

**“LIVE THROUGH THIS WITH ME”
MEMOIRS OF EROTIC DANCE AND AGENCY**

by

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Abstract

This project¹ is a discourse analysis of first-person and ethnographic writings published between the years 2000 to 2012, written by cis-gendered women who have worked or are working as erotic dancers. Utilizing frameworks of “whore feminism” and whiteness I argue that the works under examination within this project assail the victim/agent dichotomy that has historically dominated discourses surrounding sex workers, which ignore what erotic dancers themselves have to say about female empowerment and how they choose to define themselves. By examining the issues of self-presentation that arise within the context of autobiographical work, I interrogate the tensions inherent within the erotic dance industry surrounding assumed motivations for engaging in the industry; measurements of success for erotic dancers; and how stigmatization impacts the lives of dancers and their loved ones. The project highlights ways in which erotic dance memoirs at once open up new critical and theoretical spaces and also problematically reinforce patriarchal stereotypes.

¹ This project’s title is taken from the song “Asking For It” from 1994 album *Live Through This* by the band Hole. Lead singer Courtney Love has spoken openly about her time spent as an erotic dancer, insights which provided the first exposure this project’s author had to erotic dance as an industry and provided her first insights regarding the labour of erotic dancers.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

“Some Stories Beg To Be Told”

That’s why the desire for this is so pressing, I realize. It’s nothing I can reason away. You don’t always choose your journeys in life. Sometimes they choose you.

- Lily Burana

When you tell people you are a graduate student studying strippers, they tend to laugh nervously. As author Mindy S. Bradley-Engen points out, sex work is only beginning to gain legitimacy within academia (Bradley-Engen 2). The most common reaction (both in academic and nonacademic circles) is an emphatic “Why?!” This query is usually followed up by the assumption that I myself have engaged in sex work of one form or another. While I have not, this assumption becomes part of my answer to the ever present “Why?!” My reason for engaging in this work is quite simple — I care about sex workers and it is bizarre that it is so often implied that one *must* be a sex worker in order to *care* about sex workers. The discourses that shape this assumption intersect with popular understandings of sex work, classism, racism, and female sexuality. Sex workers have often been viewed as a part of society’s “throw-away class” as exemplified by crimes against sex workers often being classified as NHI – meaning, “No Humans Involved” (Burana 232). In 1990, a police officer from San Diego, California was quoted in a local newspaper stating that murders involving “hookers” were classified as “misdemeanor murders.” Later, another officer commented that “he had been trained to disregard the humanity of victims from the ‘darker side’ of life” (Sisco).

This project engages with first-person and ethnographic writings published between the years 2000 to 2012, written by cis-gendered women who have worked or are working as erotic

dancers.² Five specific narratives written by former dancers are examined at length, four autobiographies (*Strip City: A Stripper's Farewell Journey Across America* by Lily Burana; *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper* by Diablo Cody; *How to Make Love Like a Porn Star: A Cautionary Tale* by Jenna Jameson & Neil Strauss; *Diary of an Angry Stripper* by Sarah Tressler) and one ethnography (*Naked Lives: Inside the Worlds of Exotic Dance* by Mindy S. Bradley-Engen). Other autobiographies and ethnographic works authored by former dancers complement these narratives throughout the project. I rejected autobiographies written anonymously or reliant on some sort of salvation narrative – meaning the author felt as though some force (corporeal or spiritual) rescued them from their employment as an erotic dancer. The writings that are integral to my work deliberately assail the victim/agent dichotomy that has historically dominated (and largely continues to dominate) discourses surrounding sex workers. It is my goal to honor the intent of the authors whose works I am analyzing, all of whom work textually to challenge the positioning of sex workers as victims or persons without agency.

All of the core texts are authored by white cis-gendered women, which raises serious questions about how these texts implicitly construct erotic dance through a commitment to whiteness. This commitment permeates constructions within the texts regarding how different women negotiate the contradictions underlying white femininity as erotic and dancing as a capitalist process. The authors of the works under examination are utilizing their representation of a form of personal truth to write female erotic dancers into mainstream discourse. This is highly important, as autobiographic writing lends itself easily to claims of universal experience (loss, fear, happiness, achievement), which in terms of this project leaves us with a very white understanding of erotic dance. The whiteness inherent in these works highlights systemic social inequities.

² I use the term Erotic Dancers (or “Dancers”) to refer to individuals who engage in the labour of striptease, which is “an erotic dance in which the performer gradually undresses, either partly or completely, in a seductive and sexually suggestive manner” in return for monetary compensation. (Wortley 11)

My integration of non-white perspectives – especially via the works of women-of-colour feminists – throughout the project offers ways to think through the production and maintenance of white supremacy both within my chosen texts and within the industry of erotic dance itself. Whiteness in these chosen memoirs provides a very specific lens through which dancers’ suspected motivations, degrees/forms of success, experiences of stigmatization, beauty standards, and models for purity are viewed. Furthermore, the particular types of publishing and marketing that make these books popular objects of consumption³ both reproduce problematic ideas of race and class, while also paradoxically and simultaneously making claims about female empowerment and how ‘women’ (often problematically legible as ‘all women’) *choose* to define themselves. On a cautionary note, I do not want to position this project as an articulation of Whiteness Studies.⁴ Instead, this project takes the interdisciplinary gender studies route, focusing on ways in which the textual mainstreaming of erotic dance both supports and fractures various structures of gendered, classed and racialized inequity.

The examination of first person and ethnographic writings presents issues specific to autobiography as a literary genre. Literary scholar James Olney states:

We shall never have the experience in consciousness that the autobiographer had, and consequently we shall never know what, in his deepest and inaccessible self, he was. But we might, from autobiography, as from drama or poetry, know what man has been, or what forms have proved possible to humanity, which is a knowledge that one seeks with the intention more particularly of knowing what man is. (Olney xi)

³ Please see Chapter 1 for a discussion surrounding the “Oprah Effect” and erotic dance memoirs.

⁴ As Robyn Wiegman observes:

Whiteness studies emerges, after all, in the midst of a devastating lack of employment in the academy, one that many commentators connect to the denationalization of education that has accompanied the dissolution of the cold war. In the downsizing of the university and the proletarianization of its intellectual work force, many of the privileges that have ensured the white hegemony of the intellectual elite have been called into question. New doctorates, especially in the humanities and social sciences, are finding themselves accepting part-time and non-tenure-track appointments, and it is not rare to hear both white faculty and graduate students declare that only people of colour have escaped the employment crisis of higher education. (Wiegman 147)

Olney speaks to the notion that the authors' autobiography serves as "psychological and philosophical speculations, in their comments on themselves and on life in general" (Olney 4), which points to the moment in which we recount our lived experiences also serving as the moment in which we construct them. Although Olney's observations are constructed based on a masculine tradition, he does emphasize how autobiographical writing involves understanding the ways in which the self is constituted through acts of representation. Olney calls attention to the fact that the works I am engaging with possess the intention of representing a form of personal truth and that this truth cannot be accepted at face value and must be considered in terms of the processes of autobiographical reconstruction. The autobiographical genre relies on the assumed universality of human experiences as a means to draw in potential readers. In the context of this project, this proposed universality among the authors' accounts is problematized by the fact that their stated experiences are marked by white privilege, class privilege, and North American privilege. The experiences expressed within these works are framed in a way that both aspires to universality and exposes its impossibility.

While I proudly ground my work as sex-positive, I am aware that providing an overly rosy portrayal of the accounts of the women whose writing provides the backbone of my project would be dishonest and would ultimately be a disservice to pro-sex work discourse. Various issues are inscribed onto erotic dancers including: assumptions regarding experiences with sexual abuse and assault; assumptions regarding immediate family cohesiveness; assumptions regarding experiences of trafficking or coercion into the industry; and assumptions regarding social class and education level. In some cases it is undeniable that the horror stories associated with sex work are accurate, but these cases do not represent the majority of accounts; once again, gestures at universality prove troubling. The responsibility of this project is to engage in critical analysis of the self-reported accounts of dancers' experiences. I am cognizant that while my research tracks the authors self-positioning against rhetorics of exploitation and victimization,

occasionally the observations of said authors veer into the realm of reinscribing the very issues or stereotypes they are challenging onto their fellow dancers, and indeed themselves. These contradictions speak to the complexity of the task of bringing sex work into mainstream discourses.

The stigmatization of sex workers became a major issue in the midst of the Second Wave sex wars, which forced women who identified as feminists into aligning themselves either for or against the radical feminism model. The core issue was that of agency - were women capable of retaining agency in the face of patriarchy or were they consistently being disadvantaged to the point of being victimized simply because they were female. This notion of constant victimization at the hands of patriarchy became a continuous pronouncement for radical feminism, which asserted that sexuality constitutes the brunt of women's oppression (Jeffreys xv) due to the patriarchal contract that establishes men's political superiority over women with unfettered access to their bodies as a matter of property rights (Pateman 2). Within this model, engagement with the sex industry, whether as a worker or a client, is considered an act of implicit support of the notion that women are slaves. As Andrea Dworkin states in her influential 1979 book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*:

[...] pornography is the orchestrated destruction of women's bodies and souls; rape, battery, incest, and prostitution animate it; dehumanization and sadism characterize it; it is war on women, serial assaults on dignity, identity, and human worth; it is tyranny. (Dworkin xxvii)

For individuals who identified as feminist during this period, rejection of this model was complicated by the fundamentalist undertones that marked radical feminist research.

Second-wave radical feminist research, from late-1970s up until the early-1990s, largely relied on a "simple positivist [approach] which was looking for 'the truth'" about sex work (Stanley & Wise 17). This truth was positioned as universal and unquestionable which was of

course problematic as feminist research (radical or otherwise) hinges on the lived experiences of women. The variables that affect one's personal lived experiences render them unique to the individual. People may have similar experiences, but can never have identical ones. A single experiential truth is a impossibility. In order to defend their essentialist tendencies, radical feminists began to accuse women who critiqued their research as being afflicted with false consciousness⁵ in terms of cooperation and maintenance of patriarchal systems of power. When examining this tactic from a sociological standpoint, it falls under Antonio Gramsci's conception of cultural hegemony, with radical feminists attempting to assert themselves as the ideological dominant class "who seek to contain and incorporate all thought and behavior within the terms and limits they set in accordance with their interests" (Goldberg n.p.). Radical feminists took up false consciousness and applied it to their fellow feminists who rejected their assertions of universal truths. Second Wave research critics Liz Stanley and Sue Wise explained it thusly:

We are perfectly ready to accept that all people operate on the *assumption* [emphasis in text] that there is an objective social reality. What we reject is that this 'reality' is the same for everybody— or should be the same for everybody if only they weren't falsely conscious. The idea of 'false' and 'true' consciousness, with 'true consciousness' being what revolutionaries have, is offensively patronizing. It denies the validity of people's own interpretation and understandings. If these don't match the interpretations of revolutionaries then they are false. 'If you agree with me then you're right, if you disagree then you're wrong', is implied but not openly stated. (Stanley & Wise 122)

"False consciousness" became a method of stigmatizing and silencing detractors and eventually a group of women had enough. These women were sex workers.

⁵ The concept of "false consciousness" springs from Marx who believed it to be a method of ideological control, which allowed the bourgeois to blind the proletariat to the oppressive system in which they live.

On Mother's Day in 1973, an organization was founded in California called COYOTE (an acronym for "Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics") that sought to serve as a civil rights organization for sex workers (Brookes & Engelhart). Founded by former sex worker Margo St. James, the group took a labour rights approach to sex work with St. James once saying, "To make a great distinction between being paid for an hour's sexual services, or an hour's typing, or an hour's acting on a stage is to make a distinction that is not there" (Chapkis 70). This labour-based argument called for the decriminalization of all commercial sex involving consenting adults in order to provide sex workers with the same legal protections as not just other workers, but their fellow human beings. As previously mentioned, the stigma associated with engaging in sex work has led to sex workers being classified as inferior and even subhuman in the justice system. COYOTE believed that decriminalization would allow for sex work to be seen as legitimate labour, which would lead to the betterment of sex workers as individuals. Despite sex workers' organized activism, radical feminists still positioned sex workers as naïve victims or patriarchal collabourators.

Five years later, the language surrounding sex focused industries changed. In 1978 sex worker activist Carol Leigh coined the term "sex work" in reaction to the title of a workshop at a conference she was attending in San Francisco. The workshop was entitled the "Sex Use Industry," which offended Ms. Leigh as a sex professional. At the beginning of the workshop she suggested that it be renamed the "Sex Work Industry," because that phrasing provided a more accurate description of what individuals in the industry did and continue to do. Sex workers labour as human beings, they are not objects that are used (Leigh 229-30).

In 1985 the First World Whores' Congress was held in Amsterdam by the International Committee for Prostitutes Rights and the *World Charter for Prostitutes' Rights* was drawn up. The charter also approached sex work from a labour rights perspective calling for decriminalization, the dismantling of zoning laws that ghettoize sex work, and a rejection of

mandatory health screenings (International Committee for Prostitutes Rights 40). The Congress and the Charter were essentially acts of public activism and education as they had no governmental sponsor.

Later that same year a conference entitled “Changing Our Images: The Politics of Prostitution and Pornography” was held in Toronto. This conference was an historical event as it was conceived as a place for sex workers and feminists to come together in dialogue. In the face of mounting radical feminist research that positioned them as victims, sex workers at this conference took the position that feminism was excluding and silencing them causing them “to be feminists in exile; excluded from a rightful place in the feminist movement” (Bell, “Introduction” 17). One of the most striking comments came from an unidentified participant who stated:

[...] the people who are making fat incomes and have prestige out of talking and lecturing on these topics are accomplices in the marginalization, in the devaluation, of sexuality, which I think is connected to the oppression of prostitution – of prostitutes and sex trade workers. (Bell, “From the Floor” 117)

Sex workers who were already united under the banner of labour rights also began to come together to fight those who would continue to oppress not only sex workers but also any woman who could be persecuted under the “whore stigma.” With these concerns in mind they turned to feminists.

To this day no “official” definition for “whore feminism” exists but a French sex worker organization by the name of Syndicat du Travail Sexuel (STRASS) has published a fifteen-point manifesto of whore feminism. The document (for which the group provides an English translation) is too lengthy to reproduced in full but it includes the following points that shape a vision of whore feminism:

Occupy public and night spaces traditionally reserved for men. [...] Combat whore stigma that hinders freedoms of all women, by reclaiming the insult in pride in order to break the original meaning. [...] Awareness of the intersection between different forms of discrimination and being in solidarity with other minority women. [...] Respecting all women voices. Refusing paternalism that infantilises women and judge them unable to express their own will under the false pretext that we are manipulated, yesterday by the priests to deny us the right to vote, or now by pimps to ban soliciting. [...] Refusing to be a victim. (STRASS)

The tradition of whore activism that has formed the theoretical basis for whore feminism is the foundation of my work. Sex work is real work; it is complicated, intensive labour and should be treated as such. Sex workers lives and experiences matter. Despite over thirty years passing since its inception, the Second Wave sex wars are still ongoing and still affect understandings of sex work and sex workers within academia. For example, a feminist theory textbook published in 2012 discusses sex professionals⁶ in stereotypical contexts using terms like “hooker” and “streetwalker” alongside mention of “most prostitution” occurring in places such as “exotic dancing venues” (Root-Aulette & Wittner 130). The information given is not only offensive but is also incorrect in that it ignores the constant threat of law enforcement raids on clubs.

It is very important to make the theoretical distinction between sex-positive feminism and whore feminism. During the Second Wave sex wars, sex-positive feminists placed themselves in opposition to radical feminists’ stigmatization of sex and argued that “the ways in which women exercise [...] their sexuality could be liberatory” (Eichner 312). Others, such as Gayle Rubin, felt that sex-positivity was not a gender-based ideology but one that addressed the costs of “erotic dissidence” (Rubin 160) – i.e. anything outside of “the placement of the penis in the vagina in

⁶ I use the term Sex Professionals to refer to individuals who provide physically intimate sexual services in return for monetary compensation as a means of employment. I acquired this term from the activist group “Sex Professional of Canada” who specifically engage in activism surrounding prostitution.

wedlock” (Rubin 159) – in lives of all adults regardless of gender identification or sexual orientation. Although some sex worker activists, most notably Carol Queen, may argue the virtues of sex positivity as it may be defined as a theory that “allows for and in fact celebrates sexual diversity, differing desires and relationships structures, and individual choices based on consent” (Queen & Comella 278), other sex worker activists take a very different view.

Audacia Ray, a former sex worker and sex worker rights activist, takes issue with the notion that sex-positivity frames radical, liberatory sex through the lens of pleasure. Ray states that:

Emphasizing sex and pleasure harms the sex workers who aren’t firmly in the self-defined population of being sex positive and sexually educated, by unintentionally shaming them for not being enthusiastic participants in the sex they have at work. When engaging in the trade or sale of sex is helping an individual to meet their basic physiological needs, they often do not have the personal resources to channel energy into making the experience of transactional sex perfectly pleasurable for either themselves or their client. (Ray N.P.)

Ray goes on to say that if sex-positivity truly wants to position itself as a medium for social justice, it has to address the “ugly pieces of sexuality” that arise even in entirely consensual situations (Ray N.P.). For Ray, and other sex worker activists, sex-positivity ties into the marketing of the “happy hooker” which demands that “the enjoyment of sexuality is being sold as a product to both workers and our clients” creating unrealistic and inauthentic understandings of sex work (Ray N.P.). While whore feminism and sex-positivity may overlap in some regards, it is the acknowledgement of sex work as *labour* and the identification of all the complications that come along with selling sex that separate whore feminism from sex-positive feminism. The accounts within the texts under examination address these complications and thus uncover why

whose feminism supplies a much more accurate theoretical grounding for the purposes of my project.

This project engages with sex work as legitimate, not only in academia but in society overall. The sex work industry is often referred to as world's oldest, yet it remains among the least respected. Margot St. James states that:

The great fear of men, who are running things, is that if whores have a voice, suddenly good women are going to find out how much their time is worth and how to ask for the money. I really think that women are being put in jail for asking for money. It's not the sex, because in most states in the U.S. consensual sex between adults is perfectly legal unless you do it on the doorstep. Then, of course, it'll scare the horses. (St. James 83)

One reason I chose to examine the accounts of women who work as erotic dancers, as opposed to individuals who labour in a different sector of the sex industry, is that their section of the industry is in the process of gaining significant levels of sociocultural legitimacy; this cultural shift is worth unpacking. In her 2005 book *Female Chauvinist Pigs: Women and the Rise of Raunch Culture*, author Ariel Levy bemoans the popularity of “cardio striptease classes” being offered throughout the United States (Levy 20), causing her to opine that society deems “that *everyone* who is sexually liberated ought to be imitating strippers and porn stars” (27). This tenuous societal acceptance (which I discuss at length in Chapter 4) has caused a new moral panic to break out regarding the sexualization or “pornification” of Western culture (Paul 11). Erotic dancers are simultaneously viewed as goddesses opening the door to sexual freedom and as succubae destroying the moral fabric of society. It is such contradictions that instruct not only popular perceptions of erotic dancers but also, interestingly, many of their perceptions of themselves. The underlying tensions between these very different models inform my work throughout the thesis.

My research focuses on the lived accounts of cis-gender women, but this focus is not meant to erase or silence the experiences of men and/or trans people in the erotic dance industry, as those experiences are equally important and deserving of thorough investigation, though beyond the scope of my current project. My work specifically engages with cis-gendered female sex workers self-positioning against rhetorics of exploitation and victimization, as traditionally speaking (and as exhibited in current anti-trafficking rhetoric⁷) cis-gendered females have received the brunt of sex worker stereotyping within Western society. For example, cis-gender females are still overwhelmingly cast within popular cultural representations of sex work. It is my hope that future works will be able to give the experiences of men and trans people who have engaged in erotic dance the necessary space and attention.

As indicated, this project mainly speaks to the accounts of white female cis-gendered erotic dancers who reside in North America. To a much lesser extent, I engage with some experiences of black and Latina dancers, but conspicuously absent are the voices of Aboriginal women, as these voices remain distinctly absent from discourses surrounding erotic dance overall. In the Canadian context, academic literature regarding sex work positions Aboriginal women as survival sex workers⁸ who work as street-based sex professionals.⁹ While it is not my intent to argue that this consistency in classification does not reflect the experiences of some Aboriginal women who work as sex workers, it cannot be coincidental that the categorization of

⁷ For example, the U.S based National Human Trafficking Resource Center's "Condensed Guide for Service Providers and Law Enforcement" on the subject of "Domestic Sex Trafficking" states on its first page that "trafficking victims can be men or women, adults or children, rich or poor, and U.S. citizens or foreign-born" (Polaris 1), although the document subsequently only addresses the plight of women and girls (Polaris 3).

⁸ Activist Emi Koyama defines "survival sex work" as engagement in sex work in order to obtain the basic necessities one needs to survive. This engagement may occur occasionally or on an ongoing basis.

⁹ For example, a 2005 report from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives entitled *The Unheard Speak Out: Street Sexual Exploitation in Winnipeg* states "statistics estimate that 70 percent of sexually exploited youth and 50 percent of adults are Aboriginal peoples" (Seshia 16). The document's definition of "commercial sexual exploitation" echoes Koyama's definition of "survival sex work" (Seshia 6).

Aboriginal women who engage in sex work overwhelmingly places them in the most vulnerable category of sex workers. Just as Aboriginal women's engagement with survival based sex work can be posited as a legacy of colonialism, so is academia's disinterest in engaging with Aboriginal women who labour as sex workers outside of survival models furthers colonial notions that Aboriginal bodies are "undeserving of integrity and violable at all times" (Smith 10). It does not help matters that discussions of violence against street-based sex professionals go out of their way to whitewash the problem by putting forth "the hegemonic image of women at risk [as] uniformly white" (Ferris 360).

There are no exact figures for how many Aboriginal women have been murdered or gone missing within the past twenty-five years in Canada. In 2010, the Native Women's Association of Canada published a report stating that five years of research had unearthed "information about the disappearance or death of more than five hundred and eighty Aboriginal women and girls across Canada" (NWAC i). This figure has been disputed by the RCMP, who when contacted about NWAC's finding by CBC in early 2013, asserted that they were unaware of five hundred of the cases ("RCMP Questions Claim" n.p.). Prior to this, in 2004 Amnesty International took the Canadian government to task for the unaddressed structural inequalities that "contributed to a heightened – and unacceptable – risk of violence against Indigenous women in Canadian cities" (Amnesty International 2). The sociological imaginary within Canada upholds colonial conceptions of "worthiness" in terms of safety and respect. As noted above, in my discussion of and focus on cis-gendered women can often result in the silencing of vital voices and experiences. In the case of Aboriginal women it is not simply their absence from discourse that is problematic but the erasure of their very lives from all discussions of "real" womanhood or from the nascent discourses of choice/self-awareness often connected to erotic dancing. It is my hope that the broader range of experiences of Aboriginal sex workers will one day be thoroughly and accurately discussed.

Addressing erotic dance within the context of the United States and Canada provides for a richness of experiences, as the sexual cultures within the two countries are distinct. It also creates a level of complication as erotic dance laws within both countries vary so wildly, not just at the federal or provincial/state level but most notably at the municipal level. While a discussion of this variation occurs in Chapter 4, an in-depth examination of the individual countries and their multiplicity of approaches to erotic dance is simply impossible within the confines of this project. Specific distinctions between the United States and Canada are noted throughout.

This project has three parts, with chapters 2-4 addressing the life writing of dancers, interwoven with an exploration of the overarching socio-cultural factors that influenced these accounts. The second chapter examines women's motivations behind entering the erotic dancing industry, as expressed by the dancers themselves. All of the works examined delineate the dancer's (or other dancers') "rabbit hole" moment of entry into the alternative or non-normative world of sex work. I use that analogy in reference to the pivotal moment in *Alice in Wonderland* in which Alice decides to follow the White Rabbit, causing her to arrive in an alternate reality. The negotiation of a new normative then becomes the focus of each narrative. Compartmentalization of dancers' lives before and after engaging in the erotic dance industry serves the important function of allowing the reader the ability to preserve a sense of distance from the author, maintaining a voyeuristic perspective on events. The function of the recounting of individual "rabbit hole" moments is a key structural component of erotic dancing narratives as it captivates the consumeristic tendencies of the reader, as well as possibly providing a place for moral judgment to occur as the reader may not be sympathetic to the dancers' reasons for entering the industry. Effectively, the dance itself becomes a prose structure: the watcher and the watched are recreated and remarketed. I explore these structures together with analyses of the

expressed motivations given by the dancers, always seeking to complicate narratives of trauma or victimization by including logics of power, labour and economic influence.

The third chapter explores another area of narrative organization, which focuses on models of *success*. Each book analyzed in this thesis contains discussions of success, which is intriguing as dominant socio-cultural narratives position all sex workers, including erotic dancers, as part of society's throw-away class and therefore unable to be successful. For example, former dancer and pornographic film performer Jenna Jameson, is almost always described within the media in terms of her former career in pornography but rarely in reference to her business acumen. Although the measurements of success may be different for erotic dancers (i.e. whether or not they have regular customers; the socio-economic positioning of their clientele) the ultimate success translates to financial success, just as in many other industries. Yet while the financial success of erotic dancers may result in the same bank balance as an individual at a prestigious normative job, it does not result in the same social advantages. I look at ways in which the term "success" is deployed and adapted by individual dancers. I explore the socio-cultural factors that influence individual definitions of this term in order to problematize *financial* success as a marker of socio-cultural acceptance, while also considering ways in which claiming success can provide a critical space for empowerment through sex work. The notion of money as success supports heteropatriarchal capitalism, but the public claiming of previously hidden economic spaces (cash labour economies without labour regulation) complicates this support.

The fourth chapter addresses the stigma and negative/limited stereotyping imposed upon women in the erotic dance industry. "Stigma" is a multifaceted notion in this context as stigma acts as both an internal and external force with principles grounded in colonial notions of race, gender, class, and sexuality that impart themselves onto the lives of women who otherwise feel, or might feel, empowered by their life choices. I explore some aspects of stigmatization through

an examination of the socially-constructed good/bad sexual dyad which is firmly rooted within the Madonna vs. Whore dogma. This dogma underpins many popular understandings of sexuality within American and Canadian contexts. I juxtapose these concepts with analysis of dancers' accounts of their experiences with stigmatization and prejudice.

Throughout this project there is an ongoing theme of tensions between oppositional models, often unresolvable tensions. The erotic dance memoir simultaneously functions as a place wherein disempowering stereotypes/inequities are reinscribed and as a place that allows for empowerment through a public association with erotic labour. This particular sub-genre of autobiography is neither fully liberating nor fully restrictive. Consider for a moment the great economic benefit writing a bestselling book provides to the author. In the context of the erotic dance memoir, in order for the authors to obtain "bestseller" status they must reinscribe various problematic rhetorics within their work that allow for the reader to establish a place of comfort with an area long defined as taboo. Again, however, this support of capitalism and marketing of the female body is complicated by the authors' ability to shape their own self-narration and position their readers, both female and male, as consumers of erotic dance. The power dynamics of the club can be transformed on the page.

My project exposes a constant oscillation between revelation and concealment in the mainstream erotic dance memoir: revelation of how the private economies tied to erotic dance play out within the lives of dancers, and concealment of how racial inequalities and class structures play out within the representations under examination. While these narratives allow for self-positioning, self-narration, reclamation of certain types of often-hidden space, and certain challenges to ways in which heteropatriarchal capitalism devalues women's bodies and labour, they also inadvertently highlight how social inequalities surrounding race and class play out within the industry.

Sex worker activist groups around the world use the phrase “Rights Not Rescue” to address the political fallout of their stigmatization and silencing. The notion of “rescue” is extremely important to acknowledge, as scholar Laura Agustín states in her influential book *Sex at the Margins*, this term is now associated with anti-sex work organizations and the narratives they create in order to push agendas that prioritize rescue and rehabilitation regardless of the wishes of actual sex workers (Agustín 3-4). By attending to the voices and lived accounts of erotic dancers, I provide a place of resistance to rescue through focusing critical attention on the wishes of sex workers as speakers, rather than spoken for.

Chapter 2

“If It’s So Easy, Why Haven’t You Done It?”

I believe most plain girls are virtuous because of the scarcity of opportunity to be otherwise.

- Maya Angelou

One of the most intriguing things about the discourse that encompasses sex work is the level of assumption and conjecture that surrounds it, the most notable of which is the “Damaged Goods Hypothesis,” which generalizes the position that individuals who engage in sex work “have higher rates of childhood sexual abuse, psychological problems, and drug use” in comparison to their non-sex worker peers (Griffith et al. 621). The entire hypothesis is steeped in disempowerment as it sidesteps the possibilities of choice and empowerment. It also serves to uphold the devaluation of the female erotic, identified by Audre Lorde as an aspirational internal sense of satisfaction (Lorde 54) that allows women to reexamine their life purpose as something other than labouring in service to men. Lorde argues that this understanding of the erotic has been purposefully “misnamed by men and used against women” in order to trivialize the power inherent in it for women (Lorde 54). Representations of erotic dance often speak to the reclamation of the female erotic and offer radical opposition to the oppression of female erotic empowerment. These narratives respond to the dangers of commodification of damaged ‘goods’ by insisting on an active, empowered service model; economics makes a key distinction between goods as tangible property of use, versus (intangible) services and that is part of the push-back offered here.

In popular culture, discussions of sex workers' assumed past trauma¹⁰ frequently dominate discourses to the point that trauma itself overwhelms and overshadows all other possibilities and potentialities, including authentic representations of women as complex beings. The assumption that a majority of sex workers have suffered emotional trauma and are engaging in sex work as a self-destructive outlet leads smoothly to rescue narratives being built on the presumed notion that sex workers require saving from themselves. As with so many forms of medicalization, this serves to strip sex workers of agency.

Traditional understandings of sex work uphold patriarchal conceptions of the female erotic and one-dimensional portrayals of the lived experiences of women. While happy hookers and victims certainly do exist, it is in the middle ground between stereotypes that accuracy flourishes. After interviewing fifty erotic dancers for their 2009 ethnographic study regarding the processual orders of erotic dance, Mindy S. Bradley-Engen and Jeffery T. Ulmer found that no experiences were universal among dancers and that the atmosphere in which they worked, not events from their past, proved to be the decisive factor in determining whether or not a dancer would view erotic dance as a negative or positive career choice (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 55). By approaching the erotic dance industry as an organization on par with universally recognized forms of labour (for example, factory work) Bradley-Engen and Ulmer put forth a conceptual framework that challenges common assumptions in discussions of sex work. In any area of labour, understanding how processual order affects the workers is paramount in calculating job

¹⁰ Trauma is defined as "the direct personal experience of an event that involves actual or threatened death or serious injury" (Schneider, et al 1) and it is understood to be applicable in cases of both physical as well as emotional injury. Emotional trauma is commonly associated with Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), a psychiatric disorder that is characterized by severe anxiety. Individuals whom suffer from PTSD may attempt to hold symptoms at bay through various outlets, which are more often than not self-destructive (Mood Disorders Society of Canada 2).

satisfaction. In removing the moralistic boundaries surrounding discussions of sex work Bradley-Engen and Ulmer bring to light the fact that dancers' "experiences of agency and constraint" have little to do with the type of work they do but are entirely dependent on the environment in which their work occurs (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 57).

In late 2012, academics from Pennsylvania and Texas published a paper in the *Journal of Sex Research*, which further challenged stereotypical understandings of sex work as it debunked the application of the damaged goods hypothesis to female pornography performers. The study "compared the self-reports of 177 porn actresses to a sample of women matched on age, ethnicity, and marital status" (Griffith et al. 621) and found that "there was no significant difference" between the performers and the match group in terms of experiences with childhood sexual abuse (Griffith et al. 625). In terms of psychological problems, the performers reported significantly higher self esteem than the matched sample (Griffith et al. 626). The performers did report more drug use than the matched sample, although the study's authors point out that the performers responses were "similar to what was found in a recent national-level study" (Griffith et al. 630).

The release of this study created waves online with pro-sex work advocates celebrating the public acknowledgement of what they had been stating for years, and anti-sex work ideologues dismissing the findings. In light of the opening words of my introduction regarding popular assumptions, I note that a reporter for *Psychology Today* who reported on the study ended his article by stating:

As a means of perhaps preempting some likely comments, please note that my reporting the findings of this study does not imply that I am a pornographer or that I am a supporter of this career choice! (Saad N.P.)

If you strip the damaged goods hypothesis away from the discourses surrounding sex work it removes a popular distinction between “good girls” and “bad girls.” It becomes possible for any girl – e.g. the girl next door, or a white girl from an economically privileged, (ostensibly) morally-strong background – to become a sex worker. It also becomes possible for all of these ‘girls’ to speak up and reframe their own experiences, whether of trauma, politicization, erotic self-awareness, or indeed all at once.

Any woman can become a sex worker, regardless of racialization or social positioning, and this is borne out within the narratives I examine for this project. Pornography performer Jenna Jameson began her sex work career as an erotic dancer at the age of seventeen (Jameson & Strauss 35) despite having a police officer as a father (Jameson & Strauss 202). Diablo Cody worked a day job as an office worker and danced at nights (Cody, ch. 4) before quitting her day job to dance full time (Cody, ch. 17). Elisabeth Eaves was a university-educated, former sorority girl from Vancouver who became a stripper after years of weighing the pros and cons of engaging in the industry (Eaves 41-2). Sarah Tressler entered the industry as a college student after she became frustrated with her take home pay as a Starbucks barista (Tressler, Introduction).

Tressler’s account is representative of the “putting myself through school” archetype of erotic dancers that has in itself become a stereotype, particularly among white dancers, although Siobhan Brooks’ ethnography *Unequal Desires* finds that women of colour are also part of the

cliché. Brooks herself began working as a sex worker when she was attending San Francisco State University (Brooks 1), and two of her interview participants worked as dancers in order to pay their college tuitions in New York City (Brooks 40 & 46). Interestingly, Brooks points out that the support staff within erotic dance clubs (e.g. waitress, bartenders, coat check attendants) are more likely to be working class and struggling to make ends meet than the dancers themselves (Brooks 38). Readers who find this surprising might consider the classist underpinnings of the damaged goods hypothesis. Popular cultural discourses frequently associate domestic violence, childhood sexual abuse, psychological problems, and drug use with poverty.

Sociologist Mary Nell Trautner found that assumptions surrounding links between social class and sexuality serve as a major organizational function within erotic dance clubs, as they allow customers to seek out class-based sexual fantasies (Traunter 785). Traunter found that working-class dancers performed a more explicit sexuality than their middle-class counterparts who “enforced voyeuristic sexuality” (Trautner 782). These performances feed into a notion that the working-class women embody promiscuous sexuality whereas middle-class women may be viewed as upholding the WASP tradition of frigidity; these are questions of the representation/performance of different degrees of accessibility. In this area issues of tension are brought to the fore as dancers may reinforce class stereotypes by utilizing them in performance in order to aid in self-advancement — self-advancement which may ultimately alter their socio-economic class. Trautner’s observations speak to some class-based valuations of sex within our culture; middle-class dancers are paid for one type of fantasy of access, whereas working-class dancers are rewarded for a different type of fantasy. Yet regardless of how individual dancers

embody class and sexuality, the reality is that all erotic dancers do not enter sex work due to economic coercion, just as all sex workers are not the victims of trauma. The lack of causal link between class and erotic dance work further dismantles the damaged goods hypothesis that has been a backbone of anti-sex work arguments for the past twenty years (Griffith et al. 629).

The damaged goods hypothesis stands as a conceptual model by which sex workers are measured and for some its mere existence can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Readers of these memoirs become aware that the model *itself* causes damages, in a feedback loop that is another interesting source of tension(s): resistance coexists with reinforcement. Bradley-Engen discovered that drug use was more common amongst dancers who felt they had no other employment alternatives other than erotic dance (Bradley-Engen 46-7). That being said even individuals who internalize self-destructiveness can work in resistance to it. Jameson initially reacted to her fame by “living wild, free, and fucked-up” because she finally had the space to do so (Jameson & Strauss 520) and she believed that is how success was celebrated as she had seen so many rock bands do the same thing (Jameson & Strauss 519). Jameson eventually turned away from this dynamic after working through internalized stereotypes.

Understanding the damaged good hypothesis, with all its classist, paternalistic, medicalizing assumptions, is crucial to engaging in analysis of non-fiction texts by or about sex workers in the United States and Canada. Challenging the hypothesis is a theme in all of the memoirs in this study. And yet the authors still utilize the “good girl” vs. “bad girl” frameworks in order to create emotional resonances within their work. They use good/bad binaries as tools for self-marketing as they allow readers to remain comfortable with their pre-existing ideas surrounding female sexuality even as their ideas of sex work are simultaneously being

challenged by women (re)claiming erotic, economic and literary spaces. This paradoxical setup is repeated, almost obsessively, across the memoirs in this study: good/bad remains a descriptive model even as the authors insist on sex work as a labour market that is not defined by moral judgements.

An unresolvable good/bad framework frequently appears in representation of an author's "rabbit hole" moment of entry into the world of sex work. Lewis Carroll in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, describes Alice's transition between worlds as follows:

Alice started to her feet, for it flashed across her mind that she had never before seen a rabbit with either a waistcoat-pocket, or a watch to take out of it, and burning with curiosity, she ran across the field after it, and fortunately was just in time to see it pop down a large rabbit-hole under the hedge. In another moment down went Alice after it, never once considering how in the world she was to get out again. (Carroll, Ch.1)

I use this image of emerging into another world as an analogy for how the narratives under examination handle the pivotal moment of demarcation between dancers' "good girl" lives prior to dancing versus "bad girl" lives after entering the profession. As my chosen image the rabbit hole, a morally-neutral transitional space, troubles the damaged goods hypothesis by underscoring personal transformation and experiential knowledge rather than pre-existing trauma or economic need. I deploy it deliberately to push back against good/bad limitations and to emphasize choice, including, paradoxically, the choice to rely on good/bad modeling for narrative and structural reasons.

In the ethnographies under examination here, the authors often preface their work with their own accounts of dancing. R. Danielle Egan, author of *Dancing for Dollars and Paying for*

Love, which is an American academic ethnography, her description of her revelatory moment is steeped in self-analysis and intellectualism:

Waiting to go on stage for the first time at an amateur night, I felt, for the most part, intellectually comfortable and good about my decision. My stomach, well, that was a horse of a different colour. As I climbed the stairs leading up to the stage I wondered if I was walking the academic plank, stripping not only my clothes but also my academic credibility. However, once the music started my anxiety slipped away.

(Egan xvi)

Note the language of fear and stigmatization and loss of status. The idea that one's credibility as a producer of knowledge somehow changes based on the activities in private life is a constant subject of media sensationalism. It also has very real consequences in people's lives, as exhibited in the case of middle-school science teacher Stacie Halas whose dalliance in the pornographic film industry cost her her job (Mertl N.P.). Melissa Petro lost her job as an art teacher at an elementary school after she wrote about her experiences as a sex worker, a job she left prior to her teaching career (Fasick & Yoav N.P.). Teachers are not the only individuals targeted for this stigmatization; indeed public figures of any sort can have their abilities called into question on moral grounds — another odd mismatch or conflation of categories that provides constant tension. The story of Suzy Favor Hamilton, a three-time U.S. Olympian, exemplifies this after she was forced to reveal in late 2012 that she had been working as an escort in Las Vegas after a client threatened to expose her to the media (“U.S. Olympian's Secret Life As Las Vegas Escort.” N.P.). Favor-Hamilton was shamed in the media and was subsequently banned from competing in any Disney sponsored athletic events (Warren, et al N.P.). Although stigmatization

and its impact on the authors of the works under examination are addressed at length in Chapter 4, it must be noted here that Egan's concerns are not based on "What will the neighbors say?" but "What will my academic colleagues say?", a distinction that directly signals the impact of the damaged goods hypothesis on our understandings of *knowledge production itself*.

Many dancers fight back narratively against good/bad positioning by refocusing attention on the quality of performance itself as the source of anxiety or transition; i.e. the movement between worlds becomes a movement between skill sets. Several authors report multiple transitional moments as they enter different worlds/skill sets of sex work. Lily Burana, author of *Strip City*, first entered the sex industry as a peep show girl, an experience shared by fellow authors Siobhan Brooks and Elisabeth Eaves. Peep shows involve the customer viewing an erotic show involving one or multiple women from within a coin operated booth. The more money the customer puts in, the longer and more graphic the show becomes with the performer(s) receiving a majority of the profits. Burana, describes her first show with her friend Rachel: "For every increment of flesh the man requests – my top off, her top off, my stockings, her shoes – Rachel just keeps tapping the slot" (Burana 105). Her understanding of the direct relationship between money and service is profoundly influenced by this first show.

Burana later defines erotic dancing as "a place where you have a stage to yourself and are expected to use it with style and sex appeal" (Burana 34). The expectation of having a stage presence makes her "[...] nervous the point of nausea [...]" prior to her first dance (Burana 34). Burana describes the moment with a focus on the quality of her work, not on a transition between good/bad:

I sat on the staircase backstage at San Francisco's notorious Mitchell Brothers O'Farrell Theater with six other auditioning hopefuls and tried to steady my knees. The manager came back to where we were hiding behind the curtain, propped one foot on the lowest step, rested his elbow on his knee so he could lean down to talk to us. [...] "Don't worry about how you move out there. Ninety percent of the women who work here can't dance." That wasn't exactly true – in fact, his assessment was as rudely unjust to the veteran dancers as it was meant to be reassuring to us wannabes – but I felt a little more at ease. When my turn came in the amateur contest lineup, I got up on shaky legs, loped around stage for the length of Aerosmith's "Love in an Elevator", and took first place by audience-applause vote. I won a little trophy and twenty-five bucks. And a job. Which is pretty good winnings from a dance contest for somebody who can't dance. (Burana 34)

Notable in Burana's account is the clumsy reassurance of the manager, whose attempt at comforting her comes across as genuine attempt at kindness rather than as an insidious attempt to somehow con or harm Burana, which challenges the stereotype of the exploitative, sleazy strip club manager. The actions of her manager demonstrate how sex work is actual work and that at its core, erotic dance is a job like any other. In this scene, Burana's manager acts in a supportive, encouraging manner - a manner that characterizes societal understandings surrounding the employer/employee relationship and therefore position Burana's job as employment, not exploitation.

Similar to Burana, Jameson also has more than one moment of transition into a new world/skill set, one of which takes the prize for the most dramatic representation of a rabbit hole

moment out of all the books in this study. Jameson's transitional moment focuses on reader attention on self-fashioning and image-production, refusing to be drawn into good/bad stereotyping. Jameson sought employment at an erotic dancing club, only to be turned away by the manager because he noticed that she had braces on her teeth. Jameson, who was seventeen years old at the time, was undeterred. She recalls:

I was tired of hearing the same shit from everyone: Come back when you've lost the braces, come back when you're older, come back when you're taller, come back when you're Korean. When was I finally going to get a chance to participate in life?

I returned to Jack's house. He wasn't there, of course. I turned up the shower as hot as I could stand and peeled off my clothes. [...] About ten minutes into my soaking, I had an epiphany. I leaped out of the shower, ran dripping to the hallway closet, and took a needle-nose pliers and wire cutters out of Jack's toolbox. I rushed back to the bathroom, rubbed a clear circle into the fog on the mirror, and began snipping the wire holding my braces together. Then I popped each metal link away from my teeth, one by one. I screamed, I swore, I doubled over in pain. [...] Then I chipped and cleaned the dried cement out of my teeth, and smiled. It was an adult smile. (Jameson & Strauss 34-5)

In the context of Jameson's story the removal of her braces is symbolic of her transforming from a "painfully shy and antisocial" teenager (Jameson & Strauss 30) into the sex symbol she would later become.¹¹ The imagery of the mirror is also significant as it provides a window into her

¹¹ Jameson's young age points toward the very complicated and difficult issues facing a range of sex workers, sexual activities, and children who are exploited sexually; while it is not in the purview of this thesis to unpack these differential experiences I want to acknowledge here the complex underpinnings of linking the categories of youth, adolescence, and childhood to sex work

newfound maturity and by smiling at herself she expresses control over her own image, something that she then retains and expresses in performance in the club. This method of self-fashioning is discussed at length in Chapter 3 as a form of “success”, but for our current discussion it is important to understand this moment as the point at which Jameson consciously obliterates an obstruction to entrance into the erotic dance industry. Her self-presentation narratively focuses readers on issues of choice and performance.

Jameson returned to the club that rejected her. Despite her being underage, the manager was so impressed by Jameson’s moxie that he hired her immediately. Within minutes of her hiring, Jameson was onstage in an outfit she had to borrow from another dancer. Once again her description focuses attention on the quality of performance — the quality of her *work*:

I was so woefully unprepared to do this in front of a bunch of leering guys. I had always imagined how sexy I would be stripping, and what a turn-on it would be teasing all the guys, but all I was conscious of at that moment was the sweat forming in my underarms and actually dripping onto the stage. My body was out of control: my knees were knocking compulsively like chattering teeth.

I realized, a tad too late, that I didn’t know any stripper moves. Fortunately, I found a friend onstage: the metal pole. For some reason, I couldn’t let go of it. I just held on to the pole and stared at the stage, too scared to make eye contact with anyone in the audience. The shoes were too big for me, and it felt like I was going to fall on my face again at any moment. I was sure that everyone was making fun of me.

Fortunately I had my dance lessons, preteen pageants, and chorus lines to fall back

and how this differs across regions and experience.

on, and my body sputtered to life and started moving by itself while my mind twisted into nervous knots. When the song finally ended, I heard applause and whistles. [...] I was so naive that I didn't even stop to gather the dollar bills that were left for me when the song ended. (Jameson & Strauss 38-9)

Jameson's moment of onstage epiphany distinguishes itself from the other accounts discussed thus far in that she was concerned that she was going to be made a figure of fun by her audience, and not in a moral sense — in a performative one.

Whether deploying good/bad paradigms or focusing on the performative, the most intriguing issue surrounding the use of the rabbit hole moment as a literary device within erotic dancer narratives is that it engages with a dialogue of *difference* that serves to other sex workers from the rest of society. The question arises, to what extent does this re-entrench prejudices against sex workers? Even when the good/bad paradigm is avoided, is it presented in some ways via a narrative of difference? By insisting on a before/after, pre/post model for difference, the authors are reinscribing onto themselves a tool of social control that marginalizes them within society and seems in many ways to be at odds with the coexisting claims that erotic dance is just work like other forms of work. The most striking thing about the use of said dichotomy within erotic dance narratives is that the authors are entirely aware that prior to entering the sex industry they were situated as “good girls.” They are also aware that regardless of what they do after leaving the sex industry, they will always be positioned as “bad girls” from their first erotic dance onward. As Burana states, “Now I can accept that having been a stripper means I may always be an easy target for ridicule. Act cheap, reap the cheap shot, right?” (Burana 251).

Writing, like erotic dance, is work, and representational patterns are choices, just as the decision to become an erotic dancer is a choice. So again the tension arises between reinscription of stereotypes and deployment/use of stereotypes for self-advancement or self-performance — this time in literary terms. As previously mentioned, the authors’ deployment of “good girl”/”bad girl” binary or pre/post binaries within their works can be viewed as a deliberate attempt to recreate pre-existing narratives surrounding eroticized bodies in order to aid in mass consumption of these reimagined narratives. For example, Jameson’s book was not only a New York Times best seller; it was also featured on Oprah Winfrey’s talk show when Winfrey brought Jameson on as a guest to discuss the pornographic film industry. “The Oprah Effect” is a well-documented phenomenon that addresses the massive increase attention and profit that occurs after Winfrey endorses any product (Hornbuckle N.P.). Oprah implicitly endorsed Jameson’s book by having her on the show and by publishing excerpts from the book on her website.¹² Winfrey exposed her audience of approximately 5.7 million people (Anburajan N.P.) not only to Jameson’s story but concepts and prejudices surrounding sex work more broadly. Jameson’s application of a “good girl”/”bad girl” binary to her accounts cannot be overlooked as a factor for her book’s success. Jameson (and her co-author Neil Strauss) weave a compelling narrative through the consistent contrast of a “good girl” constructed through diary entries, childhood photos, and family reminiscences and a “bad girl” represented within promotional photos of the adult Jameson and her accounts of her work within the adult industry. This binary construction arises in this first few lines of the book, in which Jameson states:

¹² <http://www.oprah.com/relationships/Excerpt-from-How-to-Make-Love-Like-a-Porn-Star-by-Jenna-Jameson>

There comes a moment in every life when a choice must be made between right and wrong, between good and evil, between light and darkness. These decisions are made in an instant, but with repercussions that last a lifetime. (Jameson & Strauss 8)

The emotional impact of this sentiment is made greater by the accompanying photo on the previous page, which shows a fresh faced Jameson at the age of 15.

The good/bad stereotyping allows comfort to be established but it also is radical in the way in which it deploys the binary to ground a narrative that challenges many readers' preconceived notions about sex work as an industry. While the act of stepping onto the erotic dance stage serves as a visual metaphor for the adaptation of a "bad girl" label, dancers challenge the binary by sharing their stories with the general public — thereby disallowing the narratives of shame so often associated with the "bad girl" figure. They are instead taking up the binary in order to do the cultural work of reframing and reshaping preconceived notions of sex work and the erotic. Paradoxically, they use anti-women stereotyping to expose various forms of female empowerment. Part of the work of writing is shaping the memory — or creation of memory — in story form, with particular ends in mind. Remembering, as defined by black feminist literary critic Barbara Christian, is the deliberate reconstruction of memory in order to void fixed categories (Christian 53). It is not my wish to appropriate Christian's theory, which was conceived in reference to the works of black female authors; however her theory demonstrates the ways in which categorization homogenizes experiences, allowing them to become palatable for the consumer/reader (Christian 54). Rather than voiding all categories Christian acknowledges the porous nature of them (Christian 55). Stereotypes mix uneasily with real life; by its nature this conflict speaks to slippage of categories.

It is important to understand that many current, popular dialogues surrounding the “good girl” vs. “bad girl” dichotomy are based on colonial conceptualizations of purity as a being linked only to certain women. As Andrea Smith points out in *Conquest: Sexual Violence and American Indian Genocide*, Aboriginal bodies have been consistently positioned within the colonial imaginary as being “immanently polluted with sexual sin” and “because Indian bodies are ‘dirty’, they are considered sexually violable and ‘rapable’, and the rape of bodies that are considered inherently impure or dirty simply does not count” (Smith 10). As Aboriginal identity (and bodily integrity) came to be controlled by the colonizers (Smith 12), so did the identities and bodies of African slaves who were viewed solely as property. This allowed slave traders and slave masters to think that they owned slaves bodies and were therefore granted access to said bodies at any given moment, which lead to the identity of African women being shaped by the brutal sexuality forced on them. As bell hooks states in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*, the “black presence in early North American society allowed whites to sexualize their world by projecting onto black bodies a narrative of sexualization disassociated from whiteness” (hooks 62).

As the colonizers concocted justifications for the sustained sexual violation of Aboriginal and African women, the moral positioning of white women was being established. Wendy McElroy states the prevailing view of the time was that “[...] women [read: white women] were naturally chaste. They were the mothers and the wives and the cornerstone of the church” (McElroy Ch. 3). When we follow the semantic link between chastity and purity the concept becomes more solidified. As Richard Dyer describes, whiteness is inherently characterized with goodness:

[...] there are inevitable associations of white with light and therefore safety, and black with dark and therefore danger [...] people point to the Judaeo-Christian use of white and black to symbolize good and evil, as carried still in such expressions as ‘a black mark’, ‘white magic’, ‘to blacken the character’ and so on. (Dyer 45)

White female sexual purity has been idealized and this idealization has created a moral template by which all women (white or racialized) are measured.

While I am acutely aware of the violences that can be recreated by linking feminist theory created by women of colour and the commodification of female sexuality, it is important to recognize that women-of-colour feminists have been addressing the forced commodification of their bodies, the resulting assumptions regarding their sexuality, and the oppression which culminated from both for decades. Although there are serious risks of being read as engaging in appropriation, it is important to identify the rich history of dialogue surrounding erotics, emancipation, and challenges to insular feminism that women-of-colour feminists have been creating far before white feminists came on board. Patricia Hill Collins states that the “ideology of black sexuality that assigned (heterosexual) promiscuity to black people” (Hill Collins 98) has existed since chattel slavery and currently we are seeing “long-standing ideas about black women’s promiscuity become recycled and redefined as a problem for the state” in terms of state interventions regarding pregnancy (Hill Collins 104). This control of black sexuality has existed at the state level since slavery and allows for a link to be made between the state control of sex work and the state control of black sexuality. This link is clear within the North American context, although other racialized bodies within North America confront different issues regarding the creation of myths surrounding their sexualities that play out in different ways. The

accounts of dancers of colour are crucial to understanding how white female sexual purity is valued within erotic dance and the work of feminist of colour allow for a deeper reading of these stories.

For example, Brooks found that race, and the preconceived notions that individuals carry regarding it, cannot be separated from desire when it comes to the consumption of erotic dance. One of the white men Brooks interviewed stated that he liked frequenting black erotic dance clubs “because you can touch more” and “the women are not stuck up here like those white bitches are [at a predominantly white club]” (Brooks 41). In order to fully understand this customer’s remarks one has to rely on not only the history of white female sexual purity but also the history of the devaluation of black female sexuality. For this customer the devaluation of black bodies allowed him to reject any notion of black female bodily autonomy, allowing him to engage in behavior that “white bitches” refused to tolerate. The customer remains completely unaware of how he as a white man in a black space is serving to recreate violence against black women. It is through the utilization of texts from feminists of colour that break down the colonial history of violence that its recreation can be identified and unpacked as a legacy of centuries of black female sexual devaluation.

This narrative idealizes purity and underscores its link to white femininity; it returns us to the ways in which narratives of purity became a form of social control that placed marriage and motherhood as the only goals a female should truly care about (including non-white females who were/are paradoxically always already excluded from the category of purity but nonetheless shaped by it). As Jessica Valenti opines in *The Purity Myth: How America’s Obsession With Virginity Is Hurting Young Women*:

Idolizing virginity as a stand-in for women's morality means that nothing else matters— not what we accomplish, not what we think, not what we care about and work for. Just if/how/whom we have sex with. That's all. (Valenti 11)

It could be argued that this social control was the cause of the sexual revolution seventy-five years later, which began with the availability of the birth control pill on the American market in 1960. The pill allowed women options outside of marriage and motherhood by allowing them control of their reproductive health. The possibility of this control leading to women engaging in promiscuous sex caused social purity groups to double down on their efforts to keep women pure, although their messaging remained the same as it was during the early days of North America colonialism when Puritan values stood as the bedrock for the creation of this “new” land. White womanhood began to be understood in opposition to all sorts of sexualities thus producing ideas around promiscuity that shaped different communities and people,¹³ including white women as “naturally nonsexual” (Valenti 175), in different ways. By simultaneously creating the sexual ideal of white womanhood alongside the idea that white women were “naturally nonsexual,” sexually expressive white females came to be viewed as unnatural. In fact, some white females engaging in premarital sex were medicalized under the banner of “promiscuity” which has been linked to issues such as “low self-esteem, depression, or attention-seeking behavior” (Valenti 124).

¹³ For further discussion see: Carter, Julian. *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880-1940*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2007.

“Promiscuity” and the damaged goods hypothesis find themselves linked in regards to beliefs surrounding female self-esteem. Both constructs rely on the notion that women who have poor self-esteem are more likely to be overtly sexual. This is apparent in research regarding female adolescent participation in sports which advances the position that athletic participation boosts self-esteem thereby lessening the possibility of female adolescents engaging in early, unprotected sex (Miller et al. 101). By positioning a lack of self-esteem as the issue which opens a Pandora’s Box of sexual behavior among girls and women, it allows people to make the assumption that erotic dancers have low self-esteem and therefore must have a myriad of other personal/psychological issues. An assumption that may continuously haunt dancers in their lives post-dancing as its construction via the academy allows it a certain amount of believability. This assumption is challenged by the finding within the aforementioned study that challenged the damaged goods hypothesis that pornography performers reported significantly higher self esteem than the matched sample (Griffith et al. 626).

A constructed correlation between “promiscuity” and unhealthy “attention-seeking behavior” is something that is specifically important within the context of erotic dance. If this medicalized view of “attention-seeking” is adopted, the question arises: what could be more promiscuously attention-seeking than taking one’s clothes off in public on a nightly basis? The memoirs in this study ask us to consider instead: is this form of attention-seeking a pathology or an expression of the female erotic? Enjoying the attention of others is something that is repeatedly expressed by the authors’ within this work. At the age of 16 Jameson realized that her physical attributes were causing “men [to] gasp and turn their heads, especially when they were walking arm-in-arm with their wives” and that she “loved the attention” she attracted (Jameson

& Strauss 8). When Burana lists the reasons why she misses dancing, the attention she received ranked immediately below the money she earned (Burana 248). Diablo Cody states that as a dancer she wanted “[...] the guys to savor the attention I granted and return it in kind” (Cody, Ch. 6). Note that the pathologization of “attention-seeking” is particularly marked in relation to females, which speaks to patriarchal notions of control over women’s bodies. In some ways, erotic dancers problematize this patriarchal pathologization as their careers are based on the rewards that seeking attention can bring.

The financial rewards received by erotic dancers also disrupt the notion of sex having an intrinsic value, which was put forth in order to maintain the construct of female purity. The value placed on sex was a moral one; the purity of one’s soul was at stake. In a capitalist society, once something has value it becomes a commodity and, as Thomas Macaulay Millar points out, this led to a commodity model of sexuality. In this model “sex is like a ticket – women have it and men try to get it,” which “puts women in the position of not only seller, but also guardian or gatekeeper” of their sexual purity (Millar 30). The onus is entirely on women to not give away their ticket and when this pressure is rejected and their (pardon the metaphor) ticket is punched, it is seen as a renunciation of the purity that is afforded to them due to their race. Women who give up their commodity are accorded the same status as cheap, or damaged, goods - “women whose commodity [...] nobody would want except as a cheap alternative at a low price” (Millar 31). Returning to the notion of erotic dance as a service rather than a commodity, the challenge offered by these memoirs is considerable. As erotic dancers sell the idea, the fantasy, the performance of sex — not sex itself — they both engage with and refuse the commodification of

female sexuality. They both sell and retain their “virtue” — thereby allowing them to maintain their commodity and exploit it at the same time.¹⁴

Erotic dancers problematize understandings of female purity both within and without the sex work industry. Erotic dancers sell the *idea* of sex, not sex itself. The concept of female chastity is so idealized within society that, as Valenti explains:

[...] virginity has become the easy answer — the morality quick fix. You can be vapid, stupid, and unethical, but so long as you’ve never had sex, you’re a ‘good’ (e.g., ‘moral’) girl and therefore worthy of praise. (Valenti 11)

Yet once could conceivably be a virgin and still work as an erotic dancer, which complicates societal understandings surrounding female chastity.

It is not, just a girl’s physical virtue that allows them the label of the “good girl” within society at large. One must also be “young, white, and skinny”; “accessible and eager to please”; not “a woman of colour”, nor “a low-income girl, [...] a fat girl [... or] disabled” (Valenti 19-20). In a nutshell – one must be pretty, perky, and white to earn the distinction of being seen as pure, returning us to the issue of whiteness as a key building block to this particular sort of memoir. The specific implications for erotic dancers are expanded upon in Chapter 3 in discussions surrounding employer mandated appearance standards within erotic dance clubs. Although for the purpose of the current discussion it should be noted (harkening back to Bradley-Engen &

¹⁴ Once again: paradox, which is further complicated when, as discussed later in this chapter, some of the authors within this study establish a hierarchy of purity in terms of dancers’ on-the-job deportment. These individuals attempt to avoid being perceived as cheap via the creation of their own stereotypes surrounding female purity.

Ulmer's work surrounding the processual orders of erotic dance¹⁵) that the pretty, perky, pure girl is only one type of fantasy that erotic dance clubs attempt to sell.

Negotiation of models for purity are complicated for dancers, as for the general public. In her book *Bare: The Naked Truth About Stripping*, author Elisabeth Eaves discusses how her entrance into the sex industry made her question herself as a human being in comparison to those within society who had never engaged in sex work:

It had come so easily, this change from office girl to naked girl. I had expected more obstacles, if from nowhere else than within myself. There must be hurdles, I had presumed, or nobody would make such a fuss about the job. Because truly anyone who was female, breathing, and without major deformities¹⁶ could do this work. I had done no more than show up and sit through some interviews [...] It was the willingness that made me different. Maybe I had once had some block within me of the kind that stops other woman from becoming strippers, but if so it had disappeared years before. I felt like a misfit, as though I were missing some piece of DNA shared by the rest of society. (Eaves 74)

Here again is the core narrative of pre/post difference. Eaves' understanding as herself as different from the "good girls" who retained their "block within [themselves] of the kind that stops other woman from becoming strippers" shows a direct engagement with the good/bad

¹⁵ As defined by Bradley-Engen & Ulmer: "The processual order perspective, and its associated concept of social worlds, focuses on social organization and structure without losing sight of the ontological importance of human agency and interaction process" (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 32).

¹⁶ Eaves' abelist remark reaffirms beauty standards through commenting on the most unbeautiful, those she classifies as "deformed." What is unclear is whether or not this comment is representative of Eaves' personal beliefs or a reflection of her observations of beauty standards within the erotic dance industry.

measurement of female worth which serves to perpetuate binary models of difference as explored previously within the discussions conceptions of purity. The notion that embracing one's sexualization for monetary gain still strikes Eaves as a "misfit" behaviour, even though she herself acknowledges it as an economic deviation (Eaves 73-4). Eaves' internalization of the difference model provides another example of self-imposed othering – which speaks to scripts of purity and, as indicated by her use of words like "misfit" and "missing", to the "damaged goods" hypothesis.

Anxiety about good/bad does not exist only in pre/post scenarios in this memoirs, but also in us/them or me/her scenarios. Eaves discusses how she negotiates her professional life as a dancer:

Of course, I had sold my sexuality, my nakedness, and my words, but I hadn't seen this as the same as selling sex. Everyone had their boundaries, and the reasons behind them were as varied as personalities. For me the main division was between looking and touching, which was why I have recoiled from lap dancing and could never have worked parties. but I could be looked at, because I didn't necessarily connect looking sexual to having sex. Being looked at sexually was something that just happened, something I had learned to live with. It was removed for me as a person, which was why I could exploit it and play with it. Having sex though, was about me, I chose it.
(Eaves 291)

For Eaves the boundary between "looking and touching" is one she refuses to cross although she states that she understands that boundaries are dependent on the individual, there is still the lingering implication that a dancer who does not observe the same boundaries is (in words of

fellow author Lily Burana) “[...] a weak and greedy person. Bad Boundary Barbie” (Burana 70). The stigmatization of fellow dancers is something that is discussed at length in Chapter 4, but at this juncture it is important to recognize the self-differentiation between dancers who engage in physical contact and dancers who do not. Dancers who engage in intimate physical contact are considered by dancers themselves to be the “baddest” of the “bad girls”, whereas dancers who refuse physical contact still retain a level of “good girl” status. Obviously this too is an area of deep tensions, and one that again exposes irresolvable conflicts between dancer’s self-positioning narratively in moral terms and dancers’ coexisting claims that sex work is just another kind of job, to be negotiated in economic terms.

Physical contact between “good girl” dancers and customers occurs. The level of contact varies from dancer to dancer based on their own personal boundaries but, as Burana observes:

Stripping didn’t used to be so touchy-feely, but in the past ten years, it’s become a full-contact sport. I understand this evolution from an economic perspective—there are a lot more clubs, hence, a lot more competition, and as stripping becomes more acceptable, local legislations relax. [...] It’s hard enough rearranging your psyche so you can comfortably work half-naked in front of strangers, but touch is something quite apart. Touch changes everything. (Burana 68)

The economy of touch is complex. In erotic dancing, legal forms of touch are categorized as contact dances or full contact dances. Contact dances involve the dancers engaging in physical contact with the customer, but the customer is not allowed to reciprocate the contact (Burana 67-68). For example, a dancer may grind up against or hump the lap of a customer but the second the customer grinds or humps back the dance is over. This boundary exists in order for the club

to remain within the law. Full contact dances involve the dancer and customer engaging in mutual physical contact. For example, some clubs offer something known as a “bed dance” which involves the dancer and customer lying on bed while the dancer simulates sex with the customer (Cody, Ch. 8). The customer remains fully clothed and the dancer is responsible for setting the limits regarding touch, although the customers may not always be respectful of the set limits (Cody, Ch. 9).

Recently an online debate has occurred amongst current erotic dancers regarding the existence of “extras girls.” Extras girls are erotic dancers that are hated “by [their] colleagues, but loved by men. [They] fuck and suck, blow and go” (Josephine) – in other words, extras girls do not just sell the idea of sex they actually sell sex within the confines of their respective clubs. The debate began when a dancer named Josephine authored a post on a well-known sex worker blog regarding her personal disdain for extras girls. Josephine’s expressed contempt for this type of dancer revolves around the financial disparity she feels occurs between “clean” dancers and extras girls. She explains:

But here’s the rub [...] - you’re undercutting my money. Your chummy blowjob makes my private dance seem churchy. I have to race you to customers. I have to hustle twice as hard when you work. Frankly, it’s exhausting. The market is highly competitive here in Detroit. We are home to over 30 strip clubs. That’s one strip club for every four square miles. For a city in permanent recession and once referred to as a ghost town, that is a lot of dancers! And I’m proud to say that Detroit offers the best lap dances in the country, for only \$20 a song! Unless you’re working, Extras Girl. Then that crisp \$20 might buy a blowjob, a handjob, or even sex. (Josephine)

Josephine's argument against extras girls mirrors the reasoning put forth by Lily Burana regarding the economic basis for the evolution of contact within the industry – more girls equals more competition and more competition requires innovation. The conflation of languages of cleanliness/churchiness and of monetary value highlights the confusion/opposition of categories so characteristic of narratives of erotic dance.

Dancers who make money working as extras girls within their clubs hit back hard at Josephine's online demonization of them. Three other blog posts popped up on the same site, written (anonymously) by dancers who have engaged in selling sexual acts while dancing. Although their individual accounts differed, the responding dancers all put forth the same argument in response to the criticism – engaging in extras improved our personal ability to make money as dancers and allowed us to become financially successful. Like Josephine, one of the responding dancers works in Detroit and she described her entrance into the world of being an extras girl thusly:

I was discouraged and not making much money. I had men left and right asking me for things that I told myself I'd never do. I don't think I was morally against doing extras, I just felt that I didn't want to expose myself to the risk. Beaten down and frustrated, I started to contemplate dabbling in extras. First, it started with blowjobs. Our dances start at \$25 per song. A customer offered me \$200 for a blowjob. There is no question as to the economic efficiency of this. I would have to dance for half an hour to make the same amount. (M)

The importance of the economic argument cannot be overstated. So both outsiders to the sex work industry, as well as “good girl” / “clean” dancers, frequently seem unable to understand

that some dancers can compartmentalize sex as purely an economic decision. Readers come to ask themselves: is it really fair for dancers who sell only fantasy to cast aspersions on extras girls when those outside sex work do the same to “clean” dancers merely for being dancers? Is this not, in fact, exactly the same problematic model for difference that underlies hierarchies of pre/post, good/bad, clean/dirty? Binary thinking is not just about opposites, it is about superiority and inferiority. Negotiating these hierarchies draws these memoirs again and again into situations of paradox, contradiction and unclarity; these moments of tension in turn move the readers to question fixed ideas.

The very existence of extras girls may seem puzzling given that sex professionals specialize in selling sex and going to a sex professional directly is far less complicated from a consumer standpoint than going to an erotic dance and attempting to divine which dancers are or are not extras girls. One of the extras girls who responded to Josephine’s post explained that her club in Australia was actually located “a few hundred meters down the road [from] a well-known legal brothel” (Cole). She observes:

If customers walked in there, they could pay the same amount for full service in a comfortable bed that they would for a 15 minute dance in our strip club with a quick, no-frills hand job in a dingy room with a semi-functioning CD player and a chair held together with duct tape. Men could easily get more for their money from people who openly advertised as full service sex workers. (Cole)

This dancer’s account is notable for two reasons – it is indisputable that customers made a deliberate choice to forgo visiting sex professionals in order to seek paid sexual favors from women who may or not provide sexual favors and that in doing so customers were making an

unwise economic decision as sex professionals would offer more for their money. It is clear that extras girls are not being sought out over other tradespeople within the sex industry as a method for consumers to save money and or time, so why do customers seek extras girls?

The answer comes from the final individual who responded to Josephine's rant, a former dancer who engaged in selling extras in various areas of the United States. According to author (who used the pseudonym "Valentine"), extras girls are not fundamentally different from clean dancers who merely sell the fantasy of sex, extras girls just take the fantasy a step further. She states:

The fantasy is that the customer is deluding himself that he is special because a stripper fucked him in the VIP room. He has a mental hang-up about paying for sex directly, but if the sex is free [author's emphasis] and he pays for lap dances he can hack his psyche and let the good times roll. You and I, Stripper Sister, have a symbiotic relationship. Don't believe me? You allow the customer to tell himself that strippers aren't hookers, that he wasn't paying for sex, he was paying for dances. The sex was free. He sees himself as a giant stud who seduced the dancer in the VIP. He sees himself as a giant stud and suspends his disbelief that I don't do this for anyone with a \$100 bill despite the fact I have condoms at the ready. (Valentine)

Valentine's description of the "symbiotic relationship" between extras girls (the "baddest" of the "bad girls") and clean dancers ("good girls") is striking in its insights into the marketing of fantasy — and the marketing a of sexuality hierarchy. For there to be those "baddest bad girls" within their respective clubs, there have to be "good girl" dancers who remain virtuous and refuse engagement in commercial sexual activity. This interdependency goes beyond the erotic

dance industry and even the sex industry as a whole. As previously discussed, our societal understandings of female purity are based entirely off the imposed apocryphal impurity of othered women. Without the different/other, without the formulation of the “bad girl”, “good girls” could not exist. Erotic dance memoirs speak again and again to cultural reliance in binary systems, even when they are trying to move beyond them.

What are the complications of a bad girl setting herself up as a speaking/writing subject, keeping in mind, for example, the second wave feminists’ refusal to hear the voices of such bad girls? Engaging with the “good girl”/”bad girl” dialogues serves as a double-edged sword for my chosen authors. They acknowledge that they are aware of the social implications of engaging with erotic dance yet they must establish credibility with the reader – a credibility that allows them to tell their own stories but which depends on pre-existing assumptions to take shape. Unfortunately, these pre-existing assumptions can — and often do — depend on the abjection by sex-worker women of other sex-worker women.

Author Diablo Cody, whose erotic dance memoir is titled *Candy Girl: A Year in the Life of an Unlikely Stripper*, weaves her story around the difference that she believes marks her from other women who have engaged in erotic dancing. Othering is central to her self-presentation. Cody’s memoir is troubling for this reason. Her weapon of choice is derision as when she says:

I was approaching the dark side of my twenties, but I shook like a rattle, still felt like a teenager with fire ants in my Calvins. [...] I’d always been a well-behaved human female. Evidence: I’d never ridden on a motorcycle, not even a weak Japanese one. I’d never gotten knocked up or vacuum-aspirated. I’d received every available Catholic sacrament with the exception of matrimony and last rites. I’d completed

college in eight tidy semesters (one nervous breakdown per). I'd never thrown a glass of Delirium Tremens in anyone's face. I'd never even five-fingered a lipstick at the Ben Franklin. I was a drag, baby. I could feel my wild oats dwindling. My mid-twenties crisis weighted my gut like a cosmic double cheeseburger. I guess that's one reason I ended up half-naked at the Skyway Lounge. (Cody, Ch. 1)

Cody positions her erotic dancer career against a backdrop of other women's addiction, unwanted pregnancy, abortion, theft, and lack of education. Compared to those *other* women, she clearly feels superior, her list of the experiences of others is oddly conflated with the notion of "wild oats," signaling a lack of empathy. Unlike Eaves, Cody doesn't express a sense of differentness or shame regarding her entrance into the industry; however she projects shame and scorn on her fellow dancers:

After an hour or two, I couldn't seem to get any lap dances, so I sat down [...] to watch the stage show for a while. One of the dancers had an ornate tattoo inked across the back of her shoulders that read "Lost Girl." I'd seen a lot of body art in my time stripping, everything from wicked pixies to cannabis leaves to blurred, brutal prison tattoos of boyfriends' names. But I'd never seen anything quite so striking as "Lost Girl." It was like a life story in two words. (Cody, Ch. 16)

Cody's philosophical reflection on her fellow dancer's body art is notable because Cody does not consider herself a "lost girl." It literalizes a sense that she is building her career — her writing career specifically — on the backs of others. Given a later racist reference to another dancer as

“a drunk Venus Williams look-alike” (Cody, Ch.3) once again we are reminded of the centrality of white, middle-class privilege in the representation of erotic dance.¹⁷

Despite the importance of binaries, hierarchies, and models for othering in all the memoirs in my thesis, the fact remains that all of my sources agree that it is money that drives both erotic dance and publishing. Tensions come most sharply to light when money and morals clash or seem to clash, or rather, when good/bad models come up against economic realities.

Economist Alys Willman comments:

It is safe to say that most sex workers are not in the industry for the sex. Specifically, it is fast money that pulls people into the industry and often keeps them there even when there are other alternatives. Around the world, sex work offers much more money in fewer hours than other jobs to which the people engaged in sex work have access. For women, the majority of sex workers, the sex industry is one of the few labour markets in which they consistently earn more than men of their same skill level. (Willman 144)

Yet in narrative terms, money alone cannot sustain reader interest; and in performative terms, fantasy and money — the exchange at the heart of the service industry of erotic dance — have an uneasy and fluid set of relationships, further loaded down with social and moral judgements about the relative values of different forms of labour/service.¹⁸

¹⁷ For Cody, this tactic proved fruitful as she would go on to win an Academy Award for Best Original Screenplay for the 2007 film *Juno*.

¹⁸ A lot of factors play into an individual dancer's earnings which affects how much they actually take home at the end of the night. One factor, which is an industry standard, is the “tip out” (also known as “stage fees”). The majority of clubs view dancers as independent contractors hence the majority of clubs do not pay their dancers a standard wage and dancers actually pay the clubs for the use of their facility (Burana 236). The standard tip out can involve paying the club either flat rate or a percentage of earnings per shift as well as paying the DJ a flat rate per shift. The amount of tip outs a dancer has to do varies by club. Tip outs are not the only mandatory fees dancers must pay. Depending on the club, dancers may be required to sell a

certain number of private dances, lapdances, or even a certain amount of club merchandise during their shift or they may be required to pay the club for their shortcoming (Cody, Ch. 7 & 8). It is entirely possible for a dancer to end her shift owing the club money and going home empty handed. These are standard labour practices within the industry and considered the price of doing business as a dancer.

Chapter 3

“She Was All About The Money”

“If people were just born beautiful and gifted, I’m bored watching them.”

– Dita Von Tease

Success is one of the most powerful, yet tenuous concepts within the human experience. Popular measurements of success are not attainable for everyone due to structural disadvantages (e.g. poverty, racism) that limit individual accomplishments and access. That said, industries such as sex work can provide alternatives and ways to circumvent certain impediments to one normative understanding of success, to wit, financial success, which is often positioned as the gatekeeper for other forms of self-advancement (security, education, material goods, housing, etc.). In terms of erotic dance, success is most often measured in dollars and cents. Across all the books examined, money is repeatedly represented as the primary motivation for engaging in erotic dance. Financial success is depicted as opening up access to other forms of success. Although each person’s translation of what success is changes and is based on how they use their money (i.e. clothes vs. tuition), the money made engaging in erotic dance allows for these markers of success to be achieved.

Erotic dance’s complicity in patriarchal capitalism presents some problems in light of claims within dance memoirs to empower women’s erotic performance. A purely monetized view of success appears firmly rooted within white supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The reproduction of this model of visible financial success representing the most valued marker of success within the erotic dance industry provides an area of commonality between erotic dance and other forms of industry, strengthening claims that is it work like all other work, but

complicating broader discussions about the female erotic, choice, agency, and the reclamation of hidden/shamed spaces.

An area of commonality between erotic dance and non-sex work industries is the hierarchies of wealth that are expressed by dancers themselves. Diablo Cody simultaneously articulates one vision of success at erotic dance and her personal understanding of a class-based hierarchy of wealth via the notion of ‘banking’:

You couldn’t miss the garter of a girl who had banked. The carefully pleated money sprang out every which way in a garish green starburst. This odd flower was worn with pride, like an ankle corsage at a topless prom. The strippers at Schieks never carried purses; they wore their money against their bodies and in full view. Like a Girl Scout merit badge, or a retroactive price tag, this display of cash ensured that everyone was aware of everyone else’s price per pound. (Cody, Ch.7)

The deployment of a language of banking is telling as it offers a deliberate mirror-image to the non-dance world: substituting carefully-guarded garters for buildings. Cody’s own language continues to offer challenges in terms of her othering of fellow dancers. The use of the word “garish” is very telling within this context as it indicates Cody’s internalized class status. Elsewhere Cody states that, when growing up, she lived in a “big house in a bucolic subdivision”; that her father was a “successful restaurateur” who drove a “cherry Corvette with vanity plates”; and that her family “vacationed in Orlando, wore infinite layers of Benetton and consumed enough steak dinners to give the average kid iron poisoning” (Cody, Ch. 26) — all of which are arguably the trappings of the upper-middle class. Although she provides ostentatious descriptions her family’s displays of wealth, she never purposefully utilizes judgmental language in reference to them. Cody’s use of the word “garish” in reference to her fellow dancers’

displays of wealth indicates that she feel that her co-workers are somehow unworthy of wealth or unable to navigate financial success with dignity.¹⁹

Academia too manifests a discomfort with dancers' financial success, bringing us back to the question of hierarchies of labour. The ethnographic studies involving the authors' direct employment within the erotic dance industry never discuss the money that the authors made as dancers. Katherine Frank, Mindy S. Bradley-Engen, and R. Danielle Egan all worked as exotic dancers and not one of them speaks to the financial benefits that they experienced. The autobiographical genre allows for the author to have power over others in terms of representation. The lack of discussion of the monetary benefits offered to these ethnographers represents yet another form of power over the other as it allows for the ethnographers to craft the image that they are intellectually above monetary compensation; this issue merits consideration in terms of differences between academic publishing and mass market publishing, though that lies beyond the scope of this study. Silence in this area may also speak to shame culture surrounding the economic details of erotic work, something that undermines many of the ethnographic projects themselves at fundamental levels.

Bradley-Engen describes three types of clubs that exist within the erotic dance industry – the hustle club; the show club; and the social club. The type of club is very important in discussing the breakdown of how dancers attain success, as the atmosphere in which they work shapes what success represents and how it is represented to and by them. Bradley-Engen's system of categorization provides an excellent starting point as the three types of clubs came to light during her interviews with fellow dancers (Bradley-Engen & Ulmer 37). Bradley-Engen's own perspective is also important, as the categorization of an individual club is information formerly available only to dancers and other support staff within the industry. Understandings of

¹⁹ It is important to note that the demarcation between "clean" and "dirty" money does not come from how one earns their money but from who is earning the money. For example, a CEO can choose to close several plants and put thousands of people out of work yet their financial earnings are not categorized as ill-gotten gains; recent capitalist crises have made this abundantly clear on an international scale.

the “structural features, individual perceptions and adjustments, and career continuity patterns” - which all play a part in determining a club’s categorization – are pieces of information that would be acquired throughout one’s employment within the industry (Bradley-Engen 34). While a customer may walk into an establishment and notice the size of club or the number of dancers working, they may not be aware of the style of management nor the turnover rate for dancers – issues that directly affect the dancers entertaining them and weigh on how a dancer may perceive her own success within the industry.

The hustle club is defined by “the large numbers of dancers and customers, the emphasis on sex, and uninvolved management” (Bradley-Engen 40) and is usually housed in a building that is large enough to hold multiple stages and private rooms to accommodate the large amount of dancers (possibly over fifty) working per shift. As hustle clubs are consistently the largest clubs, it lends to them becoming the most well-known within a city which allows them to attract customers from across the socio-economic spectrum, in large numbers. The varying socio-economic positioning of the customers and the large number of dancers working every day tie together to create an atmosphere where dancers must hustle in order to make money – hence the origin of this category of clubs’ name. It is a competitive atmosphere and this translates into competitive models for success-building. One notable feature of this competitive atmosphere is the importance of persuasiveness, coupled with the need to maintain a fantasy that the customer is in control. In yet another paradoxical setup, dancers get what they want by manipulating what customers want and by creating and preserving the illusion that customers are making autonomous choices – indeed, that the customers themselves are being persuasive. This particular sort of emotional/psychological work is particularly marked in erotic dance memoirs and provides a great deal of narrative tension.

Dancers within a hustle club are fully aware that their job description involves “using manipulation and swindling to encourage customers to spend money or to spend more money

than they had actually intended” (Bradley-Engen 39). These they are considered industry standard within hustle clubs to the extent that management encourages dancers to lie and mislead customers by suggesting that may do extras if the customer continues to spend money (Bradley-Engen 39). In the context of the hustle club, success is achieved via a dancer’s “smooth talking” abilities (Bradley-Engen 39) as the dancers who excel in that area are the dancers who end their shifts with the most money. Bradley-Engen quotes a hustle club dancer by the name of Bonni as saying:

The hard part is making the first sell. Men don’t always want to make the leap to a lapdance [...] But usually once I get a guy to agree to a dance, I’m in. [...] once the credit card is out, it’s out, and what’s another twenty dollars? And another twenty dollars? I just keep making it more intense – grinding harder and letting him get away with more – so he’s always thinking that one more dance will do the trick. And he’s spent a couple hundred bucks before you know it. (Bradley-Engen 39)

The nature of her hustle (grinding harder, allowing the customer to touch) may shock some people as she willingly capitalizes on the notion of the baddest of the bad girl dancers. Bonni’s utilization of the erotic in terms of erotic dance is rooted in performing the erotic in order to achieve financial gain leading to personal empowerment. Bonni’s motives for working the “good girl”/“bad girl” binary are purely economic and allow her to deploy both the customers’ and the readers’ fantasies surrounding these categories against them for her own financial gain:

I gotta make money; I don’t have time to care [about the feelings of customers]. The clock is ticking. I got one [customer] here, and I’m finally making money, so I’m keeping him as long as I can however I need to. (Bradley-Engen 39-40)

While dancers provide a fantasy for the customers, that fantasy is based solely on an economic transaction. As Bonni’s story illustrates, in the confines of a hustle club, the more a customer can pay the closer he may feel to merging fantasy with reality.

Some customers' individual fantasies rely on being on the receiving end of a dancer's hustle. As former dancer and ethnographer Frank observes in her work entitled *G-Strings and Sympathy*, some customers may "eroticize the [dancer's] poverty, 'desperation', or 'hard luck'" (Frank 114). For these men, being able to enact a savior fantasy is part of the sensuality-based mirage they seek and dancers are more than willing to exploit this fantasy for their economic benefit. Author Elisabeth Eaves dubs these individuals with a messiah complex "Rescue Men" and defines them as follows:

[...] they go to strip clubs and peep shows with the intent to save dancers from themselves so they can feel like heroes. [...] Rescue men seemed to think that they stood a better chance with the stripper, by posing as her savior, than they would if they tried to pick up a cashier or waitress at her work, when, in fact, the opposite was probably true. They didn't understand that it was presumptuous and offensive to advise strangers on what to do with their lives. (Eaves 226-7)

The savior narrative is a symbiotic one that relies on a dancer not only embodying the role of the grateful whore but also feeding into whatever socio-economic based fairytales the customer has conjured for himself. Once again, re-entrenchment and resistance co-exist uneasily. For example, Eaves describes a rescue man who tells her that he worked for the FBI, a claim that she finds questionable (Eaves 252). Eaves hustles to this particular customer by allowing him to "have his secret-agent fantasies flattered" although he remains entirely aware that he can never truly "rescue" her from the desperation he believes a career in erotic dance symbolizes. Rescue and reintegration into the everyday world would destroy his Americanized James Bond fantasy (Eaves 270).

Dancers utilize fantasy as a weapon and a tool not only against (and for) their customers, but also against (and for) the readers who consume their stories. The consumption of autobiography is inherently voyeuristic in its purpose as it encourages readers to feel as though

they are gaining some level of insight into the lives of the individuals they are reading about. The exact level of insight achieved can be theorized in terms of philosopher Tzvetan Todorov's theory of uncanny fictions as it addresses the use of our understandings of reality in providing an explanation for the phenomena that are being described within the literary works we consume (Todorov 41). For example, if a reader has never been inside an erotic dance club nor ever met a self-identified erotic dancer, that reader may feel that the stories under examination within this work allow a very deep level of insight into the industry. The reader has no understanding of erotic dance outside of the stories being consumed. The engagement of readers such as this speaks to the fact that dancers occupy a liminal space as their industry emerges into cultural visibility, while at the same time understandings of the lives of dancers still remain dominated by preconceived notions and stereotypes. The authors use their consumers and customers understandings of reality against them in order to create a space in which the fantasy put forth in the performance of erotic dance is carried forward onto the page. The reader has the illusion of control (purchasing, consuming) but the dancers choose the nature of the purchase/consumption. The stereotypes continue to work for and against the authors and the customers/readers alike.

Although the success of one's hustle may be visibly measured in stacks of bills, there can also be personal feelings of satisfaction and pride attained. In the case of Eaves and her secret agent rescue man, Eaves gained satisfaction from being able to read the situation and provide the individual with "what he needed" which was for his fantasy life to be bought into (Eaves 252). As mentioned in the prior chapter, Jenna Jameson started her adult industry career in a Las Vegas hustle club. Jameson worked twelve-hour shifts in order to become a top earner within in her club, making thousands of dollars per shift (Jameson & Strauss 49). For Jameson, the hustle was not just about walking away with all the money a customer had, it was about gaining the maturity and self-confidence she had lacked prior to her entrance into the erotic dance industry. Jameson recalls:

[The club Jameson started at] was the best high-school class I ever took. The subject was social dynamics. It was amazing how the incentive of cash made it so easy to talk to people; before, I'd had no motivation to learn to be polite or carry on a conversation with a guy. [...] It wasn't that I discovered some dormant ability to be a natural conversationalist. Instead, I learned to be an actress, because I was still not outgoing naturally. My job was simply to put up with the poor conversational skills of the customers, to seem open and caring while they talked about themselves. When my turn came to talk, I learned to lie. Everything that came out of my mouth was complete bullshit. I could tell by looking at each person what he wanted to hear.

(Jameson & Strauss 42-3)

Although Jameson's narrative is less sexual than Bonni's (something that could be a reflection of their respective club's environments) Jameson acknowledges the hustle via any means necessary and how she personally benefited from crafting her hustle. Jameson took her career as an erotic dancer seriously, treating it with gravity and developing a solid work ethic. Due to this she viewed developing a solid hustle as a performance challenge (Jameson & Strauss 42) and this meant temporarily embodying whatever mirage a customer wanted to see. In developing a solid hustle Jameson achieved a personal goal, which translates as a success regardless the standard of measurement. Jameson was consistently economically successful as a dancer but it could be argued that the personal success of learning about social dynamics surely helped her gain the international level of success she would later enjoy as an adult film performer.

The economic importance of the hustle must be noted in light of the previous chapter's discussion of stage fees. Bradley-Engen states that stage fees within a hustle club can run around twenty-five to fifty dollars on top of the club taking fifty percent of every lap dance or champagne room fee (Bradley-Engen 35). The house fee of twenty-five to fifty dollars essentially means that the money made during the first two or three lapdances of every dancers'

shift directly goes to the club (Bradley-Engen 35-6). So while Bonni may count the dances in terms of twenties, she is only making ten dollars per dance, a pittance that encourages dancers to develop an expert hustle in order to gain economic success. In the hustle club, success is measured by economics and achieved via dramatics. If a dancer has a solid hustle and can persuade the customers to buy as much of her time as their bank accounts allow, she will end her shifts as a high earner.

Profits aside, a hustle club dancer does low-status, bottom-of-the-barrel work within the erotic dance industry. The physical and emotional stress involved in working at a hustle club causes it to be ranked the lowest among the three types of clubs. Individuals who work at show clubs and social clubs look down on those who work at hustle clubs because the clubs are seen as havens for sexual harassment (Bradley-Engen 38), drug use, and managerial bullying (Bradley-Engen 40). The drug use is especially notable as it is reported as a consequence of the intense amounts of labour required within the hustle club setting. For Jameson, the pressure to remain her club's top earner later led her to begin experimenting with crystal meth because she "thought it would help [her] hustle better" (Jameson & Strauss 57). The dancers in Bradley-Engen's work took a different stance regarding the use of drugs, reporting "that drug/alcohol use was essential in order to deal with the stress of working in [the hustle club] environment" (Bradley-Engen 40). A dancer by the name of Jamison reports:

I really needed a pill or something to get through the night. I have to take the edge off. It's just so stressful. [...] The men suck. The management is scary. They just yell at you if you're not making enough money and fire girls at will. (Bradley-Engen 41)

For Jameson and Jamison, the intense pressure (internal and external, respectively) to hustle hard and perform to standards becomes too much and forces them to seek out chemical assistance which challenges common understandings of the drug addled stripper who enters the industry in

order to support a pre-existing drug habit. At the same time, of course, the stereotype is reinforced when the observers note current drug habits in the clubs, or when readers question strategies of representation/justification in memoirs.

To harken back to my earlier discussion of the damaged goods hypothesis, it is often assumed that drug use among sex workers is representative of self-abuse and it is never seen as tool which aids or eases labour. In a 1997 ethnographic study, dancers reported that the use of drugs eased adaptation to the work environment and aided in dealing “effectively with hostile customers” (Forsyth & Deshotels 137). While this may seem a controversial assertion, consider the well-documented fact that “during the Second World War amphetamines were distributed to British, American and Japanese troops in order to raise morale and improve fighting ability” (Pickering & Stimson 1385) and that as recently as 2008 seven doctors co-authored an open letter in the journal *Nature* advocating the use of “cognitive-enhancing drugs,” such as prescription amphetamine Adderall (Greely et al 702), as a method for individuals to remain competitive in labour environments (Greely et al 705). If society is not collectively fretting over the use of amphetamines among long haul truck drivers (Pickering & Stimson 1386) or businessmen (Szalavitz N.P.), why is drug use among erotic dancers not also positioned as a method of competitive enhancement? The answer once again lies in the positioning of erotic dance within a set of hierarchies of labour.

It is not this project’s intention to position erotic dance as inferior or superior to other kinds of work, but to examine why issues are positioned differently based on the type of industry. Notions surrounding the usage of drugs among female sex workers serve as ideological pillars of the damaged good hypothesis and therefore provide a major area of stigma. The comparison between how drug use among white-collar or skilled trades workers is portrayed in contrast to depictions of drug use among erotic dancers is something that is deserving of inquiry.

If we were to reconsider stimulant use among erotic dancers as an aid to valuable labour, we might recomplicate some simple assumptions.

According to ethnographer and former dancer Siobhan Brooks, a general disdain for hustle clubs is especially intense among black dancers. In Brooks' *Unequal Desires*, "all-black male-female strip clubs" are positioned as hustle clubs (although that terminology is never directly used) and Brooks found that black dancers consistently stated that "they would not work at an all-black club if they didn't have to" (Brooks 40). A dancer named Alicia, from Toronto, shares her account of dancing at an all-black club in Atlanta:

I would never work at a black strip club again. [...] the customers acted like they were just entitled to have you. They were rude; touched you even after you told them certain areas were off limits. Also, I remember I was charging \$25 for a lap dance, and come to find out that the actual price was \$5, so I had other dancers getting mad at me because I was over charging. (Brooks 40)

Brooks interprets this behavior as representative of broader gender tensions between black men and women which are based on "the internalization of black women's hypersexuality" and the feelings of some black men that "black women are treated better than they are in the larger society" (Brooks 40-1). It must be noted that a documentary series released in late 2012 entitled *P.O.P.: Power of Pussy*, which explores an all-black club in Atlanta named Magic City through the lives of the dancers who work there, seemingly refutes Brooks' claims regarding all-black clubs, as it positions all-black clubs as following the same hustle club, show club, and social club hierarchy that other non-rationally identified clubs fall into (*P.O.P.: Power of Pussy*, Episode 3). In fact, throughout the documentary Magic City is revealed to fall into the show club category, which problematizes Brooks' claims. However, Brooks' brief treatment of these issues raises many questions about other forms of racial stereotyping that simply do not receive enough attention in these memoirs to be unpacked fully.

A show club is characterized by its “strict and aggressive” management, cleanliness, high quality staging and seating, and the expenses incurred by customers who patronize the club (i.e. entry fees, valet parking, high drink prices) (Bradley-Engen 55-6). Show clubs tend to have less than half the amount of dancers working per shift than hustle clubs and attract customers of all races and ages from middle- to upper-class socioeconomic brackets (Bradley-Engen 56). With so few girls working per shift and customers numbering into the hundreds on any given night (Bradley-Engen 56), the ability to hustle is not a requirement for dancers to survive and thrive. That being said, with twenty-five dollar stage fees and ‘tip outs’ (i.e. monetary compensation) to everyone from the doorman to the deejay required on every shift, making money becomes not only necessary for success but a necessary condition for continued employment (Bradley-Engen 56-7).

At the show club, financial success does not come from one’s ability to psychologically manipulate customers but from one’s physical presentation and ability as a dancer, hence the moniker “show club.” The emphasis here returns to performance, physical performance, of fantasy. Show clubs tend to have strict requirements surrounding physical appearance, including weight limits (Bradley-Engen 57). Author and (now former) dancer Sarah Tressler addressed the existence of “fat lists” in her autobiography, *Diary of an Angry Stripper* by stating:

If you’re a stripper, being on the Fat List is a bad thing. Actually, I’m going to go out on a limb and say that if you’re a regular person, being on the Fat List is a bad thing — but it’s worse if your livelihood is at stake. One of my Houston clubs actually does have a fat list, as it were. Not exactly a list, but a note in the girl’s file that says ‘MLW’ — Must Lose Weight. About 30 girls at this club are on it. [...] some of the girls with more Reubenesque physiques were overheard complaining about being on the list. One, a milky-skinned, red-haired girl with a penchant for corsets, said she was on “final notice, final warning,” and had one week to shape up

or she'd be shipped out. Apparently management doesn't think she's taking the weight loss thing seriously. (Tressler, Ch 9)

Although one does not want to minimize the obvious body-shaming undertones of Tressler's statement (she goes on to refer to dancers marked MLW as "fatties"), weight limits are a fact of life within show clubs and lend to an atmosphere of extreme body consciousness. Bradley-Engen asserts that her experiences in show clubs were marked by conversations focused "primarily on weight loss, diet pills, and beauty products" (Bradley-Engen 52). The show club's hyperfocus on physical perfection can even reach the extent of clubs requiring dancers to attend aerobics and dance classes twice a week with the attached penalty of a week-long suspension from work for missing a class (Bradley-Engen 57). Again the beauty standards at stake remind readers that ageism, ableism, and white privilege continue to shape public negotiations of supposedly private desires. While maintenance of these standards of course reinforces them, the possibility does arise that open discussions and publication of such standards is in itself potentially transformative in cultural terms.

To outsiders to the industry, this atmosphere of body consciousness appears at once problematic and instantly recognizable from other industries such as fashion. Within the erotic dance industry the aesthetic equals the economic. Former dancer Lily Burana breaks it down thusly: "[...] for a dedicated exotic dancer, form is just as important as content—if not more so" (Burana 4). Burana goes on to list what she considers "the bare essentials" that all dancers should have in their makeup bag:

One bottle of wig shampoo; a wire wig brush; hair spray; hair gel; one large tub of body glitter; fruit-scented body spray; emery boards; nail glue; nail polish in turquoise blue, burgundy, gold, and silver glitter; tissues; cotton swabs; false eyelashes and adhesive; safety pins; bobby pins in two sizes; cocoa butter; a five-

piece set of pedicure tools; Dermablend body concealer; lady razors; shave cream; deodorant body powder; a toiletry kit; my makeup. (Burana 5)

Consider Burana's expensive list as weaponry in the fight for the illusion of perfection, which in turn finances the list. Fantasy and the material realities of concealment/resistance shape the dancers' daily lives: the importance placed on a dancer's ability to embody a particular socially-scripted perfection speaks directly to the importance of fantasy within the context of erotic dance, especially within the show club system.

Tzvetan Todorov's theory of the Fantastic posits that the key to sustaining the Fantastic lies within the hesitation between "either total faith or total incredulity" (Todorov 31), which is a concept which is entirely applicable to the consumption of fantasy within erotic dance clubs. The space of hesitation is what sustains this consumption, as it is within that hesitant space that customers' insert their understandings of female sexuality and desire. This is a powerful space as it allows for customers to insert their own desires onto the specific illusions that the show club system strives to create and recreate endlessly.

One obsessively repetitive illusion centers around a cookie-cutter notion of female beauty that can be best exemplified by a Barbie doll – Caucasian tan skin, blonde hair, tiny waist, long limbs, large breasts, flawless skin. In fact, Barbie herself was modeled on a fictional sex worker, a German cartoon character named Lilli whose strip was a fixture in a West German tabloid in the early 1950s. In a piece entitled *The Littlest Harlot*, author and sex worker Tracy Quan describes Lilli as a character who "traded sex for money, delivered sassy comebacks to police officers, and sought the company of [older rich] men" (Quan 119). The beauty standards upheld within show clubs also present many parallels to those of the Las Vegas showgirl. Jameson worked as a Las Vegas showgirl prior to entering the adult industry, in order to follow in the footsteps of her Mother who was a showgirl in Vegas during the late 1960s (Jameson & Strauss 190). Although Jameson inherited her Mother's beauty and desire for bright lights she

did not inherit her height, which was a serious problem as showgirls throughout Vegas must meet a height requirement of five foot nine inches (Jameson & Strauss 30). Jameson recounts being physically measured when auditioning at the famed Tropicana nightclub (Jameson & Strauss 30) an account that correlates to Tressler's account of the Must Lose Weight designation. Fantasy requires a great deal of regulation, it seems.

Requiring dancers to embody a specific physical fantasy provides a very narrow view of sexuality and physical attractiveness. It also disallows variation in customer preferences and indeed, disallows customer choice just as it disallows dancer autonomy. As Burana opines:

There's no way to tell whether or not a customer is going to find me attractive. I can't tell by looking. Appearances aren't that instructive. I could analyze consumption patterns (body type, hair colour, age, attitude) and figure averages (number of dances purchased, tip) but really, I've no set rule. All I know for certain is that the idea of "every man's fantasy" is a lie. (Burana 178)

Burana's perspective is obviously true as women who fail to meet the Barbie-esque physical ideal find themselves sought after and desired sexually, the world over. The culturally projected Barbie ideal is based on a delusional perception of white female beauty. This ideal not only excludes all women of colour but also sets a standard so impossibly high that without varying levels of cosmetic intervention, white women cannot meet it. What is intriguing about the show club system is that it does not seem to be catering to the tastes of men but instead creating and marketing what it believes men want. Within the show club system the illusion of a particular sort of physical perfection provides uniform bait — perhaps intended to be reassuring as it denies cultural and racial differences, as part of an everyman/everywomen fantasy.

Although some may scoff at the idea of erotic dancers having a dress code, show clubs do have standards in terms of costuming. Professional costumes and shoes designed specifically for erotic dancers are required and run-of-the-mill lingerie and high heels à la Victoria's Secret and

Aldo are forbidden. Granted the distinction may seem somewhat arbitrary to outsiders to the industry, but there are labour-based, practical reasons for show clubs requiring their dancers to be properly outfitted. T-Backs are thong-like bikini bottoms, which are favored by erotic dancers for their lined gusset, which provides an extra layer of protection from customers and lends to durability (Tressler, Ch 9). In some jurisdictions within the United States, t-backs may be a specific legal requirement for dancers due to the lack of transparency in the vulvar area that may be common in other types of underwear (Tressler, Ch 10). Stripper shoes are highly important, not for legal reasons but health and safety reasons. Anecdotally, the best manufacturer is considered to be company by the name of Pleaser. Pleaser shoes feature heavily padded insoles and scaled bottoms which are necessities considering the following: dancers are on their feet for the duration of all their shifts; the high quality staging within show clubs include highly polished stages; and shoe heel heights that can reach as high as ten inches are common. Wearing purpose-designed shoes allows dancers to potentially avoid long-term podiatric issues and minimizes the risks of slipping or falling. Once again, the work of fantasy becomes clear to readers of these memoirs, even while the appearance of effortless remains central to the performances in the clubs themselves; concealment and revelation continue their ongoing dialogue, or dance.

The specific outfits chosen are key to success. Show clubs may also be categorized as “gown clubs” which Burana defines as:

[...] a place where your nails have to be perfect (they checked mine), your costume formal (evening dress—prom queen style, not streetwalker), and your heels a certain height (nothing less than three inches). (Burana 78)

A gown club requires dancers to wear long dresses which are usually comprised of body hugging material, slits in the skirt which allow for free movement, and a halter-style neckline which allows for ease of removal. Specialized costuming is required within show clubs, which

excludes lingerie that could be purchased at your average mall. The reasons for this are quite simple – mall lingerie lacks the durability required and tends to not supply the ease of removal required by dancers. When a stage set can last from three to twelve minutes and lapdances clocking in at approximately three minutes apiece, one does not have time required to struggle out of a Victoria's Secret embroidered French maid costume without damaging it.

It takes money to make money. Meeting dress code standards does not come cheaply. Online retailer Discount Stripper sells t-backs for \$12.99 a pair; gowns run anywhere from \$19.95 – \$139.98; and Pleaser six-inch heels ranging from \$29.99 – \$240. At the minimum, a dancer just starting out would require numerous t-backs, a couple of gowns, and one pair of shoes which could require an immediate out of pocket cost of anywhere from \$100 – \$600 for costuming alone. Consider the costs associated with the aforementioned contents of Burana's makeup bag. If a club requires that tattoos be covered, a Dermablend brand concealer kit can run from \$62 – \$77. The website for makeup retailer Sephora has facial makeup kits priced from \$20 – \$79; eye makeup kits from \$9 – \$138; and lip colour sets range from \$12 - \$75. Using these prices as a guide, a dancer is looking at another \$100 - \$400 on top of their costuming expenses for makeup alone. Add to that the cost of wigs, waxing, tanning, manicures and pedicures. A dancer could easily spend close to a thousand, if not a couple thousand dollars, before they ever enter a club. Presenting a flawless illusion can lead to considerable financial success but the economic strain of acquiring that illusion is in itself considerable.

The right outfit can mean the difference between earning enough for cab fare or earning enough for the month's rent within one shift. The selection of one's costume has to cater to the desires of the customers who are present. Professionalism in terms of judging a room develops over the course of a dancer's career. This expanded idea of what an erotic dancer does on the job is potentially transformative for the readers, as are other revelations about dancers' ordinarily-concealed emotional, psychological, and physical labours. Burana's book explores her own self-

fashioning decision-making process in depth as it chronicles her road trip throughout the U.S. to give erotic dancing a last hurrah. Here she describes her outfit selection process for a club in Dallas:

I tease my hairpiece to stratospheric heights, snap on my rhinestone choker [...] buy a fluorescent pink tanga [another term for T-Back] from the house mom, and zip on a dress I named The Tentacle of Love. The hottest of pink spandex, it reaches my ankles and is slit up to mid-thigh. The shoulder straps are white to match the rows of rubberized oblongs that dot the fabric, and the rubberized bits glow under black light. It's nothing I'd consider wearing in civilian mode, but when you work in near-darkness, you need to play big just to show up. Besides, this is about courting the peripatetic male gaze [...] (Burana 81)

Burana's dress proved to be an excellent choice as an Arkansas businessman courted her within minutes of leaving the dressing room, merely because he loved her dress (Burana 81). While the mental energy put into outfit selection may seem excessive or frivolous, Cody recounts the importance her fellow dancers put on it, which echoes the account of Burana:

[...] other girls were insistent that the opposite was true. They claimed that men were such slaves to visual cues that the right colour or fabric could mean the difference between a \$500 night and a \$1,000 night. Maybe they were right. Sometimes the theory was bolstered when a girl changed clothes and immediately banked [...] (Cody Ch.7)

Although Cody claims to find the process to be unnecessary, she contradicts herself when she goes on to say that white shoes are apparently consistent moneymakers. She states:

White shoes evoke summertime, innocence, the ruddy-chested ICU nurse bearing post-tonsillectomy marshmallow sundaes, the girl on the pier in seersucker shorts

who remained 99.44% pure until college, new roller skates. Good girls wear white.

Men respond in kind. A tan girl in white shoes was irresistible [...] (Cody Ch.7)

The main characteristic that underscores the success tied to physical presentation within the show club context is its tenuousness. As previously mentioned, a dancer may read the club perfectly and walk out with over a thousand dollars one night and the next night get it all wrong and make next to nothing. There is a knife-edge walk between conformity and individuality. Stereotypes work, but not all the time; individuality — the one outstanding outfit — works, but not all the time.

When a dancer meets all the aesthetic standards required by the show club system the effect can be mesmerizing. A measure of success for dancers is level of the effect that the chimera of perfection they put forth brings about to observers. Bradley-Engen describes being on the receiving end of the illusion:

I watched the dancer onstage before me [...] She was tall, platinum blonde, extremely tanned, and had enormous fake breasts. Her costume was bright red and covered with sequins. Her hair, skin, face, and body were flawless. Her demeanor exuded confidence and commanded attention. Her eyes and her stride radiated power. She was arrogant, yet completely enthralling. Her body, face, mannerisms, movement, and attitude were all mesmerizing. (Bradley-Engen 53)

Being able to put forth a flawless illusion is the key to economic success within the show club system. Returning to the question of complicity in heteropatriarchal capitalism, these moments of performative power and control destabilize women's victimhood, opening up other possibilities, however temporary. In written form, the destabilizations last beyond the moment of performance itself.

In stark contrast to the world of the show club is the social club, which is characterized by its location outside of a major urban setting, relatively small building with a minimal staging

area, stable management, and long-term employment of dancers (Bradley-Engen 73). Bradley-Engen describes the social club as being “characterized by customers and staff, as primarily a local bar, incorporating the dancers as part of the ‘good time atmosphere’” (Bradley-Engen 72). On weeknights social clubs feature, on average, five dancers and on weekends there will be six dancers maximum with dancers working regular shifts (Bradley-Engen 73). One dancer may only work weekends week after week and another dancer will only work every Tuesday. The erotic dance social club is most analogous to a small town bar, where everyone knows everyone else and customers return multiple times a week.

The fact that the dancers serve as a feature of the bar, rather than the purpose of the bar, has a strong negative impact on the amount of money dancers can make in a social club in contrast to dancers in either hustle or show clubs. Social clubs do not have lap-dance areas or champagne rooms, which means on-stage tipping is the sole shared method of making money for erotic dancers across the three types of clubs. Although, at social clubs the amount of money made from on-stage tipping pales in comparison to hustle and show clubs as social clubs cater to a working class clientele within an isolated area (Bradley-Engen 72). These means that regardless of a dancer’s physical presentation or hustle, they could potentially walk away with only the five dollars per stage set compensation offered by the club to offset the lack of financial windfall opportunities offered by the social club in comparison to hustle and show clubs (Bradley-Engen 72). That is not to say that dancing at a social club cannot prove to be lucrative. For social club dancers success is attained via the cultivation of relationships, more specifically the ability of a dancer to establish regular customers, or in the familiar language of other service models, customer loyalty.

The importance of quickly picking up on the culture of both the club and the customers is one of the most important skills a dancer can have. To be quite frank, regardless of a dancer’s level of physical perfection (as measured by societal conventional standards of beauty) or the

strength of their hustle if that same dancer fails to read and respond to customer demands and needs their career in the industry can be a total failure. This is especially true within the social club system as it rejects the physical standards of the show club system and does not provide the lap-dance or champagne rooms that are key to the hustle clubs. Within social clubs dancers can wear non-specialized costumes and lingerie (Bradley-Engen 72). The atmosphere of community that establishes around the regular customers and the small amount of dancers requires a level of openness that allows for personal relationships to form. As Bradley-Engen states:

Whereas being a successful in a hustle club requires women to be good con artists, being successful at a typical social club requires women to establish and maintain mutually respectful social relationships. (Bradley-Engen 76-7)

With the casual approach to dancers' physical presentation and dancers working from a place of mutual respect, it allows for the aforementioned social club atmosphere of a neighborhood dive bar that has erotic dance as its form of entertainment. The work is less about illusion and more about cooperation and community, a dynamic that in itself offers challenges to stigmatization of dancers.

For dancers to “establish and maintain mutually respectful social relationships” within the social club system, they are required to engage in a level of emotional labour which trumps the amount of physical labour required within social clubs. Emotional labour “emphasizes the relational rather than the task-based aspect of work” (Steinberg & Figart 9) and is exhibited throughout all service industries, a commerce designation that controversially (although clearly by definition) includes sex work. Emotional labour is an occupational classification that has only been defined and recognized with the past thirty years with sociologist Arlie Hochschild coining the term for her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*. It has subsequently been recognized as “skilled, effort-intensive, and productive” work (Steinberg & Figart 9). Emotional labour is defined by the engagement in “face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact” which includes observable

facial and physical actions and reactions, tone of voice, content of speech (i.e. words chosen), and other behavioral signals (Steinberg & Figart 10).

Success within the social club system is based upon the number of regular customers that a dancer has and the amount of money this genus of customer gives to his dancer of choice. Sociologist and former dancer Egan explores the relationships between dancers and their regulars in her ethnographic work *Dancing For Dollars and Paying For Love* and she experienced relationships with regulars as from the perspective both an insider (as a dancer) and an outsider (as a researcher). Egan worked at both a hustle club and a show club (Egan 14-5), and found that the behavior of regulars is generally consistent. Egan defines the difference between the “cursory customer” and “regular customer” as follows:

Cursory customers frequent exotic dance clubs for entertainment purposes, to see the show and be turned on by women on stage, often for special occasions such as bachelor parties, birthdays or a guys’ night out. [...] Men who attend strip clubs regularly may frequently go to the same strip club or go to strip clubs in different cities when they travel, but they do not invest in an emotional relationship with dancers. Regular customers formed both emotional and erotic bonds with their dancers, viewing themselves as ‘more than customers’. (Egan 13)

For regulars (colloquially referred to by dancers as “regs”), the dancers they patronize can become surrogate girlfriends. This causes regulars to interpret the emotional labour put forth by the dancer that is the object of their affection as authentic in its romantic and/or seductive overtones. Regulars often form romantic attachments but dancers rarely reciprocate their feelings. Here the work of sustaining illusion becomes the work of sustaining illusionary connections. Publication punctures, but also re-sells, this set of illusions.

The level of delusion that the customers must accumulate in order to support their romantic attachments can be staggering. The following is a conversation between Egan and her regular Marcus, which is included in Egan's book:

[Marcus] I don't want to be just a customer. [Egan] You aren't. [Marcus] Then why should I have to pay for time with you? [Egan] Because I am broke and trying to get through school, because I need to pay my bills. [Marcus] If you come home with me, I will pay all your bills. But we shouldn't have to pay to be affectionate. It's weird when I came here I was just looking for fun and some excitement and then I met you. I never thought I would meet someone like you. You know my colleagues at work said that you guys (exotic dancers) just want me for my money, and that's all. But we're different. We have a great future together. I mean... I am more than your customer... right? [Egan] I have a wonderful time with you, it's great. [Marcus] Yeah it is... so when can I see you outside? [Egan] Soon... it's just crazy right now. [Marcus] Yeah of course. (Egan 64-5)

Note Egan's generalized, non-committal tone. To some Egan's treatment of Marcus may come across as callous if not cruel, though in fact it is pragmatic and self-protective as well. Regulars present an ethical dilemma in that they often seem to hold no socially acquired knowledge of how erotic dance clubs function. For individuals who are not worldly, the fact that erotic dance clubs are places for interactions of an economic as opposed to a romantic nature may have to be explicitly stated. For Marcus his co-workers have attempted to impart this knowledge, yet he fails to believe them. Does it then fall upon Egan to explicitly explain the mechanics of her job to Marcus? Or should it just be assumed that if he has not put together the fact that he has to pay Egan to retain her attention, he may not want to have that realization?

Outsiders to the industry may view dancers' cultivation of relationships with regulars as a dangerous tightrope act that could potentially end in violence based on the rage that unrequited

love can breed within the emotionally unstable. For social club dancers, cultivating these relationships is the only way an individual can achieve success as they lack the opportunities that their fellow dancers in hustle and show clubs have, so it is a risk they must be willing to take. Although social clubs dancers do not differ from hustle and show dancers as they all sell fantasy and desire, social club dancers also sell a particular form of emotional labour therefore social clubs become sites of specialized emotional consumption. Emotional consumption is defined as “an affective relation that emerges within social interaction” although the affective relation (i.e. “emotion, desire, and fantasy”) is temporary (Egan 126).

In order for the regular to sustain the perceived emotional attachment to the dancer of his choice in between the dancers shifts the regular must engage in transference. Transference occurs when an individual shifts the emotions they have felt in a particular situation or with a particular person onto another individual. Transference has been typically attributed to therapist/client relationships it can be argued that transference is an underlying cause for regulars/dancers relationships (Egan 126). As noted earlier, dancer and ethnographer Frank found in the course of her research that older male customers often feel as though they are reliving their youth via their interactions with dancers (Frank 147-8). It could be argued that customers’ effort to retain their youth may extend to an attempt to relive the passions and loves of their past. In this context the dancers may be the canvas on which the regulars are projecting their past loves, but it is key to remember the ageist, ableist, and other restrictive assumptions that underlie these fantasies.

There are also racialized narratives and rescue narratives at play. Egan found during the course of her work that dancers of colour found their regulars fetishizing them for their race. As a dancer by the name of Margarita shared with Egan:

Like I am their wild Latina... you know the girl they always wanted to fuck, but they were stuck with their prim and proper white wife. They have all these weird

fantasies about las mujeres latina... tu entendes (Latina women. Do you understand)?

[...] Like they have always wanted someone like me... an accent, nice hips and smooth brown skin, but they were always ashamed... like I am that fantasy for them.

(Egan 107-8)

Brooks speaks to a dancer named Cristina (who identifies as Latina) who has a white regular although Cristina does not speak to any racial fetishization in her relationship with her regular (Brooks 46-7). That being said, Brooks frames Cristina's relationship with her regular (and by extension all relationships between regulars and dancers of colour) in reference to Patricia Hill Collins' observations surrounding black women and subjugated knowledge (Brooks 47). Brooks extends this knowledge to Cristina as a Latina women in stating that Cristina uses subjugated knowledge ("challenging the ideology of the dominant culture that oppresses [black women]") in "pretending to be interested in the customers while understanding the power dynamics operating between her and the men" (Brooks 47). While power dynamics are always at play in the context of erotic dance (more on that in a moment) dancers of colour also have to contend with the historical contexts of the vilification of the sexualities of women of colour both by white men and men of colour.

Egan's personal account and academic research lead her to conclude, "regulars interactions with dancers were imbued with fantasy, desire, and power" (Egan 13) and it must be noted that these interactions are symbiotic. The economic transaction underlying the fantasy and desire within the erotic dance context is often framed as unbalanced as dancers are often assumed to be reliant on customers' patronage for survival. While this may be true, it is also true that the aforementioned server within a coffee shop could be in the same situation with recent studies finding that 47% of Canadians are living paycheck to paycheck ("47% of Canadians Still Live Paycheque to Paycheque" N.P.). Framing customer/dancer interactions as having an inherent power imbalance keeps dancers within the victim context and also ignores the power

that dancers do have. If a customer does not have money, a dancer will not dance for them. Therefore although the exchange remains an economic transaction, the economic power runs both ways. A customer that Egan spoke to by the name of James, was fully aware of the fluidity of this power:

Well you know... as well as I do that the women have all the power here and they are the ones who control everything. They decide when and if they will talk to you when you come in and they can leave you at any time. [...] Shit, money is the only thing we have over [dancers]. But hell, that ain't much. (Egan 114)

Harkening back to Egan's conversation with her regular Marcus, it is blatantly obvious that regardless of what Marcus believes the nature of his relationship with Egan to be, if he ceases to pay her she will no longer spend time with him. Although the emotional labour put forth by the dancers is heavily linked to fantasy, "enabling regulars to believe that their feelings are requited and the response is not the result of commodity exchange," (Egan 138) the fact is that without the commodity exchange dancers refuse to engage in that labour.

For social club dancers, success is measured in the number of regulars one dancer has and the amount of money a dancer earns from her regulars. Their memoirs provide a more multifaceted look at the relationships between regulars and dancers. Burana shares her accounts of regulars at her first club, O'Farrell Brothers Theater in San Francisco in her autobiography. Burana provides an in-depth perspective that also addresses how regulars can affect dancers' relationships outside the club. Burana asserts:

One girl's regular, a gravelly-voiced college rock icon, buys her a brand-new Harley Davidson. Another girl is given a Porsche by her regular, which she immediately sells to pay for medical school. An eighteen- thousand-dollar emerald ring is presented to a girl onstage, insurance papers included. Some dancers talk shit, I'm sure, but a lot of the stories they tell about their trinkets are true. Rolexes don't lie—

not the real ones, anyway. I prefer cash, as the presents possess weird energy. The man might not expect so much as a phone call from you saying when you'll be working next, but he'll want some kind of connection to you, some land of exchange, so whatever he gives has its own gravity. The married girls with regulars have to hide the gifts from their husbands, or sell them. The husbands don't mind the cash, but the stuff sends them over the edge, as a gift is so much more personal. A signifier that the connection with the customer has crossed the line between transaction and relationship—even if the relationship is limited to an hour or two in the customer's lap every week or so, with him petting your hair as he tells you about his day. (Burana 215-6)

When it comes to compensation, Egan echoes the fact that regulars can provide an income that rivals anything social club dancers could make within their small communities. Egan speaks of a dancer who earns between four hundred to six hundred dollars every time her regular visits. Cody also recounted her observations regarding regulars at her first club Schieks in Minneapolis and highlights the reality of long-term power relationships between dancers and customers in the following:

One stripper, Sidnee, had a reg who came to see her at least three times a week and handed hundred-dollar bills to her as if they were pocket lint. [...] Her reg kept her rich. But I knew that her standard of living was contingent on the interest of one middle-aged man in a Cosby sweater. If his obsession ever waned, she'd be back to steerage with the rest of us, hawking two-for-one laps with a free cigar-cutter included. (Cody, Ch.7)

Dancers have to do the paid emotional labour involved in cultivating relationships with regulars on top of the unpaid emotional labour involved with balancing their real relationships and the reality that their regulars can cease their financial support at any time. Although Cody's take is

overly cynical in its tone, there is a danger in relying on the kindness of regulars and dancers are more than aware of what lies ahead.

All good things must come to end and the relationships between regulars and dancers are no exception. Egan states that “the structure of [regulars’] desire requires a hierarchical relation within which [a dancer’s] desirability is bolstered at the expense of her subjectivity and complexity” (Egan 118). Once again, there is that knife-edge of general/individual to be walked. For dancers the question becomes how long they are willing to tolerate someone obsessing over a one-dimensional fictionalization of them. The most interesting thing about the dissolution of relationships between regulars and dancers is that the regulars are consistently positioned as the ones who are ending the relationship based on dancers refusing to extend the relationship beyond the confines of the club. Unlike rescue men who remain somewhat aware that their fantasies could never become reality, regulars often attempt to make their girlfriend dreams come true. According to Egan, these forced attempts almost always take the form of the regulars using “their monetary power over their ‘girlfriends,’ to test the authenticity of their affections” via the imposition of “various ultimatums” regarding contact outside of the club environment (Egan 119). A deteriorating dancer/regular relationship can become especially fraught within the context of the social club as these clubs survive based on the patronage of their regular clientele. The best case scenario has the regular transposing his affection onto another dancer and the worst case scenario can take the form of the regular attempting to get his former “love” fired by causing a scene or spreading damaging and entirely false rumors (Egan 119). Despite the fictional underpinnings of the entire relationship, regulars react in the same manner that a spurned lover might at the end of a long-term relationship. Expressions of pain, grief, and rage are deeply felt and often openly articulated (Egan 119).

Despite the emotional labour involved, regulars remain the most lucrative form of income for social club dancers. While maintaining a successful hustle and cultivating an illusion of

physical perfection are both taxing to the dancers involved, it could be argued that the level of emotional labour by social club dancers in the cultivation of regulars is the most taxing of all. Consider that social clubs are in small towns or isolated communities. In this context, dancers are cultivating regular relationships with men who may live on their street, fix their cars, pack their groceries. Unlike regular relationships which may form in the other types of clubs, regular relationships within the social club require an awareness that an individual who becomes amorous could possibly show up at a dancer's front door or complicate a dancer's everyday life with either attempts at romance or their anger over rejection.

The final point of negotiating success for erotic dancers crosses club categorizations and surrounds whether a dancer is considered a "house" or "feature" dancer. The majority of erotic dancers fall into the house dancer category – they consistently work at one club where they perform onstage and (depending on what type of club they are in) also offer lap and private dances. Some dancers may move from club to club, but generally house dancers stay at one club for an extended period of time (Burana 38) They do not receive any special billing or compensation, although they might appear in advertising for the club (Brooks 71-81). Feature dancers are like rock stars – they go on tour with gigs booked at erotic dance clubs all over North America (and in some cases around the world). They usually have intricate costumes, their own lighting systems, elaborate props, and merchandise (i.e. autographed photos, posters, videos, etc.) to sell. Feature dancers may perform at a club for one night or for an entire week for which they receive top billing and command high fees from the club's management (Burana 38). Although a feature dancer earns far more than a house dancer, it again costs money to make money – expenses related accumulate due to their elaborate stage show (i.e. costumes, props, lighting, etc.) also there is a great physical toll that results from constant traveling and makes feature dancing an especially demanding area of erotic dance (Burana 38). These aspects of

labour are highlighted in memoirs in ways that raise awareness about the skill sets and challenges of the industry.

Dancers on what is known as the “feature circuit” seem to fall into two categories – professional competitive erotic dancers and pornographic film actresses. The Miss Exotic World Pageant is an example of a platform for professional competitive erotic dancers. Hosted at The Exotic World Burlesque Museum in Helendale, California, the pageant revolves around the Burlesque style of erotic dance (Burana 141). Burlesque is a form of erotic dance that relies more on performance and entertainment rather than sexual arousal. Arguably the most well known burlesque performer of this or any other generation is Dita Von Teese who has been crowned as a “fetish queen, fashion avatar, America’s sultry doyenne of burlesque” by *The New York Times* (La Ferla N.P.). While burlesque is a form of erotic dance that is not commonly seen inside erotic dance clubs, feature dancers can vary in their areas of erotic dance expertise. Overall, pornographic film actresses are more common among feature performers because they tend to possess a level of name recognition among the individuals who would consider going to an erotic dance club.

Jameson spent the majority of her adult film career doing double duty as a feature dancer. She chronicles her time on the feature dancing circuit in her autobiography and she provides a great deal of insight into all aspects of feature dancing. According to Jameson many erotic dancers enter the pornographic film industry in order to become feature dancers and therefore command the rates that feature dancers can earn (Jameson & Strauss 466). According to Jameson, the fact that she waited as long as possible to return to erotic dance as a feature dancer after beginning her pornographic film career in earnest allowed her to command twelve thousand dollars a night as a flat rate from the club’s management. On top of that she was earning between twelve hundred to four thousand dollars in on-stage tips and thousands more selling merchandise per night... on a three week dancing tour (Jameson & Strauss 466). Supposing that

Jameson performed for five nights a week for those three weeks, her take home grand total would be over two hundred thousand dollars. Jameson also discusses a feature dancing tour that she did with a fellow female adult performer in which they earned over one hundred thousand dollars in a three-night period (Jameson & Strauss 520). Although Jameson's account of feature dancing can hardly be assumed to be universal, she does provide insight into how financially lucrative a feature dancing career can potentially be.

As previously mentioned, success within the erotic dance industry is purely measured in profit and feature dancing provides the most potentially lucrative area for dancers, placing feature dancers at the top of the success hierarchy. The rest of the hierarchy could possibly break down as follows: 2) dancers with generous or numerous regulars; 3) dancers who successfully sell whatever fantasy is required of them; 4) dancers with a flawless hustle. This hierarchy is not representative of a perfect science and quite frankly a dancer could possibly hit on several of the hierarchical points at the same time. For example, a dancer could flawlessly hustle a regular to whose fantasies she has crafted her physical presentation. Regardless of how it breaks down within the clubs the bottom line is that success equals money and money equals power. Cody's descriptor of the garish green starburst in the garter of successful dancers is representative of the amount of power a dancer has. The higher your "price per pound" (Cody, Ch.7), the more status you have within the club and the more you can command in compensation from both customers and your club.

Discussions of power within sex work often only examine social links such as gender or race and completely fail to acknowledge the power inherent in continuously having a fat stack of cold hard cash. Widely recognized markers of success such as a post-secondary or graduate level education are acknowledged as being unattainable to marginalized individuals yet other consumptive based markers of success such as designer dresses, purses, and shoes – what Jameson states she spent the bulk of her house dancing money on (Jameson & Strauss 49) – are

far more accessible to everyone. Despite the fact that erotic dancers can achieve a financial status that is considered successful across the board (i.e. in the non-sex working world) their success is still somehow viewed as tainted. Success in the erotic dance industry is coloured by the stigma that surrounds the industry and sex work in general rendering whatever success a dancer has as tenuous within the world at large. This serves to disempower dancers and uphold the idea the mantle of success is reserved for white, wealthy, heterosexual men.

Chapter 4

“I’m Only Being Degraded If You Make Me Feel That Way”

Consider two possible headlines about the same crime: Hooker killed in alley, Mother of two found dead. Which one do you care about more?

- Leslie Jeffrey

If there is one issue that consistently informs discussions surrounding sex work it is the stigma attached to sex work, which is often used to deny dignity and agency to sex workers. Sex worker and activist Carol Queen defines stigma as “insidious myth-making” which causes to people believe things about individuals within a particular group that are false (Queen, Ch.23). The impact of this myth making has already been addressed in reference to issues such as the law enforcement classification of crimes against sex workers as “No Humans Involved”; radical feminist claims of “false consciousness” among sex workers taking pride in their work or attempting to reframe sex work as economic labour; the Damaged Goods Hypothesis; and the Rescue Men genus of erotic dance clubs customers. One theme that ties all of those topics together is the assumption that sex workers require outsider intervention in order to be rescued from the industry.

“The whore” and “stigma” are linked at the linguistic level. As sex worker rights activist Gail Pheterson states:

Whore means *prostitute*. And a prostitute is a woman who offers to hire her body for indiscriminate sexual intercourse or so says *The Concise Oxford Dictionary*. *Prostitute* is further defined as a verb: to prostitute oneself is to sell one’s honor for base gain or to put one’s abilities to infamous use. Other dictionaries [...] specify in the verb definition the *shame* attached to dishonor and the *unworthiness* and

wrongdoing attached to infamous use. The noun clearly denotes a person, especially a woman, offering heterosexual sex, in particular intercourse, for money; the verb denotes any person's activity, which need not be sexual, put to uncommendable use. Those meanings are likely to conform to popular opinion except that many people collapse the second definition into the first. A prostitute then becomes one who sells her honor by offering to hire her body for base gain or for an unworthy doing, specifically sexual intercourse. (Pheterson 39) [emphasis in original text]

Pheterson's etymological digging provides a great deal of insight into the establishment of "the whore" within North American culture. "Whore" explicitly refers to female sex workers and female sex workers are defined as those who sell their honor through selling sexual intercourse. The definitions involved are indiscriminate, in that they provide no acknowledgement of the different types of sex work – many of which do not involve sexual intercourse – or how the "whore" is defined based on one's racialization.

Erotic dancers do not meet the criteria of "the whore" as they offer fantasies of heterosexual sexual intercourse but do not expressly provide that service. In terms of racialization, specifically in the context of black women, author Leith Mullings posits that the stereotype of "the Jezebel" is more relevant than "the whore." Mullings states that "the Jezebel" "functioned to excuse miscegenation and sexual assault" allowing representations of black women to frame them as "defeminized, inappropriate, or bad", rationalizing "labour and sexual exploitation to reinforce race solidarity across gender and class lines" (Mullings 240). For white women, stigmatization surrounding "the whore" represents the abandonment of honor for wanton sexual and economic gratification. For black women, stigmatization surrounding "the Jezebel" represents a place of institutionalized violence and racism based on the constructed notion that black women did not have honor to begin with. This difference troubles the supposed

universality of slutshaming and puts forth questions about how the stigmatization of the whore plays out in the lives of women of differing racial backgrounds.

The term “social control” refers to societal structures and traditions which compel individuals to conform to standards of acceptable behavior. Social control is enacted formally through our justice system and governmental policies as well as informally through the expectations of our families or peer groups. Stigmatization is a function of social control that causes individuals who have been marked by it to be disadvantaged both politically and personally. In the context of sex work, where stigmatization is common, this dyad of disadvantage shapes how individuals conceptualize sex work. Individual citizens’ opinions regarding sex work/sex workers are shaped by both governmental approaches and individuals’ personal experiences with (or lack thereof) sex work/sex workers.

Stigmatization allows the psychologically dissonant act that is Othering. In sociological terms, Othering allows for the dominant group to view what they believe to be a subordinate group as so entirely different from themselves that they are regarded as less than human. This complements the “psychological definition of Othering which refers to Otherness as the process of attaching moral codes of inferiority to difference” (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 300), although both definitions apply to stigmatization faced by sex workers. Sex workers live their lives every day at the intersection of deviance and normalcy and it is this intersection that must be examined in order for the power of stigma to be fully understood. The basis for stigmatization is Othering. Sociologists Michal Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi state that identifying the Other is charged “with political significance” that relies on “the attribution of inferiority to difference” and aids in the development of a “hierarchical social order” (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 307). This “attribution of inferiority to certain social groups” translates into how academia addresses the Other and without active resistance to this positioning, academics inadvertently recreate oppressive structures within their work (Krumer-Nevo & Sidi 307), just as the dancers themselves often reproduce

hierarchical social orders in their own publications: constant care is needed to void and/or reframe these harmful social categories.

Within the North America the stigma surrounding sex work often rests on the resistance or denial of women's acts of choice – this is the idea that one would not or could not possibly *choose* to be a sex worker. This resistance often takes the form of contempt for certain types of female agency, especially those framed by lack of economic privilege. Academic and sex workers' rights advocate Jo Doezema speaks to the major issues inherent in this mindset by pointing out that “practical constraints on choice always exist” and that the only measurements of choice which are recognized as legitimate within the North America are dominated by both white privilege and economic privilege (Doezema 23). When individuals are alienated by voluntary engagement in the sex industry they are often speaking to their own privilege. They are essentially uncovering the fact that they have never been in position where fast money is critical to survival. They are revealing that they have never looked in the mirror and had to consider (what Diablo Cody dubbed) their “price per pound” (Cody, Ch.7). The lack of experience that upholds dominant understandings surrounding “choice” not only speak to white/economic privilege but also to the holes within our social safety nets which put far tighter practical constraints on choice based on classed and racialized positioning. Economic need and choice interact, yet need and poverty are not the only criteria surrounding choice.

In the United States there are three major federally-established, state-run social assistance programs – the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP, formerly Food Stamps), and federal housing assistance. TANF provides cash assistance to “very poor families with children”, the majority of which are headed by single mothers (McCarty et al. 5). 1.9 million families receive TANF assistance; with the states determining the specific amount of assistance a family can receive (McCarty et al. 5). For a family of three the maximum amount can range from anywhere to close to one thousand

dollars a month (Alaska) to one hundred and seventy dollars (Mississippi) a month (McCarty et al. 5). SNAP (formerly known as Food Stamps) provides electronic benefit transfer cards (known as EBT) to recipients that can be used as cash in order to purchase food. In 2011 the forty million recipients received on average one hundred and thirty four dollars per month (McCarty et al. 5-6). Four million low-income households (only one out of every four eligible households) rely on the various forms of federal housing assistance, which can take the form of subsidized housing or housing vouchers (McCarty et al. 7). Eligibility and the method/amount of assistance are determined on the federal level although local Public Housing Authorities (PHA) are entrusted with screening all applicants who are then rescreened by potential landlords (McCarty et al. 7).

A individual who receives TANF, SNAP, or federal housing assistance may be required to undergo drug testing at the discretion of state officials. If an individual fails a drug test they, along with their family, can be removed from all programs immediately (McCarty et al. 8-15). The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Act (also known as the Welfare Reform Act), passed in 1996 under the Clinton administration, bans individuals who have been “convicted of a felony for possession, use, or distribution of illegal drugs” from receiving TANF and SNAP assistance (McCarty et al. 9-10). In terms of federal housing assistance, drug felons are at the mercy of their local PHAs who may or may not deny them access (McCarty et al. 16). In the United States a felony drug conviction can come about under a variety of circumstances. For example one can be charged with felony drug possession for having any of the following prescription drugs without a valid prescription: Valium, Vicodin, Xanax, OxyContin, and Percocet (“Drug Charges Felony Possession”) and felony charges can result in adult sentencing regardless of the offenders age. In between 1996-1999 over ninety two thousand women were banned from receiving federal assistance due to felony drug convictions, with forty eight percent of the women identifying as black or Latina (Allard 6).

In Canada there are several programs at both the federal and provincial level that support low-income individuals. Under Ontario Works, the provincial welfare program, a single mother of two children under the age of eighteen can get a maximum of twelve hundred dollars a month meant to cover both the costs of basic needs and shelter (“Ontario Works Monthly Allowances”). In order to qualify for Ontario Works, that same family must have less than twenty one hundred and fifty dollars in assets (“Ontario Works Monthly Allowances”). On the surface, that may seem like a reasonable requirement – if an individual has money held in bank accounts or any investments totaling over twenty one hundred dollars, they may not require government assistance. That being said, the asset limit does not allow for recipients to amass any sort of emergency fund or personal financial safety net. Ontario Works eligibility is reviewed every three months (“Your Responsibilities”) and if for any reason a family finds themselves removed from the program, the asset limits could potentially leave them penniless.

Discourses of choice can be as totalizing as other discourses, leading to the false assumption that choice is the same for everyone. How do we define the concept of “choice” for American women with felony drug convictions? How is it defined for Canadian women who require social assistance? These are only two examples of the “practical constraints on choice” that are institutionally created. Couple that with personal issues like unexpected pregnancy, dissolution of a marital or a cohabitative relationship, death, or illness all of which can suddenly alter the landscape of choice. Not to mention issues of violence – domestic, sexual – against an individual woman or her children. Discussions of motherhood in terms of “choice” are particularly fraught. As legal scholar Katherine M. Franke states, the understanding of motherhood as a “purely altruistic” oversimplifies the lives of women and allows for “the social forces that govern the ‘choices’ and priorities we set in our own lives” to be ignored (Franke 191). Women who identify as both mothers and erotic dancers can find themselves in especially difficult positions as to the outside world, their identities may be firmly ground in their role as

“mother”, serving to obscure all other areas of identification (Franke 185). Mindy S. Bradley-Engen shares the following quotation from a dancer named Mercy:

I’m a single mother of three. Their father doesn’t give a dime. But at least he’s not involved in their lives. If I take him to court, he might not stay like that. So I take care of my kids. I do the best I can. (Bradley-Engen 18)

For Mercy, and other dancers in her position, the framework of choice is narrowed by both personal and sociological constraints, for example the limited amount of social assistance a single mother can receive. One thing that this study hopes to offer in an invitation to consider labour choices more broadly, and to develop discourses of respect for multiple forms of choice.

In her ethnographic work *Unequal Desires* former dancer Siobhan Brooks conveys the story of a black dancer named Spice, whose story offers insights into the intersections of pragmatism and choice:

I have been working ever since I was 14. I used to work at McDonald’s making \$1,400 a month. I moved out at 15 and got my own apartment because my parents were into drugs. While working at McDonald’s I met an older woman who was about 27 through a mutual friend, and she suggested that I work in a strip club. So, I got a fake ID and started dancing. [...] I went to alternative high school [...] where they allowed me to do my work from home. I was home-schooled for part of my education, so this felt normal to me. I felt different from other students since I was already working and had my own apartment. [...] I thought it was better than McDonald’s. I made in a night what I made in a week there. (Spice as quoted in Brooks 57)

As outlined in Chapters 2 and 3, traditional service industry work can provide an area of economic exploitation that far outweighs erotic dance in terms the levels of harassment and disrespect being financially worthwhile. As Spice’s story demonstrates, dancing provides an

income far greater than traditional service industry work. Spice's account is reconfirmed as Brooks recounts her interaction with a Latina women working coat check at one of the clubs she did her fieldwork in:

I returned to [a club] to conduct field research and interview people [...]. A Latina woman I had asked to interview checked my bag, and gave me her e-mail address; she reached in her purse for a pen, and opened her wallet to show me a picture of 4-year-old son. Next to the photo I noticed a white EBT card. I found this significant because it signifies that she is working class and receiving public assistance, unlike many of the dancers [...]. (Brooks 38)

Discussions of choice in terms of the stigma surrounding sex work within North America are based on privileged socioeconomic positioning and frameworks developed within a colonial system that thrives on the establishing and exploiting the Other. Just as it is key to recognize sex work as legitimate labour, it is imperative to develop informed and respectful discourses surrounding choice. Choice plays out differently within the lives of individual women; by engaging with the assumption that there is one correct choice countless women are positioned as socioeconomic or social failures. Once again, the binary thinking of good/bad causes damage.

Limited frameworks for choice factor heavily in traditional academic research surrounding sex work. In academia, the choice most scrutinized is that of the researcher who engages sex-work-centered research. Bradley-Engen recounts having her work rejected by the editor of a "well-ranked mainstream journal" who overruled all of the publication's other reviews that recommended Bradley-Engen's work for publication due to its "inappropriate" subject matter that he described as "T and A" (Bradley-Engen 2). While Bradley-Engen's account may seem like an issue of personal taste, it actually speaks to a silencing of sex work research that is endemic within academia. Bradley-Engen walked away from this experience with the impression that the stigma linked to being labeled a "sex researcher" within academia

was enough to scare other academics away from engaging in sex work research as they might encounter serious “career obstacles” (Bradley-Engen 2). Dancer and academic Eva Pendleton echoes Bradley-Engen’s perceptions in her own account of being the oft whispered about “sex worker in American Studies” at New York University (Pendleton 80). Although Pendleton frames her account as one of personal challenge as it forced her to walk a line between being “palatable to the academy without compromising [her] own convictions” (Pendleton 80). Once again, it is clear that prejudice affects intellectual freedom and knowledge-production.

By not allowing sex work research the same place of respect within the annals of social science that other social realities experience, it allows for the aforementioned “insidious myth-making” (Queen, Ch.23) to continue to dominate discussions of the sex work industry and the those who work within in it. By failing to engage in dialogues surrounding sex work, academic institutions fail to addresses, in the words of former dancer and academic Katherine Frank, our “own ideological beliefs about love, money, and power” (Frank 13). This perpetuates totalizing or simplistic dominant discourses about “the whore” upholding the apocryphal understanding of sex work as place where honor is traded within economic exchange for sexual gratification.

As explored throughout this project, dominant discourses surrounding sex work are shaped by the good/bad binary created by the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy and the remnants of Puritan morals that demand compulsory virtue for all women, even though this same binary simultaneously denies women of colour any virtuous categorization. As Jill Nagel states in the introduction to the influential whore feminist text *Whores and Other Feminists*, “one does not have to actually be a whore to suffer a whore’s punishment or stigma” (Nagel 5). Further to that point, sexologist and sex worker activist Veronica Monét asserts that:

One need not become a sex worker to experience being a bad girl; one can simply refuse to wear the label of the good girl, and let people assume she is sexually experienced, forward, and promiscuous, even if she is not. (Monét 222)

Although Monét positions the embracement of “bad girl” label as a point of purpose driven social deviance, more often than not for women who are positioned as “bad girls” it is rarely a self assumed mantle. As Leora Tanenbaum outlines in her book *Slut!: Growing Up Female with a Bad Reputation*, the positioning of certain females as promiscuous, regardless of their level of sexual experience, is about keeping all female sexuality under control (Tanenbaum 87).

For Priscilla Alexander, co-founder of the sex workers’ rights group National Task Force on Prostitution, laws surrounding sex work provide the most extreme example of these constraints surrounding female sexuality. Alexander states:

I believe that as long as women are arrested for the crime of being sexually assertive, for standing on the street without a socially acceptable purpose or a male chaperone, I am not free. As a woman and a feminist, I believe we will never have rights, opportunities choices, work options, or an income equivalent to men’s unless we can stop being afraid of being either raped or called ‘whore’. As women, we must watch where and how we walk, talk, and dress, lest someone mistake (or claim to have mistaken) our intent. (Alexander 84)

The fear of whore stigma drives the stigmatization of sex workers. As long as the sociological imaginary believes female sexuality to be threatening and in need of constant supervision, all women are under suspicion of whoredom and must fight to keep themselves separate from actual whores (aka sex workers) or order to remain respectable and safe. This mindset is further complicated by the shared notion put forth by Nagel, Monét, Tanenbaum, and Alexander that regardless of how hard any individual woman fights against being labeled a whore, no woman can prevent that label and no woman is guaranteed safety from physical, sexual or emotional violence by attempting to avoid that label. However, this project demonstrates that while women are forced to engage in self-narration within the restrictive “good girl” vs. “bad girl” binary,

women are still able to construct themselves into mainstream discourses through the simultaneous utilization and rejection of said binary.

Erotic dancers are consistently and purposefully asserting themselves against the whore stigma through sharing their stories, demanding the recognition of their labour in the context of the law,²⁰ and their engagement with erotic dance as a form of economic betterment. In terms of the works under examination, the authors are fully aware of how their lives function in opposition to this stigma. The specific issues of stigma that erotic dancers face all stem from the sexual double standard which serves to create an imbalance of power between dancers and their customers that allows for stigmatization potentially to spill over into the real, everyday lives of dancers. As Frank posits:

[...] men can be customers with relative impunity compared to the women who work in the clubs and who may carry the stigma of the sex industry for years afterward. Granted, men potentially face censure from their family (should their family actually find out about their visits) or from acquaintances who do not approve of their practices. The experience clearly does not leave a permanent stain, however, as strip clubs are still routinely used for bachelor parties, outings with coworkers, and other occasions. (Frank 18-9)

The legality, accessibility, and considerable social acceptability of erotic dance clubs put erotic dancers on the front line of the offensive against “the whore” as erotic dance clubs reside at the crossroads between acceptability and disreputableness. Returning to Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of the Fantastic and the hesitation between “either total faith or total incredulity” (Todorov 31), it can be argued that stigma flourishes in a cultural hesitation to perceive erotic dance as either

²⁰ For more information regarding labour organization within the erotic dance industry, please see the Exotic Dancers Alliance of San Francisco <<http://www.bayswan.org/eda-sf/lawstoknow.html>>

totally acceptable or totally disreputable. If erotic dance were totally acceptable it would greatly trouble whore stigma and if it were totally disreputable it would have a very limited place within society, neither of which is the case. In order for the cultural status quo to be upheld, erotic dance has to exist in a liminal space allowing for “insidious myth-making” to occur.

While all sex workers deal with social and systemic stigmatization (more on those in a moment), it should be noted that many aspects of sex work can be done in anonymity. For example, a dominatrix’s profession may only be known to her clients while the rest of the world may assume that she is a student or an office assistant. The very same can be said of sex professionals and in the both cases the stigma towards clients is often severe enough to cause the clients to want to remain undetectable to the outside world. However, erotic dancers and pornography performers put not only their physical bodies on display but by extension, they display their identities to the customers within clubs and to those that consume their films, removing the veil of anonymity. That being said, pornography performers differ from erotic dancers as they do not perform directly in front of their consumers let alone within the same community as them. Although erotic dancers may employ stage names, wear wigs, utilize heavy makeup, and cover up tattoos and scars – anonymity is not guaranteed and may be downright impossible. Erotic dance clubs exist within almost every city and small town (local laws permitting) across the United States and Canada and the majority of patrons do not have to travel vast distances in order to enter a club. As it is substantially socially acceptable for men to patron erotic dance clubs it is likely that men would choose a club within their own community to frequent. For dancers, clubs within their own communities serve to provide conveniently-located workplaces. After dancing in six-inch heels for an eight-hour shift that may end around 4am, who wants to deal with a long drive home? For dancers the customer demanding extras last night might become the mechanic fixing the car today. Fantasy is punctured easily, just as pragmatic considerations delimit choice.

For the authors of the autobiographical works under examination, almost all of their works were published under the authors' widely-recognized, if not legal names.²¹ The one exception is Sarah Tressler whose book *Diary of An Angry Stripper* is a compilation of blog posts she authored anonymously over a two-year period. Towards the end of Tressler's career in erotic dance, she became a features reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*. She continued to dance while working at the paper and her moonlighting was exposed by another Houston newspaper causing Tressler to be terminated from the *Chronicle*. Her termination and the controversy surrounding it lead her to publish her book under her legal name (Tressler, *Foreword*). Legal scholar Laura A Heymann makes the argument that in terms of publishing, authornyms (i.e. statements of authorship) are "essentially branding choices" that allow for readers to relate to literature via the brand the author has cultivated (Heymann 1377-8). For all of the autobiographical authors within this project, regardless of whether or not they have previously cultivated a brand, their names and therefore their brand will forever be associated with their erotic dancing pasts. For example, a March 2013 *Vogue* spread featuring Diablo Cody mentions her autobiography despite the fact that it is almost a decade old and she has since reinvented herself as an in-demand producer and writer in Hollywood (Van Meter 574). When dancers eschew anonymity and claim their identities, not only in publishing but within erotic dance clubs, they are making a conscious choice to claim the space around them and their personal accounts regardless of the potential fallout. To use the terminology of Heymann, these reclamations should be read as dancers' engaging in activism and taking control of their personal brands.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, the "good girl" vs. "bad girl" dichotomy is something that the autobiographical works within this project have embraced in order to challenge the narratives of shame traditionally attached to being defined as "bad girl". The authors are not ashamed to put

²¹ Diablo Cody's legal name is Brook Busey-Maurio, although her pseudonym serves as her professional name.

their names to their experiences and stand as examples of how the damaged goods hypothesis and cultural understandings of purity are complicated by the expressed experiences of “bad girls”. In forcing their readers to put their preconceived notions up against the expressed experiences of living, breathing women the authors force the readers to challenge their own stigmatizing beliefs. By allowing for their names to be attached to these works, the authors also force the readers to consider these books against their other works.

When Diablo Cody’s film *Juno* started to gain accolades from the entertainment world journalists were forced to address her erotic dance memoir within the context of someone who could write a film of “surprising delicacy and emotional depth” (Scott N.P.). Consider the set of expectations embodied in this usage of “surprise”. This sense of dissonance also led journalist Rachel Abramowitz of the *Edmonton Journal* to opine that Cody’s experience within erotic dance may have inspired the film’s tone of dealing with teen pregnancy “without the usual tsunami of humiliation” (Abramowitz N.P.). By forcing the media to address her past as a dancer, Cody challenged narratives of shame not only surrounding sex work but surrounding female sexuality more broadly.

Dancers are completely aware that if/when the nature of their employment becomes known to those around them, their lives will never be the same. In a sense, this is the same pre/post transition that they recreate so frequently in their narratives of *becoming* dancers. For some this change is welcomed, even liberating as in the case of a dancer named Trena. Former dancer R. Danielle Egan quotes Trena in her ethnography *Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love* as proclaiming: “I find it liberating when I can shock people and tell them, yep that’s right, I am a student, a feminist, and an exotic dancer” (Egan 62). Lily Burana echoes Trena’s sentiments in her autobiography *Strip City* when she professes:

Sanctimony and condemnation are the bane of my existence, and I am ever poised to take on any offenders, wielding the damning term “sex negative” like a circus knife

thrower. Dare to impugn dancing? On my watch? Taste the blade, sucker! I am quick to stress that stripping is legitimate work. Hard work. Undervalued work. And woe to the person who suggests that a stripper can't be a feminist. What is feminism about if not exercising your options? My body, my choice. (Burana 219)

Returning to the importance of respectful discourses surrounding choice, for Burana and Trena, the change that took place within their social realities allowed them to be open and political about their lives and their accounts. The fact that both dancers invoke feminism in their statements is not a coincidence. They made the decision to be out regarding their occupations in order to challenge pre-conceived, and for that matter ill-conceived, notions about erotic dancers and sex workers in general that exist among many self-identified feminists. They are reclaiming choice itself.

For other dancers being viewed as the token stripper has the opposite effect, serving to make them feel as though they are an object to be studied and mocked rather than an individual human being deserving of consideration and kindness. Egan recounts:

Dancing at a colleague's fiftieth birthday I felt free. There were many of us enjoying the music. Looking across the room, I saw two male acquaintances sitting on a couch looking sullen and thought they might have more fun if they joined us on the dance floor. As I approached the couch, I asked, 'Wanna dance?' My request was met with one of the men taking out a dollar bill and handing it to me. Walking away, I heard both men laughing. Shocked and embarrassed, I looked around to see if anyone else had seen the interaction. In that moment I felt like my work as a sociologist, teacher, researcher, and feminist was effaced. Crying on my way home, I realized that what my colleagues did was more disrespectful than anything my dancer self ever experienced in the club. (Egan 55)

Egan found the experience of her colleagues using her part time occupation to frame her entire life crushing. The tastelessness and cruelty of her colleagues' actions are stomach-turning they clearly felt empowered to mock her openly which speaks volumes about how pervasive, and in fact public, where stigma and the stigmatization of sex workers is within both American and Canadian contexts.

As mentioned in this project's introduction, Cody worked a 9 to 5 job as an office worker and worked nights as an erotic dancer. According to Cody, one evening her two working worlds collided when two male co-workers recognized her from her 9 to 5 job (Cody, Ch. 6). She recounts: "I had a lot more to lose if I was outed at work, whereas no one would penalize two red-blooded network administrators for going to a strip club" (Cody, Ch. 6). Cody states that she was not outed by her co-workers but found herself saddened when they refused to acknowledge her in the office after seeing her as a dancer (Cody, Ch.6). Despite knowing her for months as just another cube-dweller, Cody's co-workers irrevocably changed their opinions of her based on her after hours job. What would have happened to Cody's employment at her day job if she were outed remains as mystery, but as Frank found within her research, dancers who are exposed by customers within their communities "have had a difficult time securing loans for housing or transportation or [...] have been denied custody of their children based on the nature of their employment" (Frank 276). The fallout from being outed can be swift and severe, serving to undermine women's choices and to deny them economic stability.

For erotic dancers, being outed is something that could very well occur at the hands of their municipal governments as they may be required to register and obtain a license in order to be legally permitted to dance. The licensing of dancers is common across municipalities within the United States and Canada with cities such as Las Vegas, Detroit, Toronto, and Calgary requiring dancers to be licensed. If individuals want to work as dancers in Las Vegas, the licensing process requires that one obtain what is known as a "sheriffs card" (Burana 65). The

process of obtaining this form of license requires that an individual already be employed within a club, as the application requires a club manager's signature (Burana 65). The applicant then must pay thirty-five dollars, undergo a criminal background check, have an identification photo taken, and provide a full set of fingerprints (Burana 65). Within the city of Toronto the Municipal Licensing and Standards board requires dancers to be licensed "in order to promote health and safety, protect consumers, and control nuisance" (Maggie's 1). The process that dancers in Toronto must go through to obtain a license involves proving one's immigration status, undergoing a criminal background check (at a cost of forty-five dollars), providing two forms of government identification as well as a home address (which must constantly remain current), and paying three hundred and forty seven dollars for a license that lasts one year as well as subsequent yearly payments of two hundred and forty four dollars to renew (Maggie's 1).

Although the identifying information required of dancers within the licensing process may also be required within other professions (for example bankers or transportation drivers), the reasoning for these requirements is problematic for erotic dancers. Licensing laws are legislative actions based entirely on the stigmatization of sex workers and the dissimulation inherent within said stigma. The mandate put forth by Toronto's Municipal Licensing and Standards board clearly positions licensing as a matter of public protection and civil order which in turn classifies dancers as something the public and civil society need to be protected from. Within the city of Toronto requiring proof of citizenship status as well as the significant cost of not only obtaining but maintaining a license is meant to provide yet another level of anti-immigration, class-based filtering for the public as it creates barriers for immigrant and low income women who may wish to work within the erotic dance industry. The question of who needs protection under those circumstances is a serious one.

For many women having to provide government identification and a current address, or fingerprints and a photo may already prove to be barrier enough as it explicitly ties their name

and identity to such a stigmatized profession. And what of women without permanent housing? That being said, most municipalities only require dancers to provide proof of licensing to their respective clubs and not to the individual customers that they interact with, therefore allowing some semblance of privacy for dancers. There are exceptions, however, in early 2013, a Texas state legislator put forth a bill that would not only require dancers to obtain a state license in order to dance but also force them to wear said license on their person while dancing therefore fully exposing a dancer's identity and even their address to every customer that walks through the door (Peterson). One struggles to imagine this same legislator forcing a banker or a truck driver to affix their licenses to their person at all times. This incredibly invasive attempt to establish yet another barrier for women who wish to work in the erotic dance industry is simply staggering in its willingness to force women to choose between maintaining their psychic and physical safety and being able to seek gainful employment.

Returning to the issue of protection(s), the systemic stigmatization the proposed Texas law embodies is empowered by human rights violations that occur at the state level when violence is committed against sex workers and the state fails to act in their defense. Although Priscilla Alexander speaks to specifically to the experiences of sex professionals, her following statements also apply to erotic dancers as well as all sex workers regardless of their area of employment:

Police, prosecutors, and judges all too often believe that a prostitute, by definition, cannot be raped, and refuse to enforce the law when one is. When prostitutes are murdered, police make little effort to find the killer unless or until he kills someone who is not a prostitute. Far too often, the murders go unsolved, even unacknowledged. Societies tolerate this blatantly discriminatory, random, and corrupt use (or non-use) of the law because they define prostitutes as outside of the common law, entitled to no human rights protections. (Alexander 92)

When a sex worker is exposed, she often loses her humanity in the eyes of the law. As easily as erotic dancers can be exposed so can they can very easily lose their humanity in the eyes of the state. If a customer becomes aggressive or even downright violent, erotic dancers are often left to their own devices to handle the situation.

In April 2013 a regular customer at the Los Angeles location of the Spearmint Rhino chain of erotic dance clubs shot a dancer in the face before taking his own life – all within the confines of the club (Lloyd). According to witness reports, the man was a regular of the dancer he targeted and while the dancer was giving her attacker a private dance, he insisted that the dancer leave with him. The dancer refused and the customer stated “he had spent a lot of money on the woman in the past year” right before he shot her in the face. The man then fatally shot himself (Lloyd). Reports conflicted as to the condition of dancer who was said to be simultaneously “fighting for her life” (Butler) while also being “expected to survive” (Lloyd). None of the media reports addressed security within the club including how the assailant managed to get a gun in the club in the first place. Considering the attacker was a regular, this situation was clearly building for quite time, at least a year by the attacker’s own admission.

In the case of the dancer who was horrifically attacked and may or may not have been murdered by her regular at the Spearmint Rhino (an update on her condition is not available nor was seemingly sought by the same news outlets that reported on her attack) she became a victim of a violent crime. Unfortunately, if she was exposed as a dancer in her everyday life she would have already experienced being cast as a victim, as a huge part of the stigma against sex workers is the previously discussed Damaged Goods Hypothesis. It is no accident that discussions of victimization in sex work rarely incorporate conversations about re-victimization. If an individual has experienced physical, sexual, or emotional violence forcing them to out themselves as a victim is a violation in and of itself. Asking them to share their accounts of abuse can cause the triggering of thoughts and feelings that will stay with the individual long

after the question has been asked. Novelist Ursula K. Le Guin, whose fantasy novels often depict sex work and are actively anti-violence, once stated that “the pornography of violence of course far exceeds, in volume and general acceptance, sexual pornography, in this Puritan land of ours” (Le Guin 103) and that could not be more true when we consider how opposing forces seek out and use sex workers’ accounts of violence to their own end. The sexuality of sex workers is positioned as vulgar and pornographic but their accounts of violence supposedly hold the answer to an ever-present why – as in “Why would anyone choose to be a sex worker?” This forces sex workers to position themselves around other people’s projected ideas, rather than around their own experiences and politics.

For Jenna Jameson, this careful self-positioning involved her keeping her story of being a two-time sexual assault victim a secret for decades. Jameson recounts her first experience of being interviewed by notorious radio personality Howard Stern and his stigma-infused line of questioning:

Instantly, the grilling started. He seemed determined to know what had made a girl like me become a porn star. I told him I loved sex. I told him I loved the attention. But it wasn’t enough for him. He kept saying that something didn’t compute. He asked if I had a screwed-up childhood, and I said no. He asked if my parents had been strict, and I said no. He asked if my dad and I still talked, and I said we did. [...] But then Howard asked me if I’d ever been molested or abused. It was the one question I wasn’t prepared for. [...] The question had crossed my mind before: Was I in this business because I was victimized or because I wanted to succeed at something? I examined it from every angle I could, and every time came to the same conclusion: that it didn’t make a shred of difference. [The sexual assaults] occurred too late in my development to be formative. Whether it happened or not, I still would have become a porn star. I’ve been to enough therapists to know that. I’ve never told

anyone about either [of the sexual assaults] because I don't want to be thought of as a victim. I want to be judged by who I am as a person, not by what happened to me.

[...] I didn't want anyone to think that I was in the business because I was a victim.

It was a choice I had made on my own, and was proud of. (Jameson 391-5)

For Jameson, refuting the victim stereotype that comes along with the stigmatization of sex workers meant denying her own experiences of violence thereby isolating her on an emotional level from her family, friends, and support from other sexual assault survivors. Although it is believed that trauma can result in the injured party engaging in defense mechanism of isolation (Erdelyi 504), utilizing this mechanism can cause issues in interpersonal relationships if one feels as though they cannot openly address their trauma (Shahar 534). As Jameson has been through therapy it is certain that she knew the psychological risks of remaining silent to those closest to her, yet she took the risks in order to fight against the personal stigmatization and re-victimization that others would heap upon her. It also must be noted that the private traumas of sex workers are often used as very public fodder for ideological debates, which contributes to the (frequent) expectation that sex workers should freely disclose their traumas and past histories in order to benefit others.

Jameson's accounts of her experience with coping with trauma problematizes the idea that trauma can only operate as an oppressive force within people's lives. As Judith Bula Wise states, the medicalization of how individuals respond to trauma has caused all trauma response to be considered a disorder (Wise 2), which immediately disempowers those coping with trauma. By attempting to manage trauma through medical means, individuals are denied the opportunity for self-determination and the ability to retain control over their lives (Manning 61). The process of creating an autobiographical text can actually provide a space for empowerment through the sharing of accounts of trauma and its aftermath. Bina Freiwald states:

[...] what writing in a public form can accomplish that the private journal or the therapy session cannot is intervention in the public sphere, by creating [...] an alternative jurisdiction by daring to contest oppressive master narratives; by militating against – and compelling the reader to reconsider – the social and material conditions that engender trauma. (Freiwald 235)

In terms of Jameson's story, by publicly recounting her trauma and vehemently rejecting the label of "victim" she turns her experiences of violence into a place of empowerment. Although Freiwald speaks to the reader reconsidering trauma based on the consumption of autobiographical accounts, it can also be argued that readers dealing with trauma in their own lives may feel also feel empowered upon realizing that trauma does not have to dominate one's entire life story, and that there are literary and aesthetic avenues open for working through past experiences. It remains important to examine and re-examine expectations the consumption of others' memoirs, both by academics and by the general public. There is a fine line between voyeurism and respectful engagement, and erotic dancers' memoirs walk that line with varying degrees of precision. This tension, again, remains central to my project, and especially to my interrogations of the concept of choice.

Although she was never an erotic dancer, I would like to give the last words on re-victimization to former pornographic film actress Linda Lovelace, whose 1980 autobiographic account of her coerced introduction to and violent experiences within the pornographic film industry was a key text in the Second Wave's fight against "female sexual slavery" (Dworkin & MacKinnon 46). Due to her notoriety, Lovelace struggled to seek employment resulting in her family requiring government assistance (McNeil & Osborne 270). Journalist Legs McNeil posthumously quoted Lovelace in his book *The Other Hollywood: The Uncensored Oral History of the Porn Film Industry* as stating:

When I look back at all the feminists [...] – I kind of feel like they used me, too. Because when I came out and said what I said, you know, about being a victim, too, it supported everything they had been saying, and it was coming from the horse's mouth. They needed me; that was good. But if I ever needed anything, they weren't really there. Between Andrea Dworkin and Kitty MacKinnon, they've written so many books, and they mention my name and all that, but financially they've never helped me out. They don't want me to do this or that, but you've never really helped me. [...] I know they made a few bucks off me, just like everybody else. (McNeil & Osborne 456)

Lovelace died in 2002 at the age of fifty-three after a car accident (McGillivray). Prior to her death, journalist Hart Williams coined the term “Linda Syndrome” in regards to “porn stars who seek acceptance from ‘overground’ society by disavowing their porn past” (Ford 45).

In the face all the evidence regarding the overwhelming, all encompassing effects of stigma within the lives of sex workers, one is left bewildered at how these individuals manage to cope. However, they do cope and, in the case of erotic dancers specifically, various coping mechanisms are utilized in order to deal with the constant barrage of dehumanizing falsehoods lobbed at them. Ethnographer Egan found during her time as an erotic dancer that her fellow dancers engaged in what she deemed “mutual exclusivity” as a major tool in their individual battles against stigma (Egan 57). Building on the theory of “subjective modality,” which addresses how the various selves we embody are shaped and experienced by ourselves and our relationships to the world (Egan 53), Egan defines mutual exclusivity as emotional states that separate the workplace and everywhere else within an individual's life (Egan 57). The demarcations of these emotional states are the points at which one puts on and removes one's work uniform and are common within professions that require uniforms such as professional athletes, police officers, nurses, etc. (Egan 57).

Although not identifying it with Egan's term, Bradley-Engen speaks to how mutual exclusivity functioned in her own concurrent experiences of being a dancer and an academic. She shares:

Experiencing this duality, being at once in the social world of the university where I was an overworked graduate student of questionable ability and, simultaneously, a highly regarded and successful dancer in the world of adult entertainment highlighted both the similarities and the difference of each social world. Both worlds had moments of satisfaction and uncertainty. There were moments when I was simultaneously proud of my ability as a dancer and ashamed of my performance as a student. On Friday night I was a goddess, and on Monday morning I was entirely unremarkable. But there were also times that I thanked God I was in graduate school and not 'just a dancer.' My pride in producing a good paper or performing well on an exam fell on deaf ears at the strip club. I became well aware of the organization and expectations of these distinct social worlds. (Bradley-Engen 6-7)

In Bradley-Engen's account, the demarcations between her mutual exclusive worlds were not always steadfast. This is an important point to stress as regardless of how mutual exclusivity is defined, there will always be remnants of one world within the other. This phenomenon of spilling over is not exclusive to dancers, as it has been noted in various studies of first responders and advanced care staff (see Zander et al., Adams et al.).

Egan discovered that for dancers mutual exclusivity was both a method of psychological preservation and a method of minimizing stigmatization in their everyday lives. If a dancer can make it clear to everyone that her job as a dancer is simply a job and that it ends for her when she leaves the club, her fitfulness as a romantic partner, mother, student are not questioned (Egan 61). As Egan posits:

If a dancer has two different selves, then she can move into spaces where her 'self' as a dancer is absent. She is not a whore or a slut; she is a concerned mother, a warm lover, a good student, and a helpful teacher. She is safely back within the realm of cultural acceptance. Her work is nothing more than that, a job. (Egan 61)

It must be noted that Egan's assertions regarding the outcomes of mutual exclusivity could be problematized if a dancer is outed against her will within her community. As stated earlier, individuals' perceptions regarding how one functions as an employee, a student, or a mother could be irrevocably altered by the additional knowledge that one is also an erotic dancer. Sex workers within other areas of the industry that allow for near anonymity may find the implementation of mutual exclusivity to be far easier. As previously discussed, it is far more unlikely for these individuals to be outed within their communities as it may have the effect of also outing their clients.

Dealing with stigmatization is not something circumscribed to dancers' lives outside of their respective clubs. Dancers also face an undercurrent of belittlement and contempt from their own customers. As Frank discovered, some customers come to erotic dance clubs with the deliberate purpose of being able to express sexual fantasies that they believe to be somehow deviant as they presume that the supposed "ethical inadequacies of women who would dance nude or otherwise work in the sex industry" prevent dancers from passing judgment in way non-stigmatized women might (Frank 114). While it is wonderful that dancers can provide a sympathetic outlet for the sexually repressed, the beneficial effect is entirely one sided as these same men may partake in referring to dancers as "'sluts' [or] the kind of 'girls' [they] could 'get' when other women rejected [them]" (Frank 114). This attitude is emblematic of the way that erotic dance club customers may position dancers as simultaneously attractive and repulsive (Frank 225). Erotic dance clubs function on the premise that dancers are "beautiful [...] sexually alluring, [...] acceptable and [...] idealized sexual objects" but the stigmatization within the

sociological imaginary imparts that dancers are also publically defiling themselves by allowing their nudity to be used for others' voyeuristic gratification and willingness to accept "financial compensation for sexualized companionship" (Frank 225). Desire and contempt coexist in an uneasy relationship.

The stigmatization of dancers both within and outside the confines of the club is based heavily on "cultural and religious devaluations of the female body, especially the genitals," although these very same derogations play a crucial role in why erotic dance clubs exist in the first place (Frank 225). Frank quotes a customer by the name of Beck as sharing the following observation:

[...] 'I remember reading in [the local paper] about some woman who came from France and I don't know whether she was a porn star or a dancer or a stripper. But she said that she couldn't make a living because it was a normal part of human life [there]... And here we just build up all this around it so then we satisfy the need by having places like [erotic dance clubs] and the rest of them!' He continued to say that the prohibitions of and stigma against nudity (as well as the spaces in which one could view it in the United States) were part of what made it exciting to visit the clubs. 'That's what makes it interesting and enticing. When you can't see it, you want to go see it. That's the whole point!' (Frank 131)

Mere acknowledgements that dancers are stigmatized by not only their customers but by society in general for allowing the public consumption of their nudity completely fail to address that we as a society have constructed the desire for the public consumption of female nudity. When customers degrade dancers for engaging in a sexually based economic exchange they fail to acknowledge that without their participation in the exchange would not occur. It is an interesting form of denial.

Customers' estimations of dancers as simultaneously attractive and repulsive become quite complicated when emotional labour is considered. Egan quotes a customer by the name of Ken as saying that he believes the club he frequents to be "his special place" in which "he feels taken care of by the dancers" as "they 'treat' him 'right' in two respects: erotically and emotionally" (Egan 36-7). Egan puts forth the concept of the "whorish wife" to explain how customers navigate their dual feelings towards the dancers of attraction and repulsion. Egan asserts that by when customers mentally combine the categories of "slut" and "wife" they arrive at the expectation that dancers will embody "a fantasmatic woman who is both sexually available and 'wants it,' as well as an emotionally nurturing woman and thus, one who wants to 'listen to it'" (Egan 43). Although dancers' performance of the whorish wife may serve to ease customers' feelings of duality, it does not remove the stigma customers attach to them. Regardless of how well a dancer can pantomime the role of wife, a customer will never fail to remind her that she debased "in comparison to their wife, girlfriend, or daughter [...]" (Frank 225).

The most common method dancers employ in dealing with stigmatization within the club from customers is to quite simply take their money. As Bradley-Engen found, turning a customer's preconceived notions about dancers against them could serve as a powerful moneymaking tactic. She relates:

[...] through my work as a dancer, I quickly learned that dancers themselves are aware of the larger 'victim-versus-agents' controversy and use it to their advantage. Strippers, by trade, tell customers what they want to hear. And, based on my own experiences as well as those of fellow dancers, I know that the victim-versus-agency debate is alive and well in the strip club. Dancers draw on this debate regularly when interacting with customers to make money. Indeed, they are aware that people are questioning whether dancers are women down on their luck. They make the most of

this guilt and stereotype to increase tips. More than once I have observed dancers playing the ‘sympathy card’ with their regulars, describing how they are in desperate need of cash for their children or rent. This is a valuable money-making tactic, often used independent of actual need. Making men feel sorry for them, dancers often play on a client’s desire to ‘save’ them. It is a common practice to play on the victim status to manipulate clients into giving dancers extra money or paying bills. I have done it for myself and can verify that it is extremely profitable. (Bradley-Engen 4)

When we couple Bradley-Engen’s account with previous discussions of Rescue Men it becomes apparent that the most easily attainable form of revenge for dealing with customers’, and by extension society’s, endless judgments is to become financially successful as dancer. That being said, the money in erotic dance is rarely static so such satisfaction may be fleeting; publication can sometimes change that.

For dancers the stigmatization they face is most powerfully lessened by the personal growth they experience by engaging in the sex work industry. As Burana attests, “I’m glad to have gotten more from this job than just money” (Burana 171). Two of the most notable things Burana got other than money from her time as a dancer was a more patient, friendly personality (Burana 171) and the knowledge that her sexuality is truly priceless and uniquely her own (Burana 208). Egan found that her time as a dancer gifted her with insight into her own bodily experiences and also made her a better writer as properly expressing her experiences required her to utilize concepts of poetry and prose within her academic writing (Egan xvii). Jameson’s time as a dancer helped her blossom from a girl who was nicknamed “Mouse” due to her quiet, unassuming demeanor into a self-confident woman aware of the value of her natural talent (Jameson 42-3). Brooks’ time as an erotic dancer occurred during her undergraduate studies (Brooks 1) and her personal experiences of racism within all aspects of the erotic dance industry created a personal place of politicization that directly lead to her graduate work as she left the

industry wanting give a voice to her fellow dancers of colour (Brooks 4). For Cody the realization that she – a self described “hippy girl, shaped like a Gretsch bass guitar” (Cody, Ch. 2) – “could certainly strip without fear of being chased offstage by an incensed mob” (Cody, Ch. 3) provided self confidence. Bradley-Engen credits her time in the industry as allowing her to experience “the kind of total acceptance and appreciation that virtually never occurs in contemporary society” (Bradley-Engen 18).

Acquiring a large sense of self-worth and self-confidence is a repeated refrain among the former dancers who authored the works under examination within this project. In a society in which the management of female sexuality has been a consistent area of concern and males consistently rank higher than females in measurements of self esteem (Kling et al. 486) asserting ownership of one’s sexual self and becoming aware of one’s inner strength is a revolutionary political act. When an individual refuses to abide by the restrictive expectations that society has placed upon women for centuries it unsettles our understanding of how these forces operate within our own lives. It is this unsettling that causes society to double down on its efforts to keep sex workers stigmatized. The overarching concern among those who are so deeply invested in the white supremacist capitalist heteropatriarchy (whether they acknowledge their investment or not) is that women will figure out that their sexual and physical selves are their own domains that they can use however they please including for economic purposes. As Bradley-Engen asserts:

[Erotic] dancers are not the only individuals who are rewarded for and seek prize for their physical attributes. Let’s not kid ourselves. Strippers did not invent tanning beds, breast augmentation, sexy outfits, high heels, or lingerie. They just brought them all together in one place and made money off of them. (Bradley-Engen 6-7)

What might happen to our society if all women around the world suddenly realized the value of not only their physical bodies but also their time and energy? As the books under examination

have shown, the monetization of emotional labour can prove to be lucrative and if women the world over suddenly demanded, not only the recognition of, but payment for emotional labour it would leave labour markets scrambling to account for this new paradigm.

When we as a society allow for the stigmatization of sex workers to go unchallenged we are implicitly reaffirming the devaluation of women. When we in academia resist engaging with dialogues surrounding sex work we are upholding the notion that women are undeserving of having their labour – both emotional and physical – taken seriously. When discussions of sex work are centered only around the supposed victimization and degradation of women working within the industry we encourage the propagation of racist and classist stereotypes. When women are forced to choose between employment and physical safety or employment and seeking treatment for trauma it underscores the patriarchal wish that women be denied independence. When the opinions of scholars are privileged over the lived accounts of sex workers it strengthens the belief that women who are marginalized should not be allowed a voice. When punitive legislation regarding sex work is put forth unchallenged it corroborates the notion that women should not be entitled to have a say over their corporeal selves.

The purpose of this discussion of stigmatization is not to gloss over concerns regarding very real problems within the sex work industry. The intent is to bring balance to discussions of victimization within sex work, specifically the area of erotic dance, and highlight how the lives and accounts of sex workers are positioned within a vicious cycle that relies on stigmatization encouraging acts of victimization in order for stigmatized assumptions about sex workers to be proven as correct. This cycle allows for the persistent dehumanization of sex workers and the complete removal of agency as a possible answer to the ever-present question of “why?” The demonization of sex workers springs from the most patriarchal and moralistic portions of our historical sociological imaginary. Its existence is tied to biblical understandings of gender and colonial fabrications regarding race. Continuing refusals to address how deep and pervasive our

assumptions regarding sexuality, gender, and race run can no longer be allowed in the twenty-first century if we are truly committed to bettering ourselves as society. Acknowledging the lives and accounts of sex workers is a step towards this goal.

Chapter 5 Conclusion

“Bruised But Otherwise Smashing”

I'd lie down in front of an oncoming train to defend a woman's right to strip for a living. But that doesn't mean I grant rubber-stamp approval to the business.

- Lily Burana

At the most basic level, this project challenges the idea that one has to be damaged or *different* in order to view erotic dance as an employment option. In rejecting the notion that dancers occupy the problematic category of the Other, it allows for the understanding that dancers occupy the same social categories as non-dancers. This is a revelation that has tremendous consequences. Within their personal lives dancers are mothers, sisters, daughters, and romantic partners – and above all, talented and engaged. Their personal situations and motivations affect their entry into the industry; living under a cloud of stigma affects not only the dancers but their loved ones in negative ways. If we acknowledge that dancers are labourers who are capable of professional and economic success we are then forced to acknowledge the monetary value of not only the female body but also the monetary value of the emotional energy expended by women on a daily basis.

When I first conceived of this project, during my third year of undergraduate studies, I was downright naïve about the intersection of sex work and research. Bolstered by statements from my professors, such as “No one is doing your work!”, I felt confident that I was about to enter uncharted territory. As I began to engage more deeply with my project I learned that nothing could be further from the truth. For decades, sex workers have been addressing their

personal motivations, their measurements of success, and how stigma impacts their lives. They have been expressing themselves through underground publications,²² direct actions,²³ blogging,²⁴ and social media.²⁵ It took some time for me to understand why some individuals in academia believe that my project “hasn’t been done”, although I finally came to the realization that this belief most likely stems from the fact that sex workers tend not to utilize accepted academic channels in order to express themselves. The rise of the erotic dance memoir, however, may change that, just as it may be a signal of other changes to come in the labour market of erotic dance.²⁶

As outlined in the introduction, whore feminism was conceived in reaction to the misrepresentation of sex workers within academia by radical feminists. To this day academics remain suspect to sex work activists as the legacies of violence and oppression that have been reinforced by academic work continue to occur and may never be fully addressed. However, there is a marked turn in academia to serious and respectful engagement with sex work²⁷ and I am proud to be a part of this shift in sensibility. I am extremely aware that attempting to incorporate sex worker voices into my academic discourse could be read as yet another act of academic violence against sex workers. In 1988, scholar Joyce Trebilcot shared the three

²² Please see the now defunct \$pread Magazine (<http://www.spreadmagazine.org/>) which was published from Spring 2005 until the Summer 2010.

²³ Please see the Sex Workers Project (<http://sexworkersproject.org/campaigns/>) for information about current direct action campaigns.

²⁴ For a starting point, please see Tits and Sass (<http://titsandsass.com/>) a sex worker run group blog, which relies on content provided by other sex worker bloggers.

²⁵ As no list of sex workers using social media exists, please see these search results from Twitter using the key work “sex work” under “users” for a starting point (<http://twitter.com/search?q=sex%20workers&src=typd&mode=users>)

²⁶ As mentioned in the introduction, I rejected autobiographies written anonymously or reliant on some sort of salvation narrative – meaning the author felt as though some force (corporeal or spiritual) rescued them from their employment as an erotic dancer. Anonymous narratives and savior narratives are far more common than the narratives I have chosen to work with, which assail the victim/agent dichotomy. The rise of the agent-focused erotic dance memoirs which position themselves in opposition to pure savior narratives, alters the discourses occurring around erotic dance although the extent of this alteration and how it will play out sociologically is unknown.

²⁷ E.g. <https://landing.athabascau.ca/pages/view/107959/porn-sex-work-archives-learning-contract>, http://www.ubcpress.ca/books/series_sexuality.html

principles that guided her academic work. These principles were developed from her own experiences as a lesbian and her anger surrounding the politics of representation and the power it lends to that which is viewed as the dominant discourse. Trebilcot's principles are as follows:

First principle: I speak only for myself.

Second principle: I do not try to get other wimmin to accept my beliefs in place of their own.

Third principle: There is no "given." (Trebilcot 1)

Trebilcot's principles guide my work and also parallel expressed concerns within whore feminism, specifically the assertion that refusing to respect all women's voices is an act which upholds the paternalistic infantilization of women (STRASS). It is important for me to clearly position myself as a non-sex worker, although I do not want the meaning for this positioning to be misread. The importance of clarity in this regard is not in order to separate myself from sex workers in order to maintain an aura of "purity" or "goodness". I emphatically state that I am not, nor have I ever been a sex worker because I want it to be clear that I am not speaking *for* sex workers in any regard. As Trebilcot states, I can only speak for myself. It is my hope that by engaging in this project from a place of openness and willingness to admit that academia is not always right, that I have honored the decades of intellectual work by sex workers.

The grounding of this project within Trebilcot's principles which allows for the discourses surrounding erotic dance to boil down to one simple point – the erotic dance industry functions on the labour of dancers therefore dancers' voices should be privileged within discussions of the industry. Mindy S. Bradley-Engen approached her work similarly, as expressed in the following:

I believe that my role as a sociologist is to understand social phenomena as an individual's lived reality. My job is to reflect people's commonsense understanding of their lived experience of social life. In this tradition, I posit that a thorough understanding of sex work is best informed by looking at the profession through the eyes of those who do it. (Bradley-Engen 15)

In this project the privileging of the self-representations of dancers serves two specific functions. The first is that it is meant to provide a space within academic discourse for an often misrepresented and marginalized population to speak to their own lives and experiences. The second function is far more uncomplicated. Put quite simply, one would not presume to describe the functions of the construction industry to a bricklayer, so why is it assumed that people who have never engaged in erotic dance are remotely qualified to speak about working within the industry? Throughout the past ten years there has been a rising tide of sex work based research and this project endeavours to contribute to this newly emerging area of sex work centered grounded theory.

This project's design as a discourse analysis allowed for an exploration of empowerment through representation. By juxtaposing pre-existing dialogues of constructed representations of sex workers with the self-reported, autobiographically-reconstructed experiences of erotic dancers this project reframes dominant understandings of personal motivations, measurements of success, and the impact of stigma for not erotic dancers within the North American context. By actively rejecting reinscriptions of past understandings of sex workers as Other, an inadvertent consequence of my project was the questioning of centuries-old dogma surrounding what motivation, success, and stigma might mean to women in North American society.

There are numerous underlying tensions throughout my project, although these tensions are beginning to transition into a state of *becoming* or transition allowing this project to serve as a contribution to this emerging area of academic thought. The greater acceptance and attentiveness arising around the voices of formerly-private dancers within North American popular culture points to a sea change within the erotic dance industry itself. There is a broader change in public attention, a change that is paralleled by the rising interest in academia in sex work, which allows for these memoirs to participate in heteropatriarchal capitalism while creating spaces of significant push-back that cannot be discounted. There is hope that the acceptance and attentiveness surrounding the voices of formerly-private dancers will change the socio-economic positioning of erotic dancers although, as the recent closure of San Francisco's storied Lusty Lady²⁸ highlights, we are only beginning a period of transition into possible acceptance. This begs the question; can long-term public exposure change things?

The examination of the damaged goods hypothesis as a supposed place of motivation provides a space for "normativity" to be questioned and addresses the gender bias surrounding understandings of trauma. Any individuals, regardless of their sex, can experience "childhood sexual abuse, psychological problems, and drug use" (Griffith et al. 621). By singling out female sex workers for inclusion within the damaged goods hypothesis, academics inadvertently make the unsupported inference that males who have experienced the same issues are somehow more adept at dealing with trauma. As my project shows, erotic dancers have shown that they can not only cope with trauma, but can do so in ways that translate trauma into empowerment.

²⁸ <http://www.newyorker.com/online/blogs/currency/2013/08/last-days-at-the-lusty-lady-strip-club.html>

Within my project, the authors utilize the “bad girl vs. good girl” framework as a tool to provide emotional resonance within their work and to provide a niche for self-marketing, which speaks to the commonality of self-representation through pre-existing structures of female sexuality. So yes, they rely on stereotypes. But by actively engaging with the reinscription of sexual mores, a place for commonality between readers and authors is established which makes it easier for the authors to utilize the literary tactic of “rememory” to challenge pre-existing understandings. While they are aware of the cultural zeitgeist surrounding their work, they actively reject its totalizing nature. The authors challenge the notion that one should lose professional credibility and personal dignity for engaging in the erotic dance industry by sharing their stories with the general public. By putting their experiences alongside their public personas the authors reject the narratives of shame that plague “bad girl” figures, therefore reframing and reshaping culturally-based notions of the female erotic. This results in broad questions about how medicalized concepts such as “promiscuity” and “attention-seeking behavior” play out within the lives of North American women.

This project’s insights surrounding how the monetization of female labour plays out within the erotic dance industry raises other questions about the current valuations of female labour within North American society. It is often assumed that erotic dancers are only paid to disrobe publically, overlooking the labour one engages in before and after they leave the stage. Maintaining appearance standards, whether they are socially or professionally imposed takes an abundance of time and vast quantities of money. The prevailing wisdom within the industry is that one has to spend money to make money but for lower-economic dancers who are in the industry as a method of survival this requirement can prove punitive. As the majority of dancers

within North America are effectively independent contractors, their employers do not pay them but in fact they have to pay their employers to work. The practice of tipping out can cost a dancer a minimum of hundred dollars per shift (Tressler, Ch. 10) something that also would disproportionately affect lower income dancers more. Labour rights organizations are known for addressing such disproportionate business practices in minimum wage labour environments but when it comes to erotic dance, dancers are forced to confront these issues themselves at the risk of being blackballed as troublemakers. One is forced to question why dancing so often is not viewed as a legitimate form of labour – is it because of the nudity or is it because it is an industry dominated by female labour, and in particular, female emotional labour, something that so traditionally goes unrewarded.

Erotic dance, both as a profession and as a business, relies on individuals' personal agency. Dancers make the decision to dance and customers make the decision to watch them dance. While choices are always constrained, when we dismiss agency as a factor in people's lives we strip their humanity from them and position them as mere automatons following pre-existing life paths. When dancers are Othered or readers are encouraged to believe manipulation lies at the heart of their self-reported lives and experiences we discount agency as a factor within the lives of dancers and thereby categorize dancers as ignorant to their own experiences. This project does not exist to champion erotic dance or any form of sex work as a viable employment option for all women. Its purpose is to question pre-existing dialogues and myths surrounding erotic dance as an industry and female sexuality as a construct. The purpose of this project is to give insight into the erotic dance industry and to encourage the emergence of sex-worker-centered dialogues in academic contexts. Everyone deserves for his or her voices to be heard

and dancers are no different. It is my hope that this work encourages conversations about understandings of sex, stigma, and success and how they motivate, or trouble, readers of erotic dance memoirs at the individual level.

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