acceptance of multiple identities, hidden resistance, and the liminal nature of dis/empowerment can enrich feminist theory, and challenge cultural binaric distinctions.

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CHAPTER I

Stripping Subjectivity: Dynamic Multiplicity, “Covert Mimesis,” and Reinscription/Resistance through Subversion

“How can I call myself a feminist and do the work I do?”

--Sarah Katherine Lewis

“The strip club, in many ways, is a safe place to disobey.”

--Katherine Frank

Sex work¹ is a major point of contention within U.S. feminist discourse, eliciting discussion often polarized along lines of dis/empowerment: is sex work empowering *or* disempowering, feminist *or* unfeminist? Divisive discourse in the late 1970s and early 1980s split feminists into many positions pertaining to sex work, but dialogue between two main camps was especially vehement:² “anti-pornography” feminists denounced objectification as a tool of patriarchal oppression, while “sex-positive” feminists stressed possible empowerment within objectification and therefore within sex work itself.³ These “sex wars” formed a trend of polarized discourse that continues today;⁴ however, small canons of consciously feminist, reflexive sex worker/researchers have emerged,

¹ “Sex work” and “sex worker” were coined by Carol Leigh aka Scarlot Harlot during a 1978 feminist conference to inclusively describe work performed by service providers in the sex industry. For a more detailed description of the term’s origin, see Leigh’s “Inventing Sex Work.”

² For the purposes of clearly articulating feminist clash on the issue of sex work, and given my limited space, I will focus on two major positions within feminist discourse. There are of course more than two positions on this issue, and although I address them later, the nuances are explained in great detail in Chapkis’ chapter “The Meaning of Sex” in *Live Sex Acts*.

³ See Barton 587, Hohmann 323.

⁴ See Troster’s “Women’s Conference Still Divided on Sex Work” for a description of a 2008 Montreal conference that featured polarized discourse along these lines.

proliferating narratives of liminality within dis/empowerment throughout every facet of the sex industry.⁵

The strip club context⁶ is especially compelling compared to other facets of the sex industry, providing a semi-public interactive sphere in which to participate and/or observe core issues of objectification and gender roles; enacting a magnified representation of gender/power scripts that pervade our culture (Perrucci, “Transformative Power” 336); “some young researchers find strip clubs the perfect laboratory to literally work through these concerns using their own bodies” (Frank, “Strip Club Research” 507). I am among the specific category of researchers to which Frank refers: I spent a decade fascinated by the strip club context, but shortly before I began official thesis research into strippers’ subjectivities I was driven to seek embodied knowledge on the subject. Compelled by a perceived rift between literature written *by* sex workers and literature written *about* them, and an intense desire for insider knowledge, I began working as a stripper, intent upon interrogating how my feminist subjectivity interacted with the club environment.

⁵ Barton 587.

⁶ By “strip club context” I refer to clubs that feature female dancers and primarily male customers. (While many female-dancer clubs enjoy a rising female customer base, their interactions with the club environment involve a different set of power relations, as the club remains phallogentric but allows female customers to reenact those scripts. To avoid getting sidetracked by this nuanced exception, I am ignoring female customer/dancer interactions in my thesis.) Moreover, the majority of outside research into strip clubs has focused on clubs geared towards male clientele, ignoring female customer/male dancer counterparts. When male strippers are researched, they are viewed through a different lens than female strippers. To my knowledge, only one stripper/researcher, Carol Rambo, has interrogated this discrepancy between research about male and female strippers, which she discusses in “Dancing With Identity” with Rebecca Cross. Note that although some of Rambo’s work has been published under her married (and divorced) name Ronai, she wishes to be cited as Rambo.

My methodology results from viewing my experiences through the lens of others' subjectively-informed theories: using my body as a primary site of knowledge production, I articulate my experiences through those of previous feminist-stripper-researchers. However, my experiential and academic interrogation of strippers' subjectivities quickly encountered pervasive cultural binaries: the Cartesian mind/body split informs denouncements that strippers are "reduced to objects," i.e. objectified, and the self/other divide necessitates a unitary, fixed, and stable "self," thereby delegitimizing the multiply-situated subjectivity often resulting from all forms of sex work. Strippers' narratives force reconsideration of cultural dualisms by presenting embodied theories that confound "either/or" thought structures; liminal experience with dis/empowerment and acknowledgement of multiplicity pervade sex worker discourse, thereby challenging both stigma and stereotype. In this thesis, I draw on my own experience to argue that strippers' reflexive engagement with roles/personae results in a conscious, dynamic, and multiply-situated self that becomes a tool of "covert mimesis."⁷ These acts facilitate transcendence of objectification through excessive performance and enable agentic empowerment in a phallocentric context by allowing strippers to reinscribe and control their expressed selves through strategic resistance.

My thesis will consist of two sections. The first chapter traces the history and content of the feminist sex wars, arguing that the resulting polarization within feminist discourse is due to a focus on dis/empowerment, and fuels feminist sex worker narratives.

⁷ The term "covert mimesis" was coined by Egan in "Fantasy Girl" and is specifically defined on p. 113.

I analyze positionality within feminist stripper literature, emphasizing reflexivity's crucial role in conveying subjective realities of stripping, and describe how polarizations fueled my entry into the industry. I begin to unpack those subjective realities of stripping, focusing on emotional labor, the use of roles/personae, and their development into a multiply-situated identity. The second chapter delves deeper into analysis of multiplicity, explaining how it becomes a tool of covert mimesis, necessitating *conscious acknowledgment of and movement between* selves. This conscious, dynamic multiplicity and resulting covert mimesis fosters privacy, resistance, personal empowerment, and enables increased freedom of sexual expression. Finally, I show how covert mimesis-fueled and autoethnographically-expressed reinscription can expand mainstream conceptions of resistance.

Strip clubs are inherently phallogocentric environments (Egan, "Fantasy Girl" 111); stripping requires direct interaction with customers and thus a great deal of emotional labor⁸ (Bruckert 86): a successful stripper not only provides sexualized entertainment in the form of lap dances, but more importantly maintains a believable performance of a role or persona, indulging clients' whims. In catering to customers' demands by concealing "undesirable" facets of their personalities, strippers alter their expressed selves for profit. Any context that demands continual female capitulation to male

⁸ "Emotional labor" was coined by Arlie Hochschild in *The Managed Heart*, and was mainly specific to flight attendants, but was also explored in relation to other service industry workers. The term was connected to sex work by Wendy Chapkis in *Live Sex Acts*, where emotional labor is defined as a skill whereby sex workers call upon "real" emotions in "faked" work relationships, allowing them to keep certain parts of their selves private while highlighting others for financial gain. In this sense, emotional labor contributes to a sense of a multiply-positioned self (76).

interests may seem to only entrench the phallogentric environment, yet many aspects of the strip club context defy distinct categorizations (Perrucci, “Transformative Power” 333). As I argue in this thesis, feminist stripper ethnographies indicate potential empowerment through multiplicity, as associated with the maintenance of roles/personae. Autoethnography necessitates that a researcher unpack her positionality; thus reflexive engagement with the environment can yield what Carol Rambo calls a “layered account” of how simultaneously occupying the roles of stripper *and* researcher affects one’s subjectivity: multiplicity becomes a source of strength, and “the self produced in this text is emergent from the interaction of these roles” (“Reflexive Self” 105).

Acceptance of multiplicity allows roles/personae to become tools of what Danielle Egan calls “covert mimesis”: strippers excessively perform versions of femininity, knowingly entrenching phallogentric forms, yet simultaneously exposing and utilizing their object status in a form of covert resistance to the male-dominated environment (Egan, “Fantasy Girl” 111). Both self-image and emotions are molded into a stripper’s performance of an alluring and seemingly-available object, and the image presented mimics various mainstream cultural conceptions of femininity. This performance is covertly mimetic because a stripper mimes aspects of traditional femininity, but only she understands how each aspect varies in relation to her subjectivity; covert resistance is invisible because her *actual* subjectivity is unimportant to customers (Egan, “Emotional Consumption” 99); she mirrors what they desire, allowing her to subvert gender norms while seemingly entrenching them. Since claiming

both a feminine *and* feminist identity brings numerous behavioral prescriptions,⁹ covert mimesis within the club context permits traversal of seemingly conflicting roles: a stripper can appear unabashedly sexually aggressive/available while remaining partnered; she can be crass or bubbly but remain intellectual; and she can feign agreeability but remain opinionated.

Building on Egan's term, I argue that covert mimesis fosters movement *between* selves (blurring the "true" and "faked" self and self/other dichotomies) and performances of femininity which empower when viewed through a lens of excess and performance (Johnson, "Pole Work" 150). While any number of the above traits might be part of her own self-image, a stripper chooses what to express, and to whom, thus crafting her own performance of object and sexuality while retaining personal privacy. In this sense, roles and masks can be liberating even while they seem unfeminist on the surface (Perrucci, "Persona and Self" 39), because ironically, the strip club (a seemingly homogenized and repressive environment) can supply more freedom of sexual expression than its participants may enjoy in everyday life (Johnson, "Stripper Bashing" 165).

Everyday empowerment through sexual liberation was a major goal of so-called second wave feminists, but also an epicenter of heated debate: the feminist "sex wars" of the late 1970s and early 1980s engaged issues of objectification, dis/empowerment, performance and sexuality in a way that brought politicized, intense discussion about the de/legitimacy of sex work to the forefront of national discourse. In 1978, Carol Leigh

⁹ See later discussion of Lockford's "feminine appearing feminist" in the following chapter.

attended a San Francisco conference organized by Women Against Violence in Pornography and the Media (WAVPM, formed in response to a 1976 San Francisco conference on violence against women). The 1978 conference featured a march through San Francisco's main sex work district during which protestors repeatedly "embarrassed and harassed the strippers and other sex industry workers in the neighborhood" (Leigh 223), which typifies the divisive strategies used by anti-sex-work feminists during this era. Leigh participated in a conference workshop about prostitution and, noticing its title of "Sex Use Industry," suggested the less-judgmental term "sex work," explaining that prostitutes felt uncomfortable identifying as sex workers in feminist circles for fear of ostracism. Incendiary discourse occurred around the de/legitimacy of sex workers' agency and self-determination, asserting perpetual degradation: members of WAP and WAVPM repeatedly claimed that "most" women in the sex industry were coerced into it (Califia, "Among Us, Against Us" 112; Grussendorf and Leighton 36 and 39); sex workers testified in court hearings as "victims of pornography" to support Andrea Dworkin and Catharine MacKinnon's attempts at banning pornography in several U.S. cities (Califia, "See No Evil" 119). In short, the sex wars represented a spike in public discourse around the de/legitimacy of sex work, potential empowerment therein, and possibility of sex worker agency.

The sex work debate has deep-seated roots in feminist discourse, and critiques of its legitimacy drew upon the suffragists' tenet that identification with sex is an "important obstacle in the recognition of women as civil subjects rather than simply sexual objects"

(Chapkis 11): so-called radical feminists shunned object status by arguing that only mutually-lovingly-expressed sexual practices are legitimate, and or that all heterosexual acts are invariably an expression of male dominance (Chapkis 12), thus delegitimizing the willful objectification, faked arousal, and agreeability strippers perform in their interactions with customers via covert mimesis. Asserting that male sexual domination defines all women as whores, Andrea Dworkin rejects the notion of prostitute-as-sex worker (who negotiates an exchange of sex for money) and instead reduces her to a sex object, redeploying the notion that both “woman” and “whore” are passive conditions; the prostitute thus “becomes the symbol of women’s abject powerlessness under conditions of male objectification and domination; they are simply objects in a marketplace” (Chapkis 19).¹⁰ By equating object status with powerlessness and shunning engagement in a marketplace, Dworkin actively criticizes sex work’s social function, meaning, and impact on gender relations, identifying sex work and object status as things that no feminist should willfully ascribe to.

Others took anti-objectification arguments to another level, singling out the prostitute as “the archetypal sexual slave,” encouraging feminists “to view prostitutes as their enemies, as women who contribute to the oppression of all women because they have allowed themselves to be victimized” (Califia, “When Sex is a Job” 136-7). Still more argue that since stripping is prostitution and most prostitutes were abused as children, sex work is sexual abuse and any self-empowerment therein “is not something

¹⁰ Also see Dworkin 141.

to be celebrated” (Grussendorf and Leighton 38-39, also see Lee 56-57, Manzano 25, 28). MacKinnon uses similarly divisive language when she criticizes Adrienne Rich for having signed the FACT brief (which challenged Dworkin and MacKinnon’s Indianapolis anti-pornography legislation that cited pornography as a central contributing factor to discrimination based on sex): “You say you know what subordination means, unlike the brief you signed. Unlike the brief you signed, you say the pornography is real to you. Yet you side with the status quo, with letting it go on, with doing nothing” (“An Open Letter to Adrienne Rich” 18). In short, while anti-sex work feminist arguments were based in a passionate belief in women’s subjectivity (as opposed to object status) and a desire to rid gender relations of male dominance and violence, these views unfortunately also came loaded with actively divisive language which delegitimized all sex work as a tool of male domination, rejected potential empowerment within the sex industry, and shunned voices to the contrary as being imbibed with “false consciousness.”

From what Chapkis calls a “Radical Feminist” perspective, the sex industry is a social microcosm that is representative of and deploys male domination over women; thus any engagement in sex work is seen as entrenching phallocentrism. In contrast, “Sex Radical feminists” view sex as a “cultural tactic which can be used to both destabilize male power as well as to reinforce it” (29). Refuting Dworkin’s reduction of the prostitute to a passive object to be used by men, pro-sex work feminists view sex workers as making “active use of the existing sexual order” (30). While they operate within a male-dominated environment, strippers actively utilize the structure and power/gender

relations therein both to express a multiply-situated self *and* to profit from it; in this sense, strippers challenge the negative claims against objectification by not only willingly subjecting themselves to it, but also by manipulating their object status towards their own personal goals. Whereas women outside the sex industry often struggle with similar identity issues resulting from social pressure and prescription, inside the strip club (or elsewhere in the industry), women have an opportunity to utilize the often-hostile gender/power relations to their advantage; instead of merely aiming to survive identity constructs with their selves intact, strippers carve out their own niches of subjectivity while garnering unprecedented amounts of money and freedom in the process. The debate around the legitimacy of this niche-carving also calls into question the justifiability of covert mimesis: echoing Audre Lorde's "master's tools" analogy, feminist discourse contends with whether or not sex workers can operate within a phallocentric environment without solely entrenching male domination, and whether their actions therein can potentially be empowering. If one feels that claims of empowerment within sex work are a result of "false consciousness," covert mimesis is also implicated as being the result of a self-deluding, self-defeating, and therefore illegitimate feminist consciousness; however, voices to the contrary emerged that pointed to self-defined and embodied feminist theories of sex work that left room for potential empowerment resulting from engagement with the strip club and other sex work contexts.

Anti-sex-work feminists, skeptics, and those who conduct qualitative research from outside the sex industry often focus on what they describe as sex workers' coping

mechanisms to mitigate the objectifying, degrading and “deviant” nature of their labor, thus entrenching an either/or mindset when addressing dis/empowerment, and subsequently ignoring the descriptions of complex, contradictory, and liminal experiences which continually emerge from sex worker narratives (Lerum 8). Anti-sex-work feminists’ rejection of potential empowerment within sex work was viewed by pro-sex work feminists as an attempt to silence voices of liberation, and thus provoked an onslaught of feminist sex worker narratives. One such work appeared in the 1981 “Sex Issue” of *Heresies*, published in response to the early phases of the sex wars; the issue collected poetry, prose, and art on the theme of sexuality (Hunter 24), including Steph Weene’s “Venus,” which presents a basic articulation of multiplicity and possible empowerment within the strip club’s phallogentric environment. This narrative traces her shift from a polarized, either/or mindset to one of liminality and self-definition; Weene explains her early impressions of the power dynamics she was exposed to through stripping, outlining how her feelings of dis/empowerment changed over time, culminating in an agentic act of resistance and power reclamation via reinscription.

Weene’s assessment of customer motivation and the underlying club power dynamics gradually transcends dichotomous “either/or” thinking and moves into the liminal field of “both/and,” effectively laying the groundwork for redefinitions of power within sex work literature. Initially, Weene divided male clientele into two categories based on their reasons for attending: knowing they’d never possess the women they desired in the club, they came to suffer, *or* they came to dominate, supposedly thinking,

“I’m paying for this, she has to do those dirty things for me” (36). Later, she saw the situation as “less clear-cut,” viewing many customers as feeling simultaneously *both* passive *and* dominant, and some as having “less extreme feelings;” through embodied, temporal knowledge, Weene’s perceptions of customer motivation shifted from polarized to liminal. This emphasis on liminality within dis/empowerment provides groundwork from which future sex-positive feminists would describe power as fluid and multi-directional, an element that changes hands repeatedly during a single shift and over the course of one’s career in the industry.¹¹

This analytical transition from polarizing stripper/customer power relations towards a positive self-definition of empowerment within stripping is a theme Weene replicates as she continues to outline her embodied theory. Writing “Venus” at the height of the sex wars, Weene lacked support from the then-nonexistent sex worker literary canon and experienced cognitive dissonance “because both the conventional, male-dominated outlook and feminist doctrine defined what [she] did as bad.” Knowing that her joyousness and pride as a stripper were positive things, she coins “feminissima” to reclaim “pride in being physically feminine” (37). Additionally, stripping made her conscious of commercial images of female sexuality and allowed her to analyze those images and “enjoy them without feeling perverse or getting trapped” (37). Having nearly succumbed to “phony images of sexuality” by finding herself donning makeup outside the club because she no longer recognized herself without it, Weene learned to “codify

¹¹ See Barton 587; Egan, “Dancing for Dollars” 107, 113-14.

[her] feminine knowledge” so that she “do all the stripper-things and remain [her]self”(37). It took time for Weene to realize that she was engaging a persona when she did “stripper things;” having acknowledged a plurality of self, she could choose when to engage a specific aspect of her identity without feeling like her stripper personae had taken over her subjectivity. By acknowledging and analyzing her personae, Weene reinscribes gender roles with her own meaning, thus overturning the commonly-applied stereotype of the victimized object that taints strippers’ agentic potential within feminist discourse.

Conscious personae-engagement is not the only aspect of subjectivity strippers must be aware of in order to maintain their self-esteem while presenting “faked” versions of their selves. Knowing that club managers and customers saw her sexuality “as a product,” Weene realized that she too had incorporated “this dehumanizing view of women” into her own mindset, since it is “so central to our culture,” yet gained strength through self-definition: “I could integrate and absorb all the cultural constructs of femininity into the positive concept of feminissima, but I could not throw all the garbage away forever” (38). Like Lewis, Weene struggles to reconcile her feminist beliefs with her roles in the club (Lewis 320). By conveying embodied experience, Weene uses real-life language to describe covert mimesis: strippers must first absorb negative aspects of their sex worker subjectivities before they can reflexively analyze and rationalize those personality facets into manageable personae.

An early narrative of stripper empowerment, Weene's piece provides excellent ground from which to base subsequent theories: "Venus" is a rudimentary example of a stripper's literary grappling with issues like multiplicity and covert mimesis, so dated that such terms were not yet being used in feminist sex work discourse. Having had less engagement with fellow stripper ethnographers than is enjoyed today, "Venus" was written before women could identify as strippers in academic work and also maintain legitimacy, and Weene politicizes feminissima in relation to both cultural and feminist anti-sex-work discourse. Therefore, I regard her work as the basis from which future strippers were allowed to share their experiences, and as an example of what had been missing from quantitative analysis of stripping: personal narrative, autoethnography.

Outside research into stripping almost entirely focuses on strippers' justifications of and techniques for mitigating the deviant nature of their occupation and identity, and much of this "deviance literature"¹² fails to analyze positionality (Egan and Frank 300): outside/r¹³ (e.g. non-sex worker) researchers repeatedly fail to interrogate how their

¹² Examples of deviance literature include Barry, *The Prostitution of Sexuality*; Boles and Garbin, "The Choice of Stripping for a Living"; Forsyth and Deshotels, "A Deviant Process: The Sojourn of the Stripper"; Levy, *Female Chauvinist Pigs*; McCaghy and Skipper, "Stripping: Anatomy of a Deviant Life Style"; Salutin, "Stripper Morality"; Thompson and Harred, "Topless Dancers: Managing Stigma in a Deviant Occupation." Deviance literature will be covered further in the 2nd chapter.

¹³ I chose to unify "outside" and "outsider" researchers to emphasize the rigid insider/outsider dichotomy that I believe exists in sex work research and literature. While other applications of the insider/outsider distinction could be arbitrary, and the line is often porous, I believe it necessary to emphasize this boundary in relation to sex work literature. The nature of stigma guarantees the label of "sex worker" (and any number of associated connotations) outlasts one's career in the industry. For this reason, outside researchers will remain outsiders, because they intentionally maintain a safe academic distance from their subject matter and thus avoid stigma. In the case of sex work, embodied knowledge necessitates risk of stigma, and that risk-taking enables insider knowledge which in turn distinguishes insiders from outside/r researchers by allowing them to experience subjective realities and truths of sex work that remain hidden from an outside/r perspective.

position as researcher affects their work and the context in which it operates. By disregarding the power relations affected by their mere *presence* as researcher and thus entrenching the widely-criticized “top-down” method of inquiry (301), many outside/r researchers are preoccupied with arbitrary distinctions like dis/empowerment¹⁴ and become deaf to the liminal experiences of the strippers they study. In contrast, stripper theorists repeatedly argue that “exploitation is more complex than ‘customers exploiting dancers’ or vice versa,” and find it “impossible not to discuss [their] own positionality at length” (307), since their motivations for stripping while collecting data have already been questioned by friends, family, customers, and academic peers. Whereas power dynamics inherent in the researcher/researched divide are ignored in deviance literature, these feminist strippers—embodying both researcher and researched—cannot help but unpack how their seemingly-dual status of stripper/scholar affects their subjectivities and their work, and how both become infused with liminality that goes unnoticed by outside/r researchers.

Two decades after “Venus,” autoethnography is a crucial tool by which sex workers can infiltrate the academy and expand their canon (Egan and Frank 313), and repeated calls are made for more sex workers to become researchers and vice versa (Lerum 33) so as to incorporate their ideas into the ever-expanding fray, pushing individuals on both sides of the stripper/scholar divide to build a bridge. Since studies *by* sex workers often evoke blurriness of power dynamics rarely seen in studies *about* sex

¹⁴ I use the term “dis/empowerment” to refer to the line between empowerment and disempowerment.

workers (Chancer 152-53), this void must be filled: some wonder “how feminist theories of power, sexuality, and the body might change if they were more substantially informed by the embodied knowledge of sex workers” (Egan, Frank and Johnson xiii), based on the belief that “women working *in* stripping should be influential in formulating the questions asked *about* stripping” (xxvi). I had read these calls to action long enough, and so, like many before me, I chose to deploy embodied theory in the phallogentric strip club context, reflexively analyzing my identity’s interaction with the environment’s gender/power dynamics while positioning myself within the theoretical canon from which I derive my feminist ethics.

My academic motivations to work as a stripper were twofold: First, I wanted to transcend polarized literature and seek truths of my *own* experience, and second, I felt that deliberate exposure to the sex work stigma would yield greater understanding of strippers’ subjective experience, and also build the epistemic privilege I felt was crucial to effectively research and write about stripping at the academic/activist level. Like Vicky Funari, “I wanted a way to look beyond what seem like false polarizations within feminist discussions of sex work If I can say there is nothing wrong with sex work, I had damn well better be able to do it” (22). I was fascinated by the strip club context’s gender/power dynamics, but my outsider/researcher status entrenched either/or thinking that clouded my perspective: I had asked too many strippers if they “felt empowered by their work,” hoping they could provide the oversimplified proof I sought, naïvely assuming that they *would* convey such truths to an outsider. I had written too many

decontextualized quotes on disintegrating cocktail napkins, unable to interrogate the roots of these impromptu interviews because they were tainted by the commodified context and the stripper/researcher division. My curiosity ran into a decisive wall between insider and outsider, and I existed at impasse before summoning the courage to bridge that gap. I had to become an insider.

After attending my first sex work conference in 2006, I realized that if I was truly committed to unmasking the fallacy of the stripper stigma, I had to subject *myself* to its consequences before I could feel equipped to speak about its reality. Lesa Lockford, who stripped for a single night in an effort to inject embodied knowledge of sex work into her book, *Performing Femininity*, expresses the shift from outside/r researcher to insider status:

Standing here I am focused on how I am about to walk up the steps to the stage and enter the space where imaginative speculation must give way to embodied experience. . . I experienced this moment as liminal, a moment where my status as a non-stripper and my status as a stripper, or at the very least, a woman who has stripped will shift. (73)

Acutely aware that she was about to undergo an identity transition that could never be undone, Lockford pinpoints the precise moment of shift between outsider and insider as the instant before she takes the stage for the first time. Having read Lockford's book before the fateful day of May 10th, 2006, I smiled to myself as I alighted the stage for my audition, remembering her words and welcoming the shift I had finally decided to

undergo. Ascending those four steps seemed ironically simple compared to the internal conflict I'd wrestled with for five years prior: I'd weighed the consequences, mostly worrying about how my parents would feel, and decided that incorporating "stripper" into my many identity categories was more important than the potential risks—and then all it took was a few shopping trips, a thirty-minute drive, some deep breaths, and four steps.

Once inside the club, I saw no reason to hide my researcher status from the many customers who asked versions of the clichéd question, "What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this?"; however, disclosing one's researcher status carries another set of risks. Katherine Frank best describes the identity niche of stripper/researcher, and the power dynamics therein:

Though my academic interest sheltered me somewhat from stigmatization ("Oh, you're only doing this for the research"), there were times when I faced much of the same stigma as does any woman. . . . My experiences as a sex worker also politicized me in new and different ways. Actively claiming an identity as a sex worker, for example, rather than using my academic privilege to disavow this aspect of my experience became very important to me over time. (*G-Strings and Sympathy* 13)

Frank makes an important point: identifying as a stripper/researcher can highlight aspects of privilege that one may not wish to express. In order to mitigate privilege deployment and embrace multiplicity in my life both inside *and* outside the club, I seek to actively embody *both* stripper *and* researcher, and take every opportunity to express liminality

between these two identity components. When someone asks a question aimed at pigeonholing my identity into *either* one category *or* the other, I describe how various aspects of my personality (e.g. exhibitionist, voyeuristic, hedonistic, money/freedom-hungry) and identity (academic, activist) inform my interest in stripping, thus conveying a both/and subjectivity in as many contexts as possible. As one stripper/researcher I met at that sex work conference cautioned, I am careful “not to hide behind the research.”

Another primary goal of my work is interrogating my roles of stripper/researcher, articulating positionality *around* the blurriness I feel when I analyze my performance of gender roles. Thus, I resonated with the multiplicity expressed by Carol Rambo in “The Reflexive Self Through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Exotic Dancer/Researcher”:

I supposedly have a self that is a whole, neatly divided up into parts or facets. . . . My culture demands I frame each separately from the others regardless of the clashes and overlaps that result from the demands of the roles. The self exists as a process in a constant state of transformation and flux; it is the dialogue between the facets There is no safely isolating this, cordoning it off from the rest of my identity. Having been a dancer/researcher is part of what I am. (107)

Expanding upon the “whole” self, Rambo challenges negative connotations applied to multiplicity by defining facets of subjectivity as not mutually exclusive but interwoven: in contrast to the cultural norm of a fixed/stable/unified self, her self is a *process*, a *dialogue between* facets. Echoing Weene, Rambo describes how her “dancer self” fuses

with her “other selves,” making it “difficult to step out of the role when leaving the bar” (121); she reflexively analyzes her roles before interpreting her identity for an audience: to convey multiplicity, Rambo employs a “layered account” in her writing, making her “experience as a dancer/researcher the object of study” (122). Aiming to “invoke in the reader the emergent experience of ‘being’ and to use many voices to [foster] the understanding that we are all processual, emergent, multivoiced entities” (123), Rambo redeploys her multiply-situated stripper/researcher identity on the page and in the club, challenging audiences across multiple contexts to reconsider the culturally-normative unitary self and embrace the potential emergent and dynamic identity of both/and.

The sex wars’ dialogue around sex work as it relates to issues of objectification, empowerment and multiplicity provoked a deluge of embodied and autoethnographically-articulated narratives of strippers. Listening to narratives of liminality within a very polarized debate around the de/legitimacy of sex work, academic researchers, cultural theorists and other audiences have been exposed to experiences of strippers hidden amongst the margins of feminist discourse, situating specific and personalized voices of multiplicity and empowerment within this often-overlooked subset of feminist theory. Collectively, many of these narratives contain thematic patterns centered on perceived shifts between and within identities and power relations: Weene’s perceptions of gender/power dynamics shift from polarized to “less clear cut” as she wrestles with articulating her non-/stripper selves; Lockford describes a transitional moment between her non-/sex worker statuses; Frank emphasizes the importance of accepting roles of both

stripper *and* researcher; Rambo solidifies those roles into her identity by viewing it as a dialogue between facets of selves; and Egan articulates dynamic multiplicity's power to pick and choose from role performances via covert mimesis. These embodied experiences emerge from multiply-situated selves and represent a decisive departure from the Cartesian-based mind/body split as well as the culturally-mandated fixed/stable identity: the visceral responses that stripping provokes cannot be easily categorized as emerging from either body *or* mind—so employing both/*and* is essential; embracing multiplicity requires jettisoning notions of a stable identity that never changes—which necessitates viewing the self as a dialogue between facets of selves.

As I will show in the next chapter, viewing the self as a dialogue between facets removes the arbitrary distinction between stable/fixed and multiple identity constructs: emphasizing movement between selves enables strippers to feel fixed and stable at some times, liminal and fluid at other times. There is no standard experience of subjectivity: this model of multiplicity does not apply to all strippers at all times; sometimes I feel my stripper/researcher selves are unified, sometimes separate. I can articulate affinity with a stable identity, but allow for the heightened expression of my exhibitionist facet while at work: while some things may remain fixed (I never lie about my researcher status), many other aspects of my identity are fluid (I choose to hide my relationship status when I think masquerading as “available” is profitable)—but allowing for the *possibility* of movement between selves is crucial towards maintaining a positive self image while engaging a

challenging, multiple, and stigmatized social identity. Like Katherine Frank, I find in the club a “safe place to disobey” (“Ambiguous Pleasure” 189).

CHAPTER II

Strippers' Multiplicity and Choice: Reinscripting Objectification, Binary Terrorism, Authorship of Self, and Overcoming the Insider/Outsider Problem

I choose to exist in a space among the various states of undress, my body the border across which covering and dis-covering gender identity takes place. . . . Refusing to be one kind of girl or another, passing instead among borderlands, I hold open the ideological frameworks that define womanhood in such varying social domains as strip clubs and universities. By remaining ever in motion . . . I am able to maintain contact with my body and control its presentation; and in the space between clasping and unclasping, the impossibility of female sexual agency is suspended. Unstill in the undressing, I resist what tries to pin me down.

--Merri Lisa Johnson

In the above epigraph, Johnson insists on her agency, her ability to move between selves; her power and resistance is enabled by the freedom to remain “unstill.” Because she felt compartmentalized by the ideological frameworks in other arenas of gender/power discourse (like academia), the strip club becomes “a place to wholly be” (“Pole Work” 151): secure in fragmentation, she can “control the presentation” of her body, relieving her “sensation of incapability” and explaining how the “typically non-feminist” context is empowering. When she occupies and interprets the stage, she achieves “freedom and control of motion that [she does] not possess in other places” (“Pole Work” 150). The stage enables embodied interpretation and freedom of movement; Johnson claims ownership of her performance as object, thus making a phallocentric environment a site of mobility instead of constraint and reclaiming the stage

as a place to experience *more freedom* than in other spaces. In this chapter, I will show how this owning one's performance as object can refute the presumed negative aspects of objectification and foster empowerment through covert personal resistance and subversive gender role reinscription.

Strippers' agency (i.e. the ability to move between roles) injects mobility and subjective liberation into the seemingly repressive club context; moreover, the continual re/deployment of and tinkering with gender roles encouraged inside that environment fosters production of an alternative knowledge stock. In "The Transformative Power of Sex Work," Alyssa Perrucci identifies the strip club as a space where malleable scripts permit redefinitions of gender roles that, in turn, increase freedom of expression. Gender/sexual relations are more transparent than they are in other places: on the superficial level, it may seem that the club context perpetuates a dichotomy between the disempowered/objectified stripper and a controlling/subject-laden customer, yet a closer look reveals that both dancers and customers experience both power *and* objectification.¹⁵ Perrucci's work shows how the narratives produced within the club (ranging from casual dressing room conversations, blogs and onto academically-published autoethnographies) form a hidden transcript which provides understanding of how strippers "live out the construction of gendered behaviors, while at the same time subverting and transcending

¹⁵ Bruckert argues that, through strippers' use of hidden transcripts (analyzed in greater detail later in this chapter), the club becomes a site where "resistance against client control is made real through praxis," and that "far from being agents of her oppression, the men are transformed into mere consuming objects" (117). In other words, by making themselves the subject of their own experiences of objectification and dis/empowerment in the club, strippers objectify the customers as mere tools in their overarching game of resistance and profit. Therefore, both strippers *and* customers can experience objectification and empowerment within the club.

them.” In other words, strippers’ narration of their experiences merge into a re-transcription of gender roles which, when conveyed to readers, demonstrates how they resist gender role inscription with their own discourse. In turn, this understanding fosters awareness of the “complexities and inherent contradictions within gendered interaction” and encourages “greater tolerance in the movement toward gender and sexual freedom” (336). Though strippers embody phallogentric codes by performing and embodying various roles, we do so knowingly and with ulterior motives; the club context goes further than skin-deep, and becomes a space of contradictory interactions and reinscriptions. While our work is mainly personally and thus somewhat selfishly liberating, strippers’ narration of hidden transcripts (internal dialogues that become covert discourse when shared with others) can convey these increased gender/sexual liberties to outside/r audiences and thus foster broader and more nuanced conceptions of gender roles.

At the surface level, the club context is a place where entrenchment of stereotypical gender roles and binary oppositions constitutes strippers’ inherent oppression, but when taken instead as a cultural artifact where gendered dynamics are simply more transparent than other contexts, the dynamics and dichotomies can be subverted even while they are entrenched. The club does not limit gender expression, but rather grants a palpable freedom to move between and reinscribe gender roles because strippers are *in control* and own their performances of object. I can change personae as easily as changing costumes, thus shifting between elegant intellectual, bubbly party girl,

and seductive dominatrix, or any permutation therein; I can manifest and highlight any aspect of my personality that I desire. Having the ability to choose which facets of self to reveal and when to reveal each one, strippers can control their objectification; as Chris Bruckert asserts, strippers can “invert and manipulate the very relations and gendered scripts that would oppress them” (121). Rather than being universally oppressive, strip clubs represent a safe space to play with normally constrictive gender roles: freedom of role movement makes norms transparent, fostering awareness and potential transformation of gender/power relations for all involved by enabling more expressive role performances than are permitted in the outside world. By owning our performance of object, we can play with roles; instead of being constrained by scripts, we manipulate them.

Performative role switching enables covert mimesis, which is the act of wielding control over one’s object status and manipulating it. Utilizing roles and objectification towards an agentive end, I vary my performances according to my mood and/or assessment of customers’ inclinations: I can channel the slut by recanting my sexual exploits for a curious audience, I can be the academic by letting my vocabulary run free as I detail my research, *or* I can do *both/and*. I entrench mainstream definitions of femininity by conforming to the club’s standards of appearance (high heels, skirt/dress, appropriately groomed hair, etc), but can also c/overtly reject them by wearing edgy attire, minimal makeup, and accessories that have personal/hidden symbolism but yet are in plain view to strangers who will never know what they truly see. In short, I can

embody or challenge whichever flighty female stereotype I want, or I can do *both simultaneously*. Thus, I do not solely entrench those roles: I simply try them on for size, or in this case, for expressiveness and profit; my acknowledged utilization of performance means that even while I embody them, these roles do not constitute my entire identity.

As covered in the first chapter, a multiply-situated self contradicts social conditioning, so it's hardly surprising that critique of sex worker subjectivity is often ingrained in culturally-mandated emphasis on a whole/fixed/unified self. Kathleen Barry equates prostitution to sexual slavery, and argues that in order to survive, these victimized women "must segment themselves, must set up demarcations within themselves that break down the human self" (317-18); this disengagement gives women "the emotional distance to be able to distinguish her real self from that of her self that is being used for sex as a commodity" (32) to the point where the distinctions between our "real" self and the selves we've "learned, been forced into, or taken refuge in as captive" (268) become blurred. Defining fragmentation of self as false consciousness, Barry argues that sex workers' disengagement of self makes us unable to fully and consciously consent to sex work, because the loss of self makes us sexual slaves (268). Attacking agency and subjectivity, Barry deems victimization inherent within fragmentation, yet sex worker theorists disagree. Jo Doezema notes, "there are parts of myself that I don't want to share with my clients. But drawing boundaries in my work doesn't mean that I am in danger of being destroyed by it" (qtd. in Chapkis 75-76). Chapkis, who interviewed

Doezema, argues that emotional labor and the multiply-positioned self contribute to a “disassociative ability” which is an aspect of professionalism for sex workers, rather than an “abuse of feeling” (78). So instead of being a hallmark of mental instability, sex workers’ ability to cordon and multiply aspects of our selves is an acquired skill, necessary to our emotional well-being, not evidence of bondage. Fragmentation may seem oppressive to outside/r researchers like Barry, but listening to sex workers’ voices implodes arguments of universal oppression. Sex worker narratives show nuanced insight, self-awareness, and agentic feminist consciousness, yet outside/r researchers tend to ignore or delegitimize our voices as victimized and imbued with false consciousness.¹⁶

Strippers’ embodiment of traditional feminine roles is misconstrued as pure entrenchment of those roles, yet mainstream/club gender scripts are covertly wielded by strippers as instruments of reinscription. Refuting claims of degradation-through-objectification, covert mimesis allows strippers to mime femininity without “feeling trapped.” Some feminists invoke unitary/fixed/stable identity constructs to discount strippers’ “authorship of self” as a perversion of feminism, liberation, and sociological interaction,¹⁷ and some feminist strippers struggle with the notion of sex work as a

¹⁶ See Jeffreys 169-70, Wesely 1196.

¹⁷ For example, Ariel Levy argues that certain pro-sex feminist groups (who use sex workers as poster girls towards their goal of reappropriating “sexy”—an example of authorship of self) “haven’t yet found a way to enact the redefinition they are advocating, so they are wishing for feminist justification where none exists.” Presuming a monolithic conception of feminist consciousness that can be either present or absent, Levy asked Susan Brownmiller to comment, who replied that “You think you’re being brave, you think you’re being sexy, you think you’re *transcending* feminism. But that’s bullshit” (Levy 81-82). Also see Levy 4, 107; Johnson, “Stripper Bashing” 600; Grussendorf and Leighton 36 and 38-39.

fundamental “sale of self.”¹⁸ Yet we resist victimization: negative labels like “slut” can be manipulated to advantageous ends, re-inscribed/colonized with personal meaning so as to create effective distance between externally-imposed and self-defined subjectivity. Strippers are in a position to invert scripts and formulate/move between multiple selves, thus allowing increased personal expression and subjective empowerment in an environment that some define as the opposite of liberating.¹⁹

Strategic role reinscription allows strippers to pragmatically engage within the club environment: they entrench phallocentrism by embodying traditional gender scripts, but with a self-awareness that provides space for resistance. Covert mimesis allows strippers to “recover [their] space in the symbolic” by resubmitting themselves “so that [they] may operate within it” (Egan, “Fantasy Girl” 111). Immersed in a phallocentric context, strippers eventually acquire the knowledge that fantastical roles are social constructions and thus can manipulate them to their advantage, permitting empowered engagement with the scripts and club context.²⁰ Thus, Lockford’s reinscription was “clearly liberatory” because she came to know how traditional acts of femininity could be enacted to subvert and challenge both socially dominant and feminist conceptions of “the feminine” (3). Whereas some feminists reject both the phallocentric club context and any

¹⁸ See Funari 25; Sarah Katharine Lewis 165-66, 185.

¹⁹ See Bell 190-91; Manzano 28; Jeffreys 169-70.

²⁰ Weene’s internal struggle with culturally-imposed stigma and her subsequent invention of feminissima is an example of how strippers can resist the internalized shame our culture imparts onto strippers’ manipulation of roles. Her story represents one way that strippers can come to understand roles as social constructions; initially confused because her feelings about her work were not nearly as negative as what society dictated they should be; Weene eventually rejected that stigma in lieu of a more agentic approach to role manipulation. Additionally, Lockford, Rambo, Egan, Frank and Johnson were all strippers, meaning their autoethnographic work can be taken as examples of conscious manipulation of socially constructed roles.

attempt made at capitulation therein,²¹ strippers take the pragmatic approach of strategic functioning within a hostile environment while retaining covert resistance on the subjective level. While strippers' script subversion via phallogentric entrenchment might not seem possible or agentic to some, excluding the possibility of resistance/empowerment within covert mimesis relies upon and entrenches a monolithic, unitary model of the club context's power dynamics, overarching cultural discourse, and feminist theory.

Challenging sociocultural and anti-sex work feminist prescriptions of identity and consciousness,²² Johnson's articulation of dynamic multiplicity is my crucial theoretical model for connecting covert mimesis to agentic subjectivity: one must be aware of and accept roles in order to consciously move between them, and when that movement is described as an act of resistance, it represents a subjective assertion of feminist consciousness. Additionally, a broad range of feminists would support a move towards increased sexual freedom for all genders, making the potentially transformative power of the club context difficult to reject outright (as it was by some participants in the sex wars). Covert and individualized, our subjective resistance may perpetuate and fail to challenge repressive gender roles on the surface, but a deeper look into narratives can inject the potentialities of self-defined subversion into mainstream conceptions of resistance and empowerment. While some may critique the notion of agentic

²¹ Critiquing "stripper chic," Levy equates this "new feminism" with "old objectification" (81) and argues that strippers can only express their sexuality by "spinning around a pole" (107); also see Wesley 1196.

²² Salutin describes strippers' role performance as a "coping mechanism" to mitigate stigma and repaint their bodies as "moral" (22), while Lockford's "clearly liberatory" aim was to embody norms in hopes of illuminating how "ideology is inscribed upon the performing body" (3).

compartmentalization, their arguments omit strippers' narratives, thus ignoring reports of agency and empowerment from the front lines of discourse. Naïve at best and ignorant at worst, failing to take stripper narratives into account not only diminishes the validity of claiming strippers are universally disempowered, but also reduces broader cultural understanding of strippers' experiences with power and agency by silencing our voices.

Objectification is not necessarily a bad thing. Arguments about the supposedly pervasive repression in the strip club context center upon critique of the sex industry's inherent objectification;²³ the Cartesian bedrock of the mind/body split informs a cultural distaste of "being reduced to an object." Catharine MacKinnon argues that "sexual objectification is the primary process in women's oppression" (Valverde 30). According to MacKinnon, since pornography objectifies women, men find it erotic, yet it is violent towards women; additionally, instead of spending money (as men do) on pornography, women spend money on cosmetics in order to "set ourselves up as objects which emulate those images that are sold as erotic to men" ("Violence Against Women" 55-56). Yet objectification, while pervasive in the club context, does not necessarily have to mean *reduction* to anything, and the negative connotation is a social construction inherent in any ranked binary like mind/body: through willful objectification and subjective formation of object performances, strippers subvert the dichotomy by utilizing both mind *and* body in the process. Johnson refutes the mind/body and subject/object dichotomies

²³ Reacting to the recent increase of female customers in strip clubs and criticizing the objectifying context, Ariel Levy wonders, "Why would a straight woman want to see another woman in few clothes spin around a pole? Why would she want to be on that pole herself?" (34-35). Bashing the cultural phenomenon of "stripper chic," she further critiques entrenchment of objectification by asking, "How is resurrecting every stereotype of female sexuality that feminism endeavored to banish *good* for women?" (4, her italics).

and subsequent deprivileging of object status by reframing objectification as “an emphasis on the physical” and arguing that engaging in willful objectification has the “capacity to expand feminist praxis” by countering the Cartesian “preference for minds and transcendence of bodies in scholarship.” The “reduction of women to bodies” is not the only outcome of objectification; strippers’ embodied movements provided an alternative to the “cerebral university and buttoned up throats of conservative womanhood” (“Pole Work” 151). Instead of being an inherently degrading aspect of immersion in the club context, objectification can be an inclusive *alternative* to the privileging of the mind over the body; by subjectively crafting their object performances, strippers become *both* subject *and* object, mitigating the ranking of one over the other.

Not just a defensive survival tactic, strippers’ willful objectification via role movement can be a way to agentively reinscribe their identities so as to narrate and resist the implication that they’re *reduced* to objects. Identifying embodied knowledge as a powerful counterforce to the supposedly unavoidable degradation-through-objectification, and as an act of resistance against traditional/cerebral prescriptions of femininity, Johnson redeploys embodied movement as feminist theory: “Through these motions, I live out the break with tyrannies I have read about in other feminist essays; these motions are the start of doing my own work” (“Pole Work” 151). Movement becomes a counter-hegemonic act of reinscription as willful objectification empowers by imploding the inherently ranked mind/body split: through embodied movement, strippers experience a mutually *inclusive* alternative to cerebral/conservative values and thus

subvert gender roles, constituting a shift into agency. Objectification is inherent, yet “even when the dancer is the object of a customer’s gaze, she is the subject of her own experience. . . . The act of resistance lies in how the dancer meets the objectifying gesture and her conscious choice . . . to narrate the meaning of that experience” (Perrucci, “Persona and Self” 51). Objectification is pervasive, but strippers’ willful engagement therein crafts highly specialized subjects, and role manipulation enables strippers’ subjective agency within objectification; moreover, narrating that experience means strippers can refute accusations of universal victimization and false consciousness.

Movement between roles can transcend binaries and either/or categorization. Identifying the club’s objectifying “emphasis on bodies” as an alternative to cerebral “transcendence of bodies in scholarship” might seem to entrench an either/or distinction between body and mind by simply shifting focus onto the body—but a closer look reveals that movement between roles permits “both/and” to become the alternative, hence mutual inclusivity of body and mind. Aiming to reinscribe feminist consciousness with both/and, in “Pole Work: Autoethnography of a Strip Club” Johnson presents the analogy of “pole work” (156) as an embodied straddling of dualisms, facilitating reclamation of selfhood through *movement between* dichotomies like “stripper-scholar” (157). Identifying a lack of “literally embodied activism,” Johnson argues that the “strip club picks up where [feminist theories] leave off. I writhe on the stage, living out my excesses, refining my ideas through the language of dance” (151). Performance *in excess* of binaries is personally transgressive, thus constituting an act of feminist theory: extending

philosophical subversion into physical movement, stage motions become tools by which strippers can embody both/and and implode binaric categories. Our performances disrupt “either-or thought structures” (i.e. “poles”) and fuel “efforts at straddling the stripper-scholar and mind-body hyphens,” thus enacting feminist theory’s “assault on conceptual roles” and enabling reclamation of “physical and sexual selves” (157). Putting cerebral feminist criticism of feminine roles into play through *physical movement between roles* and personification of both/and, strippers literally embody activism by *reclaiming our selves* through transcendence of hyphenated binaries like mind/body and stripper/scholar. Through deployment of embodied feminist theory, Johnson’s “pole work” provides ample illustration of how strippers bend their subjectivities to reclaim a niche of empowered agency in an objectifying context. Cultivating borderland existence and motion between dichotomous categories, stripping makes performance of dynamic multiplicity an implosion of gender/power binaries: feminist consciousness is reinscribed into physical motion and willful objectification, facilitating subjectivity through resistance to either/or thought structures.

Using dynamic multiplicity, strippers can shatter binaries of madonna/whore, subject/object and active/passive: strippers subjectively reincarnate themselves as the object, reinscribing new meaning into seemingly fixed and oppressive gender roles. Alexandra Murphy notes that by “manipulating their bodies to fit an idealized feminine image . . . strippers enable themselves to construct their own subjectivity. They are both subject and object in the process” (327). Moreover, strippers’ performance of

objectification helps to form a fluid subjectivity and constitutes embodiment of “both/and” (Egan, “Dancing for Dollars” 145). Rather than being *either* subject *or* object, there can be subjectivity within objectification, and the nuances of each strippers’ performance of objectification constitutes her own identity within sex work. Through a role Egan calls the “whorish wife” (43), strippers transcend the Madonna/whore split by performatively catering to customers’ sexual and emotional needs. Most customers desire both physical and psychological entertainment, and so strippers provide titillation in the form of lap dances and ego-stroking conversation, all the while maintaining a whore’s air of sexual availability and a wife’s supportive emotional appreciation, becoming the whorish wife—embodying both/and, transcending the Madonna/whore divide. Willful objectification allows dancers to “invert gendered discourses” and continuously move between active and passive roles” (Egan, “Dancing for Dollars” 133). Simultaneously constrained by customers’ desires and liberated by the multiplicity-enabling context, strippers are in a unique position to redefine gender roles that requires analysis beyond the limits of binary categories.

More than simply shattering binaries, embodying both/and is an agentive act of identity formation. I can be both stripper *and* scholar, girlfriend *and* “available” object, traditionally feminine *and* physically subversive: by choosing which facets to highlight and when, I move between roles, using them as fodder for object manipulation. Johnson argues that since the club is a space where essentialist views of femininity are contested, strippers thus have power to control and reclaim object status through “transitory shifts of

persona” (“Pole Work” 154). Though femininity is commodified and contested, traditional gender scripts become fodder for “manipulation of imagery”: strippers “invert the position of looked-at by claiming the space of the stage and club as places to act up and stereotypical gender roles as matter to be played upon” (“Pole Work” 155). Thus, the club fosters movement “from shame into agency” (Egan, “Dancing for Dollars” 72): through repetition and excess, strippers can expose the “limitations of conventional sexuality and [open] up a space of critique in which women’s desires and agency can exist” (155). Mirroring, manipulating, and miming gender scripts, strippers highlight facets of self, channeling feminine archetypes but not being completely constituted by them. In this way, strippers can maintain agency by situating ourselves in relation to the roles we embody; the self-aware dynamic multiplicity of covert mimesis is crucial to our pragmatic engagement in an objectifying environment without allowing it to completely dictate our subjectivities.

By choosing when to reveal or conceal various aspects of self, strippers morph our subjectivities to protect our identities while prospering within the club; a primary indicator of prosperity is a sense of privacy, which is essential to self identity. Perrucci argues that strippers’ ability to reveal/conceal parts of their selves and bodies fosters feelings of personal privacy, which are important because a sense of control is “tied to one’s sense of autonomy and agency” (“Transformative Power” 323). By controlling the information we reveal to customers, strippers engage in performative role movement, and some feel that the club context actually frees us from mainstream constrictions on

feminine sexuality (“Transformative Power” 324). Through dynamic movement, strippers form personae that are “neither fully integrated nor fully separate from other aspects of self,” constituting a phenomenological understanding of identity that “*comes into being* in relationship to others” (Perrucci, “Persona and Self” 39-40). Roles are facets of self that change according to the situation; my subjectivity differs from each and yet is composed of all. Thus “roles and masks are liberating even if they seem to be concealing,” providing space from which to “explore aspects of self” that might not be possible in everyday life, forming a “sense of authorship of self accompanies the often contradictory, radically discontinuous appearances of self through time and context” (Perrucci, “Persona and Self” 39). Cultivating a phenomenological and multiple self through a desire to retain privacy, strippers endure stigma *and* experience empowerment while working in a commodified and seemingly restrictive environment. Movement between roles is necessitated by the context, but the resulting “authorship of self” constitutes greater potential for agency than often credited to strippers.

Through authorship of self, strippers are able to utilize their own embodiment to publicly unmask the roles and power dynamics that might otherwise pin us down in everyday life: we exist in cracks and borderlands, reinscribing seemingly-fixed roles with agency and motion (Johnson, “Pole Work” 149). Rebecca Schneider calls this method of identity reinscription “binary terrorism”: a “strategic implosion of binaried distinctions” (18), used by “contemporary feminist explicit body works,” i.e. performance artists who “make *their own bodies* explicit as the stage, canvas, or screen across which social

agendas of privilege and disprivilege have been manipulated” (20). Schneider’s theory connects strippers’ acts of covert mimesis with willful reinscription: by making themselves explicit, strippers knowingly highlight cultural gender/power dynamics that are embedded within identity and social interaction. Terroristic embodiment of both/and (i.e. multiplicity, covert mimesis) becomes not only a defensive survival method in a complex power scheme, but also an offensive way to reveal and reinscribe gender/power dynamics. While this resistance mainly takes place internally, and might be only subconsciously noticed by customers (if at all), the fact remains that strippers can actively use their work in the club to deepen their *own* understanding of nuanced gender constructions.

Binary terrorism can be taken a step beyond subjective understanding of gender/power constructs: the act of straddling dualisms means that strippers come to represent “dialectical images” in our culture, a role that allows them to put forth an alternative to socially-prescribed either/or constructs. Binary terrorism has specific application to sex workers, both within Schneider’s argument as well as manifestations throughout stripper literature. Links between identity manipulation and challenges to social constructs and categories appear throughout stripper ethnographies. Dichotomies and contradictions abound, necessitating manipulation (covert mimesis, excess) and straddling (both/and) of binaric categories. Schneider argues that prostitutes become “dialectical images” due to their status “as both commodity and seller in one;” her analysis extends to strippers, who most certainly embody a “bizarre and potentially

terroristic collapse of active and passive, subject and object, into a single entity” (24). Through covert mimesis strategies such as pole work or feminissima, strippers become dialectical images that “show the show of their commodification;” by reinscribing and resisting, strippers can then “gesture back” at the “social enterprise which secret(e)s them” (52). So, in addition to fostering an internal concept of both/and, strippers status as binary terrorists means that they represent a literal straddling of cultural dualisms, a role which should not be ignored when analyzing strippers’ relative empowerment within their occupation.

Stripper theorists have demonstrated many examples of agency. In binary terrorist fashion, Lockford declares her feminine-appearing-feminist body “be read as a challenge to the status quo;” refuting claims of a static/fixed/stable definition of femininity, like Rambo she views embodiment as a dialogue, a process where she can make her transformation public and resist “standard cultural interpretations and feminist misreadings of her body,” enabling the feminine-appearing feminist to “contest and subvert problematic cultural and feminist norms.” She “subverts through her ambiguity,” rupturing the system of meanings at the very place it seems most secure, a club where gender scripts are so overt and pervasive that they become fodder for manipulation (54). Weene’s feminissima represents strippers’ agentive reclamation of feminine sexual power vs. cultural misrepresentations. In Egan, Frank, and Johnson’s introduction to *Flesh for Fantasy*, they argue that their roles of the “third wave feminist stripper” means that they “embody the multiple subject positions critical scholars theorize in discussions

of postmodern identity” (xii). Identifying themselves as postmodern agents in a broader cultural debate about the nature of identity and the legitimacy of a multiply-situated self, these women position the role of stripper as an example of agentive subjectivity.

Johnson’s “pole work,” Rambo’s “dialogue between facets,” Lockford’s resistance to misreading of her body, and Weene’s feminissima converge on this notion of binary terrorism to form a group of strategies that represent strippers’ willful manipulation of roles and scripts towards an agentive end. Egan, Frank, and Johnson extend those strategies into a wider cultural debate about identity; dynamic multiplicity and covert mimesis represent strippers’ assertion of agency within and beyond the club walls, positioning strippers as agents within broad cultural representation.

Strategic empowered functioning in the club requires the usage of covert strategies; strippers develop patterns within covert mimesis, and by sharing their thought processes and strategies with each other, form their own subversive discourse within the phallocentric context. According to Bruckert, strippers craft their niche of covert mimesis through the formulation of a “hidden transcript”: a covert critique of dominant discourse that encodes worldviews from an insider position, collectively created so that “consciousness is transformed into knowledge and becomes a personal and political resource.” After a dis/satisfactory encounter with a customer, a stripper might remark upon her experience to another, and through the ensuing dressing room conversation, one stripper’s survival tactics can be absorbed into the collective consciousness. We share our experiences and wisdom, and while every stripper has her own subjective approach to the

job, we can impart stories and knowledge onto each other that aid us in our pursuits, both financial and personally integral; our collective knowledge forms a rudimentary and unspoken code of conduct. Thus, “realized in practice,” the hidden transcript critiques club scripts while forming a script of its own, becoming the subtext from which strippers fashion interactive scripts (113). The hidden transcript is covert mimesis *discourse*: functioning simultaneously with gender/power scripts, it is formulated through experience and narrative, becoming a covert re/script of its own.

Due to the pervasive and explicit nature of club scripts (having ample “matter to be played upon”), strippers can use covert mimesis and hidden transcripts to make the club a unique space for subversion of gender/power dynamics: where the dominant, public, and overt club transcript meets strippers’ hidden transcript/s, clash occurs, and through the ensuing collision and negotiation, notions of gender, identity and agency are contested (Bruckert 113). Since the hidden transcript is generated from an insider perspective within the club, it allows dancers become agents in the process of questioning the club’s transcript, all the while covertly performing collective reinscription and resistance to repressive discourse (115). The contested, multiple, and pliable nature of roles within the club means the hidden transcript “challenges assumptions that [strippers] are simply victims of social and structural forces” (119), thus legitimizing covert mimesis and other “passive and assertive strategies of resistance” (120). Strippers mime acquiescence to the dominant transcript while engaging in covert resistance: exemplifying “non-shameful display and retention of agency” in commodified

interactions, the hidden transcript is a manifestation of discourse that rescripts the phallogentric system. Reinscription via hidden transcript allows a supposedly oppressed group uses public discourse to their advantage (121); however, “employing subordination for personal gain does not challenge stereotypes or the legitimacy of the hierarchy, and may support the status quo. . . it can be a personally empowering strategy” (122). Strippers must work within the club’s discourse towards an inversion with our own inscriptions; we must operate *within the* system, but yet subversions such as these are rarely recognized as an appropriate or legitimate form of resistance.

Varied and multiple articulations of covert mimesis prove that there is a hidden transcript at work underneath the entrenched phallogentric discourse of the strip club, constituting a more complex web of power relations than assumed by monolithic analyses of strip club dynamics. Strippers’ performance of object requires that they mold themselves according to customers’ desires, but this act does not constitute passivity (Murphy 314) or “strip dancers of their subjectivity or agency;” rather, “the very action of self-regulation” demonstrates “subjective agency that opens possibilities of resistance” (321). Murphy applies a “duality of structure” to the club context, in which participants are “bound by the governing rules and regulations while open to the possibility of shifting or changing those rules, or even creating new ones” (310). In order to prosper, strippers must engage in self-regulation as they objectify themselves within the club’s transparent and public gender scripts; however, this covert mimesis allows us to manipulate, embody, and resist those scripts in an agentive way by creating our own. Acknowledging “the

paradoxes of simultaneously being subject to and subversive toward systems of power” (Egan, Frank, and Johnson xiv-xv), strippers create their own rules within the system during the formation of a hidden transcript, forming a resistance tool inside a problematic yet profitable context. Internalizing cultural influences while manipulating and defying them within the club, strippers negotiate the duality of structure with conscious self-regulation that covertly subverts the phallocentric system—we masquerade as acquiescent while employing sly personalized resistance strategies that should not be discounted.

Phallocentrism pervades culture, and drastic change will be slow going, so the strip club provides a context within which to dissect and understand power dynamics, rather than attempt to overtly undo them. Strippers’ resubmission/capitulation to the contextually-imposed gender roles should not be confused with acquiescence: strippers’ self-awareness of our position within scripts fosters freedom to move between identity constructs, which means strippers can resist gender scripts while entrenching them. A direct challenge to the club’s fantastical system would result in loss of job or income; therefore, covert mimesis is a “subversive strategy”: like any marginalized group in an exploitative context, strippers can “negotiate an otherwise oppressive structure” (Egan, “Fantasy Girl” 113) through parody and mockery of their object status, subverting customers’ scripts and engaging in resistance strategies (Egan, “Dancing for Dollars” 105). The “playful repetition” (“Fantasy Girl” 111) of covert mimesis enables “women to

use their position as objects in order to challenge dominant cultural fantasies . . . and their positions within them” (“Dancing for Dollars” 102, her italics).

For some feminists,²⁴ strippers’ simultaneous entrenchment of and resistance to gender roles may not seem very empowering: Despite our resistance, the phallogentric club environment remains phallogentric; even though strippers are continually reinscribing roles and crafting subjectivity so as to better function within that environment, we do not try to *significantly alter* the context. When I argue that the club context provides a greater opportunity for self-expression, I acknowledge that the context is itself repressive—and expression becomes relative to that repression. Rather than rejecting any participation in a phallogentric environment, my task becomes using the transparent nature of gender dynamics within the club as a laboratory for analysis and personal narrative. Empowerment is *relative to the environment*. In the context of stripping, empowerment should be regarded differently than overt forms of resistance within prior conceptions of feminist theory: strippers accept the phallogentric environment; instead of attempting to change it, they endeavor to prosper in a way that protects their subjectivities.

Looking closely, strippers’ self-regulation can seem like passive acquiescence but really constitutes personalized resistance; this seemingly contradictory stance thereby becomes a catalyst for overcoming the stripper/scholar divide so as to expand dominant definitions of resistance to include covert mimesis. Continued insertion of stripper

²⁴ Barry; Levy; Stark; Whisnant; Gussendorf; Leighton; and, of course, Dworkin and MacKinnon.

narratives into academic and feminist canons can work towards redefining pragmatic engagement with an oppressive system as something more than entrenchment, and further legitimize notions of empowerment via sex work. Greta Paules notes a tendency among researchers to limit definitions of resistance to active/collective action, ignoring the “informal, often hidden ‘garden variety’ resistance, which has typified the history of subordinate groups,” building a research bias that focuses on “structural inequality and exploitation” and causing the frequent perception/portrayal of women as “resigned to their subjugation” (182). Ignorance of covert, “garden variety” resistance, like covert mimesis, fuels anti-sex-work feminists’ critique of strippers’ self-determination and accusations of false consciousness,²⁵ but missing from those arguments is acknowledgment of covert mimesis—fantastical performances of roles/personae—whereby strippers are able to consciously redeploy gender scripts in a self-determined manner so as to facilitate the reclamation of identity while not being defined solely by the roles they embody. Fluid boundaries of self enable resistance and create identities which call for “alternative discourses that challenge dominant discourses and social processes” (Egan, “Dancing for Dollars” 72). Through autoethnographic analysis,²⁶ we see how strippers’ reinscription of gender roles allows them to identify repressive elements within fantasy and embody them while thwarting disempowerment. Continued inclusion of stripper narratives into the feminist canon can only improve communication across (and

²⁵ See Barry 30, 268, 317. Note that sex worker narratives are excluded from Barry’s argument. Also see Jeffreys 169-70 and Wesely 1196.

²⁶ Bruckert, Egan, Frank, Johnson, Lockford, Rambo, and Weene are all examples of strippers’ engagement with autoethnographic tools towards subjective and agentive self-expression.

within) the stripper/scholar divide. Everyone benefits: whether anti-sex work feminists choose to incorporate stripper narratives into their arguments or not, their arguments can be more finely tuned if they listen to and acknowledge strippers' voices. The point is not to accept the idea of empowerment within stripping, but at least be open to narratives from within the sex industry, and to not lose sight of personal narrative truths by focusing on dis/empowerment.

Personal empowerment in the strip club (and everywhere else) is by definition subjective, and the covert resistance and subversion through entrenchment I emphasize here has yet to be canonized (in non-sex work discourse) and legitimated as an empowerment strategy. Both logistical²⁷ and political aspects of stripping impede communal resistance: though strippers reject and resist stigma, many remain closeted and thus avoid public declaration of their status; through role manipulation they entrench stereotypes of femininity and do not challenge them outright but covertly. Having chosen to engage in a stigmatizing but highly profitable occupation, overt resistance is illogical for strippers: since we aim not to dismantle the system but to function and prosper within it, fear of sociocultural ostracization silences many who might narrate their experiences for others' benefit. Stigmatizing constraints and the covert nature of strippers' resistance means that their discourse functions as *unseen* on two different levels: they fear the

²⁷ With rare exception, strippers are classified as "independent contractors," thus enabling the choice of when and where to work: strippers can set their own schedules and move freely between clubs and geographic locations. Also, most strippers do not consider their work a long-term employment option but merely a short-term occupation. As a result, stripping is a transitory business in which many find it difficult (or ill-advised) to make friends, share narratives, or engage in communal organizing in any way. Also see Bell 193.

delegitimizing aspects of overt public and/or academic discourse (though this can be mitigated by anonymous blogging or other forms of self-publishing), and even when strippers do convey intricacies of their resistance strategies, those too are delegitimized by the ranking of more overt, collective, and “classic” forms of resistance which hold covert mimesis in disfavor, or ignore it completely.

Sex worker discourse has many hurdles to clear on its path towards increased visibility: hidden transcripts, while personally empowering, have limited ability to generate “cohesive class consciousness” or “impact on public perception” precisely because they are *hidden* (Bruckert 123). Collective resistance occurs occasionally,²⁸ but strippers’ strategies are usually individualistic and personal; therefore, viewing resistance through a lens of “traditional labor organizing” (Bruckert 159) causes resistance to go unseen by outside/r researchers. An alternate discourse must be forged: the lack of “intellectually worked-up insider knowledge” allows the presentation of “conceptual constructs” as “truth,” (read: strippers are victims) and the absence of narratives impedes the formulation of collective knowledge that can become a “personal and political resource for marginalized individuals and their advocates” (Bruckert 136-37). Since strippers’ resistance doesn’t resemble mainstream cultural definitions, it is often missed by outside/r researchers, who, preoccupied with dis/empowerment and degradation, place their own spin on resistance and prevent formation of collective marginalized knowledge. Anti-sex work feminists give lip service to listening to sex worker voices, yet cite only

²⁸ *Live Nude Girls Unite!* is a documentary about a San Francisco peep show’s efforts to unionize.

stories of abuse within/as a result of stripping, focusing on narratives of coerced sex work and spinning them as universal truth, and dismissing any evidence to the contrary as indicative of “false consciousness” or internalized exploitation.²⁹ In short, the outsider/insider barrier of the club context is extraordinary, and communication across the divide is so difficult that outside/r researchers often fail to see the very knowledge they seek. The task becomes not to organize resistance per se, but to make the personal realities of strippers’ covert resistance more visible via dissemination of narratives: these can spoken directly between two strippers in the dressing room, thrown to the masses via blogging, published in the traditional manner for the attention of scholars, or submitted to an curious outside/r researcher who listens with an open mind.

If stigma is to be mitigated and eventually jettisoned entirely from our cultural/political/power landscape, an alternate discourse must be spoken on some level. Some academics (like Lockford and me) undertake a career in stripping (be it only for one night or for a more extended period) for the specific purpose of better understanding its effect on our identities as researchers and feminists; others (like Sarah Katharine Lewis and Weene) become politicized in the process of sex work, prompting self-expression via publishing. And even as increased transcendence of the in/outside stripper/researcher divides occurs (as indicated by the explosion of sex worker blogs in recent years), others call for more researchers to become sex workers, and vice versa (Lerum 34). Self-identified feminist academic strippers like Egan, Frank, and Johnson

²⁹ See Gussendorf and Leighton 35, Barry 32-33.

note that they “embody the multiple subject positions” theorized by critical scholars in their discussions of “postmodern identity and intersectional analysis: good girls and bad girls, virgins and whores, and acceptable bodies and their transgressive counterparts.” Their infusion of “theory in the flesh”³⁰ with the marginalized sex worker position within feminism causes them to ask “how feminist theories of power, sexuality, and the body might change if they were more substantially informed by the embodied knowledge of sex workers” (xii-xiii). By subjecting themselves to and writing about the multiple roles they embody as feminist/stripper/researchers, these women notice a gap in the literature that they strive to fill by injecting sex worker embodied knowledge into feminist theory. In order for outside/r researchers and the mainstream influences they wield to accept strippers’ individualized forms of covert resistance, theorization across the stripper/researcher divide must be undertaken.

The issue of choice is paramount in sex work research. Antiquated deviance literature focused on “the choice of stripping for a living”³¹ and ignored the realities of strippers once that choice had been made; this literature became preoccupied with strippers’ “rationalizations and neutralizations”³² of stigma, interpreting our multiple

³⁰ See Moraga and Anzaldúa.

³¹ Title of Boles and Garbin’s article.

³² One section of Thompson and Harred’s article, “Topless Dancers: Managing Stigma in a Deviant Occupation,” is entitled “Rationalization and Neutralization,” where the authors note that “dancers not only rationalize their deviance by denying any harm but also often contend that they actually perform positive functions for society” (305). Presuming that deviance is inherent in stripping, the authors focus on strippers’ rationalizations therein instead of contending with the social construction of strippers’ deviance as a whole. While deviance literature seems to have come and gone from the debate, more recent anti-sex work feminist criticism keeps its main arguments alive by continually questioning strippers’ agency to choose sex work and to legitimately experience empowerment therein. See Wesley 1196; Dworkin 141; Grussendorf and Leighton 36, 38-39; Jeffreys 169-70; Manzano 25, 28.

roles as “manipulative and deceptive”³³ behavior. These researchers frame strippers’ skills as “ethical transgressions,” thus entrenching an unexamined preconception that women in the sex industry are all “deviant and stigmatized;” consequently, any attempt made by strippers to distance themselves from this classification is seen as being imbibed with false consciousness (Perrucci, “Persona and Self” 43). Current outside/r researchers use stories of coerced sex work to typify the entire industry;³⁴ while coercion does occur and should be opposed, it is only one (unfortunate and unacceptable) aspect of the sex industry and should not dominate the debate (yet much of the recent discourse is marred in discussions of trafficking). When this one aspect sidetracks discourse, scholars ignore the cacophony of agentive narratives which do exist. Since anti-sex work feminists equate sex work with sexual slavery, they detract attention from—while attempting to delegitimize—voices of agency, and instead direct their efforts towards an unattainable goal—the abolition of sex work—which makes it impossible to address pragmatic solutions towards improving work conditions in the *existing* sex industry, which *is an enduring facet of our culture*. Deviance researchers and anti-sex work feminists seemingly have their hearts in the right place—they just want to “help” us, or pity us—but inscribing coerced victimization upon the identities of *all* sex workers sets up a self-

³³ In his analysis of “counterfeit intimacy” (read: emotional labor, covert mimesis), Sijuwade argues that a stripper’s “cynical performance” causes customers to “impute a specific ‘self’ to her performance; the imputation that she is available for a ‘sexual experience’” (374). Adjectives like “counterfeit” and “cynical” are widely used across so-called deviance literature, and serve to delegitimize strippers’ performances as manipulative and deceitful, instead of analyzing multiplicity as the performative act it represents.

³⁴ See Gussendorf and Leighton, Barry, Stark and Whisnant, Dworkin, Jefferies, Wesley, and Manzano.

fulfilling prophecy within their research that ignores narratives to the contrary. Outside/r researchers must acknowledge that we *can* and *do* freely choose to engage in sex work.

Outside/r researchers must expand the scope of their analysis. Anti-sex work feminists need to accept that many strippers voluntarily and knowingly engage in sex work, and listen to their narratives of multiplicity, agency, and dis/empowerment instead of dismissing them as evidence of false consciousness. Additionally, they must stop reinforcing the supposed divide between feminists and sex workers³⁵ (and then adopting an air of victimization when their reinforcement is criticized);³⁶ anti-sex work feminists do nothing but redeploy stigma when they discount and refuse to listen to hopeful voices from within the industry.

Deviance theorists face a similar challenge. Simply analyzing strippers' reasons for engaging in a deviant occupation reinforces not only the divide between strippers and scholars, making deviance something that strippers can undertake and that scholars should avoid, but also entrenches stigma: wondering how strippers can possibly subject themselves to such a repressive environment does nothing towards analysis and understanding *of that environment*. Moving away from questions as to *why* strippers engage in sex work (read: coercion, rebellion) will decenter the presumed aspects of strippers' subjectivities (read: abuse, addiction) that supposedly predispose us to deviance and victimhood. Accepting that some strippers can and do freely choose sex work will move discourse towards questions of *how* strippers engage in sex work, which shifts

³⁵ See Manzano 28, Gussendorf and Leighton 38, and Stark 290-91.

³⁶ See MacKinnon 51, Manzano 25, and Stark 278.

focus towards the nuances and transparencies of the club's gender/power dynamics, how strippers operate within it, and how these nuances challenge our cultural tendency to oversimplify and polarize.

Careful formulation and reading of stripper auto/ethnography can mitigate the negative connotations I apply to outside/r researchers: by disseminating their narratives (even as an anonymous blogger, reducing the risk of stigma), strippers allow their voices to be heard; with open-minded reading, non-sex worker audiences can travel into the subjective worlds of strippers instead of analyzing their predicaments from an outside/r perspective. Focusing on the strippers' labor instead of their deviance or victimization allows outside/r researchers to "see them as agents" while also addressing their marginalization. Not easily categorized, strippers' labor "resonates with multiple social and cultural meanings that operate independently of the labor market. This complex space, where discourses intersect, is a space that needs to be explored" (Bruckert 16). Despite Dworkin's assertion that strippers are mere objects in a marketplace, focusing on narratives of labor when analyzing power structures can imbibe research with analysis that resists easy categorization. "Serious and genuine consideration" of marginalized narratives is necessary to change social discourse on female sexuality, because researchers can glean more intimate knowledge of the power structures that pervade the club context. Subversion of these dichotomous constructions "must begin with an understanding of the social construction of sexuality and desire, and that objectification and empowerment exist for all genders" (Perrucci, "Transformative Power" 323). If any

victory over stigma is to be achieved, a shift in discourse is necessary: research into strip clubs must refocus its attention on the conflicted, liminal, and personal truths described in the narratives of those on the front lines.

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