

# QUEER DESIRE IN THE SEX INDUSTRY

Bernadette Barton

*Department of Sociology, Social Work & Criminology  
Morehead State University, Morehead, KY 40351  
(bernbarton@yahoo.com)*

“They are all lesbians anyway,” is one of the stereotypes with which mainstream society labels sex workers. In this field study of exotic dancers, I research what dancers feel about this stereotype as well as the shapes they perceive queer desire assuming in the sex industry. In this article, I highlight a fascinating tension between the desire that sex workers perform for men and the queer desire they feel for other women. Using the framework of ethnographic description, I explore this tension through the description and analysis of the sexual identities of sex workers. Specifically, I examine the sex industry as a site that encourages women to expand notions of their own sexuality. This is partly because the environments of strip bars and peep shows offer women easy access to other women, invite them to break taboos, and teach them disdain for men.

## Introduction

“If you don’t like pussy, you shouldn’t be working here,” the management of the O’Farrell Theater in San Francisco tells the women who want to work in the upscale sex club. In San Francisco, at the Mitchell Brothers, it is not only hip to be queer, it is management policy to require live woman on woman shows of all the performers! The presence of a vast amount of women with women pornography<sup>1</sup> surely attests to male fantasies about expressions of lesbian desire, a presence that the O’Farrell Theater does not hesitate to capitalize on. But what about the sex workers themselves? When researching women’s attitudes about exotic dancing, I stumbled across a significant facet of sex labor: manifestations of queer desire among sex workers for their own pleasure, not the

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expectations of clients. Somewhat surprisingly, I found virtually no academic literature on the sex industry researching this sexual subjectivity of sex workers.

My first table dance, February 1998: Looking my butchiest with recently cropped hair, wearing a purple velvet shirt and jeans, I went to the Velvet Lounge a day a porn star was headlining. I begged a male co-worker to accompany me, having already encountered the strip club policy of barring entry<sup>2</sup> to unescorted females. Darrell, once in the Navy, enthusiastically agreed. "Anything for research," he said. We entered a hazy room lit by black lights, cluttered with tables and comfortable, padded chairs. Two women performed on the main stage, one clothed in an evening gown, the other topless. The noise was deafening—pop hits sprinkled with acid rock. A scantily clad waitress brought us drinks while I observed curvaceous women teetering from table to table on six-inch heels. I was the only woman in the room not working. A slightly drunken dancer stumbled up to Darrell and asked if he would like to buy his lady friend a dance. "Twenty bucks," she said. (Later we learned that we'd been ripped off and table dances only cost \$10.)

"Absolutely!" Darrell accepted and gave the woman a twenty-dollar bill. I nervously sank even deeper into my heavily padded chair, my body unconsciously adjusting to the butt grooves fossilized by many other patrons. Sylvia, the dancer, twirled my chair with a flourish toward the center of the room, and deliberately spread my legs. I was supremely conscious that every male eye in the club turned its gaze upon us. Sylvia slipped off her dress and began to gyrate to the music, moving her body over the length of mine, placing her breasts a breath away from my face. She simulated oral sex, licking a geometric pattern near my crotch. Turning, she displayed her buttocks, rhythmically moving to the now hypnotic music.

At the conclusion of my virgin table dance, Sylvia donned her dress and sat to chat a while. I shared that I was a lesbian. Sylvia then happily proceeded to confide how she had been contemplating becoming sexually involved with a woman since she started dancing. Sylvia discussed shows she performed with a close girlfriend at the club, and their running jokes about doing it for "real" some day. Both their boyfriends want to watch. This conversation

with Sylvia reflected many of the undercurrents I have observed in twenty-five interviews and innumerable chats with dancers, clients, bouncers, partners, and managers: sex work is a means to explore your sexual identity, the other women are great, and most dancers have at least toyed with bisexuality. More succinctly, queer desire and the sex industry positively reinforce one another.

“They are all lesbians anyway,” is one of the stereotypes with which mainstream society labels sex workers. The image of two feminine women sexually involved for the voyeuristic pleasure of the (usually male) viewer is reflected both in media images of sex workers in a film such as *Showgirls*, and men’s imaginations. When I embarked on my field study of exotic dancers, I was curious about the possible truth inherent in this femme on femme stereotype, as well as the much more subversive manifestations of women desiring one another for their own sexual pleasure, not for men’s gaze. I wondered too what dancers felt about this stereotype. As I collected my data, I observed a fascinating tension between the desire that sex workers perform for men and the queer desire they feel for other women. Using the framework of ethnographic description, I explore this tension through the description and analysis of the sexual identities of sex workers.

Strikingly, in the sex industry, a microcosm designed for men’s pleasure, queer desire among women is not only condoned in most settings but actively encouraged. After extensive observation, and lengthy conversations with sex workers, I learned that there was no single explanation for the slippery contradictions of queer desire, but three main channels women traverse (sometimes floating blissfully down a gentle current, and other times falling headlong over a waterfall) to the pool of queer sexual subjectivity. In brief, the environments of strip bars and peep shows offer women easy access to other women, invite them to break taboos, and simultaneously teach them disdain for men.

## Method

I gathered data for this project from April of 1998 to May of 1999 using qualitative sociological methods—observation, interviews, and a focus group (Adler & Adler 1998; Denzin & Lincoln,

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1998; Fontana & Frey, 1998). I have visited and observed in nine dance clubs in a mid-sized, southeastern city in the United States. For the purposes of this article I will refer to the city where I performed the bulk of my data gathering with the pseudonym "Silverton." All the clubs described and mentioned in "Silverton" are pseudonyms as well. I also performed comparative research in San Francisco, California. Because San Francisco is so famous for its sex activism, and the specific clubs I visited in the area so well known in the sex literature, I have not altered those names for this article. All other identifying information has been changed to protect the confidentiality of my informants.

I have conducted tape-recorded interviews with twenty-two dancers, three clients, one owner, and one partner of a dancer. Interviews were open-ended and lasted from 1 to 2 1/2 hours. In addition to these audiotaped interviews, I have informally spoken with more than 75 dancers, patrons, bouncers, and waitresses about their experiences in topless bars and peep shows. Most of the women I interviewed had, and have, been involved in other aspects of the sex industry as well. Sex work encompasses not only topless dancing but prostitution, phone sex work, and labor in pornographic films.<sup>3</sup> I discussed these other types of sex work with my informants only when they introduced the topic. Although I mainly focus on women's experiences in and out of strip bars and peep shows in this study, I also observed a tremendous overlap among the kinds of sex labor my subjects performed. The more contact women had with other women in any area of the sex industry, the more manifestations of queer desire my informants described.

While observing in the strip clubs, I generally acted as either an attracting or repulsing agent. At first, most dancers felt uncomfortable approaching my table because of my gender. Some dancers avoid tables with women present because they either prefer not to dance for women or are afraid they will be mistreated or rejected by other women. Once I got to know the dancers in a club though, a whole group would often gather around my table. While a woman's disapproval is very upsetting for dancers, dancers appreciate a woman's acceptance and support. Dancers treated me as someone they could relax and take a break with for a moment. I

was never hustled. Rather, dancers bought me drinks and gave me free table dances when the mood hit them, determined that I should have the “full experience.”

Of the twenty-two dancers I interviewed, twelve identified themselves as bisexual. Of these, two were in committed relationships with women. Three dancers identified themselves as exclusively lesbian and seven as heterosexual. It is possible that the high numbers of bisexual and lesbian women among my informants reflect a biased sample. Queer dancers may have been more likely to trust me because I am a lesbian too. Indeed, my sexual identity tended to invite the confidence not only of lesbian and bisexual dancers, but heterosexual informants as well. However they define their sexual identity, all exotic dancers experience a certain level of marginalization in mainstream culture, and hence are sexual outlaws. This generally encourages them to be more open-minded about alternative sexual identities and, consequently, more sympathetic to me as a researcher because I am lesbian. Also, I interviewed eight (out of twenty-two) dancers in San Francisco—a region with a high gay and lesbian population in general. One San Francisco informant said plainly that all her friends in the sex industry have had sex with women at some point. I attempted to account for this possible bias by asking specific interview questions about sexual orientation of all my informants.

### **Sexual Orientation: An Understudied Phenomenon**

Current studies on sex workers reveal a surprising paucity of research exploring dancers’ sexual identities. Ironically, at the same time, many of the women studying and writing about sexuality and sex workers themselves identify as lesbian or bisexual (Bright, 1997; Chapkis, 1997; Queen, 1997). In the sex work literature, some sex workers identify as queer (Patton, 1997; Queen, 1997; Zoticus, 1997). Also, sex activists such as Carol Queen, Pat Califia, and Annie Sprinkle acknowledge the existence of queer sex workers and their relationship to the gay and lesbian community in their writing. Indeed almost every pro-sex activist and scholar lining my desk shelves identifies herself as lesbian or bisexual. This list includes the activists listed above—Carol Queen, Pat Califia, and

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Annie Sprinkle—and also Susie Bright, Dorothy Allison, Holly Hughes, the Scarlett Harlot, Joan Nestle, and Joanne Loulann. Many of the first person autobiographical books and articles I have read, (i.e., Erika Langley in her photographic essay and text documenting her experiences working at The Lusty Lady in Seattle) discuss the author's transformation from heterosexual to bisexual or lesbian. In the anthology *Whores and Other Feminists*, four out of five sex workers writing for the anthology references a female partner at some point. However, while the number of lesbian and bisexual women studying, analyzing, and commenting on sex workers is significant, the social science examining the sexual identities of sex workers is virtually non-existent.<sup>4</sup> Why might this be the case? I observed two general tendencies contributing to the lack of research on the sexual identities of sex workers—reluctant dancers and reluctant researchers.

When questioned, my subjects had varying reactions to discussing sexual identity. Some said baldly that most dancers are queer. Some expressed that they had not thought about it before. Several suggested that the sex industry turns women into lesbians. One bisexual dancer in a lesbian relationship felt uncomfortable even discussing the manifestations of lesbianism and bisexuality among sex workers. Janeen, a phone sex worker, exotic dancer, and performance artist in San Francisco, has felt the consequences of asking unpopular questions: she has been ostracized and ridiculed by other sex activists,<sup>5</sup> one of the few communities a sex worker can rely upon for support. The following exchange between Janeen and myself illustrates the emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983)<sup>6</sup> sex workers experience when they embody yet another stigmatized identity:

- B: One thing that doesn't seem to be studied a lot is lesbians and bisexual women in sex work. It just seems like, I'm a Sociologist, that's what I am. A really high percentage of women in the sex industry are bisexual or lesbian, it seems to me. And in some ways, there are some contradictions there. Do you agree? Disagree? Why?
- J: I agree. But it's hard for me, I feel like I can't answer that because . . . I don't want to answer that. Why don't I want to answer that? I don't feel comfortable answering that, because I know what my theory is, but I don't feel comfortable talking about it.

Intensely curious why Janeen did not feel comfortable sharing her theory, I shared my own ideas about sexual identity and gently encouraged her to explore why this was such a difficult subject to pursue. She responded:

San Francisco is all sex positive, and that's the backlash of people being so oppressed. But people go to the other extreme, and think, 'Everything's fine. Everything we do is wonderful here.' No, everything is not wonderful. You got to have a balance between Andrea Dorkett,<sup>7</sup> or whatever the hell her name is. Everything is not okay. So, that's where I am, and that's how I'm trying to articulate that and get people to hear me. It's exhausting and it takes a lot of courage and emotional energy; and people just get on my nerves. So, when you asked me that question, it triggered that.

In this excerpt, Janeen illuminates a key problem researchers face in studying the sexuality of sex workers. It takes courage to talk about unpopular topics. It takes courage to be a sex activist. It takes courage to be a topless dancer. If you are a sex activist in San Francisco, critiquing the labor or discussing sexual abuse and the impact of dancing on women's sexual identities complicates the "sex positive" paradigm. Such women are then read as reinforcing stereotypes about sex workers when they describe experiences counter to the accepted "party-line." Other sex activists are inclined, then, to misinterpret sex workers who discuss such topics as traitors who really believe that sex work is bad for women.

If queer sex activists themselves respond poorly to exploring any idea that might reinforce negative stereotypes about dancers—i.e., all dancers are really lesbians who hate men—it is not surprising, then, that dancers in more homophobic parts of the country are hesitant to fully discuss sexual identity, or that researchers are hesitant to broach the topic. A woman who dances or participates in any kind of sex work is stepping outside society's definition of respectable femininity. Consequently, many women remain "closeted" about working as strippers, instead telling friends and family that they work in a bar or waitress. Dancers know that they are stereotyped as drug-addicted, stupid, sleazy hookers on the one hand or victims of sexual abuse on the other. In short, most people characterize sex workers as deviant.

Researchers have *not* been loath to study this phenomenon. Many scholars have examined the problems involved when women assume the deviant identity of topless dancer (Bell & Sloan, 1998; Sweet & Tewksbury, 1998), as well as how sex workers manage to maintain their self-esteem when they face bigotry and abuse (Forsyth, 1998; Ronai & Ellis, 1989; Ronai & Cross, 1997; Thompson & Harred, 1992). Indeed, it is difficult to write about sex work at all without at least some mention of the stigma women endure and negotiate in the industry.

Unfortunately, some researchers have also reinforced homophobia directly or indirectly in their studies of sex workers (McCaghy & Skipper, 1969, 1972; Scott, 1996). Kari Lerum proposes in her article, "Twelve-Step Feminism Makes Sex Workers Sick" that most research on sex workers is dominated by a few hegemonic institutions and perspectives (including the feminist perspectives of the sex wars) that conceptualize sex workers as "sick." She argues that:

The study of sex work has achieved social and scientific legitimacy at the expense of dehumanizing sex workers, and that this dehumanization is not an unfortunate coincidence, but a *requirement* for the production of contemporary institutionalized knowledge. (Lerum, 1998: 9)

Whether the sex worker is portrayed as a victim or a whore, she ceases in most studies, as Lerum notes, to be the subject of her own life. If dancers are so viciously "dehumanized" for the act of dancing, what are the consequences of adopting yet another socially stigmatized identity, that of lesbian or bisexual? Similarly, how much stigma can a feminist researcher unpack before her informants clam up, or before she becomes tangled up in the layers of stereotypes she is trying to debunk?

As I just elaborated, dancers are already sexually marginalized simply by virtue of their work. Strip bars are legal—but often just barely so—and dancers routinely experience discrimination.<sup>8</sup> The more dimensions of discrimination a researcher attempts to illuminate, the more complicated and demanding the emotional and intellectual labor. Others (both informants as well as the general population) tend to assume anyone interested in exploring such a topic must be involved in both the sex industry and the gay com-



munity. Not every researcher feels comfortable dealing with the burdens imposed by such assumptions: i.e., that you yourself must be a queer stripper if you want to study them. This might especially be the case if the researcher herself is a lesbian who needs to remain closeted. Moreover, a woman researching sex workers may fear—and perhaps actually experience—the stigma of the profession rubbing off on her. When I talk about my research, people tend to assume that I am a dancer. For example, the chair of the Institutional Review Board committee turned to me in the middle of my full review and inquired, “So Bernadette, are you a dancer and that’s why you want to study them?” Similarly, when a radio personality interviewed me for her show, she was stunned to learn I was not a dancer.

For a male researcher, feminist or not, the fact that he is observing the dancers for “scientific reasons” does not erase the reality that, for the dancers, he is still a male client. Dancers are skilled at making men feel special and adored as long as the money continues to flow. This is the way all exotic dancing in mainstream clubs is performed: for the male spectator, his gaze and needs are the magnetic center of the universe. Although the image of the glamorous lesbian erotically touching another woman continues to hold a special place in men’s imaginations, these images of beautiful femme women having sex with one another do not reflect subjective lesbian desire, but rather, at best, a bisexual expression of lust designed to arouse and satisfy men. A lesbian exotic dancer—a woman who receives no erotic charge from the presence of men—is thus an odd thing for the customer, or researcher, to wrap his mind around. It is counter-intuitive.

Heterosexual men, then, even if they are researchers, face a unique struggle in unraveling the layers of sex workers’ sexual subjectivity. Does the stripper exposing her breasts, spreading her legs, and rubbing her crotch on a phallic pole genuinely prefer to be sexually intimate with women? Are the women performing a live sex show under the black lights of a strip club just pretending to be aroused for men’s pleasure and/or is it an expression of their own desire? Inevitably, exploring the sexual subjectivity of sex workers (assuming the informants even feel comfortable sharing their “real” sexual selves with a potential customer and a man at that)<sup>9</sup> de-

stroys the illusion that all women, even lesbians, reserve their sexuality for men. This may be something the male researcher does not want to explore too closely. Finally, academia, for all the current emphases on postmodern sensibilities, is still a conservative arena. If I receive salacious comments and snickers from grant agencies and Institutional Review Boards as a young, feminist woman for studying the sexual subjectivity of sex workers, what might male researchers face? At the very least, a man who is interested in studying the sexual identities of sex workers would fear that other academics might assume his research topic is motivated not by the pursuit of knowledge but instead by his own lecherous drives.

Additionally, the researcher, female or male, who is already encouraging a woman to discuss intimate, potentially painful aspects of her life in the sex industry, might logically fear that exploring the manifestations of queer desire on top of the already loaded identity of sex worker could alienate the informant altogether. Sexual orientation, like race, is a frightening topic for many people to consider. Often white people fear that any comment they make about race could potentially be perceived as racist. Thus, they say nothing. Similarly, some heterosexuals fear anything they ask about sexual orientation could be construed as homophobic and/or offend their informants. This silence reinforces racism and homophobia better than any ill-chosen remark and, in the case of researching queer sex workers, further inhibits dialogue and understanding. This combination—the double burden of discrimination queer sex workers shoulder, patriarchal assumptions about women’s sexuality, homophobia, institutionalized heterosexism, and the unique challenges female and male researcher face studying the sexual identities of sex workers—contributes to the lack of studies of lesbian and bisexual sex workers.

### **Expressing Queer Desire in the Sex Industry**

#### *Lesbian or Bisexual?*

When asked “of the dancers you know, how many are lesbian or bisexual?” most dancers provided information that led me to the

possibility that a higher than average proportion of dancers may be lesbian or bisexual in relation to the perceived number of gays (10%) and bisexual (20%) in the general population. Obviously, based on a sample of twenty-two, I cannot generalize my fieldwork to the larger dancer population. This is an ethnographic study, not one involving descriptive statistics. Furthermore, I have not spoken with dancers from all parts of the United States. I am also a lesbian researcher, so some dancers may purposefully play up their lesbian encounters just to please me, since pleasing their customers with suggestive conversation is an important part of their work. Nonetheless, my fieldwork suggests a great deal of lesbian and bisexual expression and identity construction, and is itself striking and deserving of further analysis.

With analysis, the real challenge begins. First, sexual orientation is hard to define. When does a woman qualify as bisexual or gay? If she's attracted to another woman? If she has sex with a woman? If she does a show with a woman? If she's in a committed lesbian relationship? Suppose she likes to have "three-ways" with her boyfriend and another woman? For me, however a woman chooses to define herself is the "bottom line." But self-identification is complicated by the fact that sexual orientation is both fluid and changeable, and defined differently by different people. Many dancers (who publicly identified themselves as heterosexual, and privately wondered if they were bisexual) confessed to me the times they had had sex with women, the secret relationships they had years ago, and stories about going out with a girlfriend to heterosexual bars to scope men that turned into nights spent having sex with one another. Several women I interviewed were in committed relationships with other women while identifying as bisexual. Still other dancers were themselves not certain of their sexual orientation.

Additionally, as I have written earlier, dancers are already sexually marginalized by virtue of their work. They are arguably already violating their gender socialization simply by taking off their clothes for money. Having broken one taboo and discovering that the world as they know it has not ceased functioning, they may be more inclined to break another. Moreover, some lesbian and bisexual women choose to dance believing it will be easier for them

to draw boundaries between the sexuality they perform at work and the sexuality they feel themselves. Finally, a combination of easy access, job-related experiences and adventurous personalities propel many dancers to explore their mounting attraction to other women. Dancers work with beautiful, naked, or virtually naked, women daily. Many are encouraged to feign sexual interest in other women to titillate the customers (the policy of the O'Farrell Theater). Eight of the women I interviewed began to date other women after they began working in the sex industry. Five of these eight were San Francisco dancers.

### **Learning Desire for Women: Breaking Taboos**

Journeying from the Bible Belt to San Francisco, I visited the most famous clubs and peep shows in the Bay Area to conduct comparative research on dancers' lives. With the gift of a free pass from a generous interview subject, I entered the Emerald City of sex clubs, the Mitchell Brothers O'Farrell Theater. I hoped not to see the Wizard, but to meet and speak with the witches who spin male lust into gold. It was May and, of course, freezing cold in the city. I was a weary traveler, marching all day long from sex club to dance bar in search of interviews, carting around a heavy backpack with notes and recording devices, three layers of clothing, and a jacket. I dragged myself into the theater lobby, lumpy and tired after trudging 15 blocks uphill into the icy wind. I offered my free pass to one of three large male bouncers (a \$30 value), and made a beeline to the bathroom to shed some clothing. There was a used condom floating in the toilet, which did not want to flush even after three tries. After rearranging my layers of clothing and applying fresh lipstick onto chapped lips, I ventured into one of the performance spaces.

The space was so dark at first all I could see was a dimly lit stage with a stunningly beautiful woman performing. When my eyes adjusted, I found the room cast in a dark burgundy glow. I felt that I had entered a giant vulva. The seats were packed close together stadium style, and so tightly spaced I could barely fit my 130-pound self (burdened with backpack and jacket) in-between the rows. I was the only woman watching who was not a dancer. I shifted

uncomfortably in my cramped seat for perhaps five minutes before Beatrice, a recent UC Berkeley graduate, approached me. We moved from the performance area to a quiet spot, where she generously spoke with me for over an hour. Like many of my research subjects, Beatrice is bisexual. She shared that she became interested in women romantically and sexually after working at the O'Farrell Theater. Beatrice's comments echoed those of many of the women I interviewed, and served as yet another confirmation of the rambunctiously profuse queer desire in the sex industry.

Beatrice believes that the close bonds dancers form with one another encourage them to experiment sexually with one another. She explained:

For one: to be a dancer, you have to be sexually open. Obviously, you're taking your clothes off; you're playing a role, you're doing this sexual thing and you can't be judgmental of other things that are not sexually normal. Not that being bisexual or lesbian isn't sexually normal, but in society's eyes it isn't. If you're open to being a stripper, you may be open to other things. Mitchell Brothers is very unique in that way. The club started off being a film group and they made one of the first pornos that has an actual 'come' shot in it. So, they kind of have a history of being on top of what's hot. And a lot of men think it is very arousing to see two women together. So, a lot of the shows we have there are girl-girl shows. And, if you're working there, you see girls having shows with each other. And it makes it more of the norm, more acceptable. And we all get to be good friends and are sympathetic to each other's emotional needs. We all talk a lot. We have an upstairs dressing room, and a lot of times, we just sit up there and smoke and talk and complain about the customers and talk about our problems at home. And it is a very supportive environment. A lot of the girls are really friendly and nice. And a lot of girls end up being lovers. I think that might be unique to Mitchell Brothers.

I found, however, that the intimacy Beatrice described dancers sharing (leading sometimes to romantic and sexual liaisons) was not unique to San Francisco or the O'Farrell Theater dancers. Melinda observed a similar phenomenon among Silverton dancers:

I think they finally see other women. You can look at yourself and see yourself as a woman but not be attracted to yourself. But to sit there and look at women all day long who are trying to be attractive, if you have any bisexual tendencies, you're going to find one that you're attracted to. And

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you're going to want to do something with that because I don't think you can help it. They're beautiful, they're trying to be sexy, there's going to be an appeal.

Jenna discussed how dancing makes women more open to sexual possibilities:

Dancing encourages exploration and coming into your sexuality. I think, on a whole, we're all bisexuals. It allows dancers to look a little more closely at that. I think a larger percentage are bisexual because they have had a chance to explore their sexuality more. They've had to deal with the sexuality more than a lot of other people do. It's a natural thing; it's a great thing.

Kelly, a San Francisco dancer and sex activist, concurred:

Most dancers are bisexual here (San Francisco). To be a sex worker you have to be comfortable with your sexuality and it's a highly sexual environment and you are surrounded by gorgeous women. I think sex workers definitely explore their sexuality.

So, the environment of the strip bar encourages sexual exploration. Similarly, the taboo breaking process can work in both directions. An "out" lesbian already has violated a cultural taboo by having sex with another woman for her own pleasure. She thus may be more open to considering exotic dancing, a high-paying profession for a woman.

### Lesbian and Bisexual Dancers

I discovered that many lesbians and bisexual women choose to work in the sex industry *because* they are not attracted to men. Lesbian informants shared that they felt dancing was easier for them than it would be for a heterosexual woman because they can sustain a clearer boundary between the work of feigning desire for men and the more "authentic" desire they feel for women. Boundaries between performance and pleasure and clients and partners are simpler to maintain because of sexual orientation. Darby, a veteran dancer involved in many aspects of the sex industry, described this reasoning:

It's a heck of a lot easier to keep yourself from getting emotionally attached. You can keep your mind on your money, because these little straight

chicks, they get drunk, they meet some cutey and then start dating him. He don't want them to dance no more. I've always found it easier to be a lesbian 'cause you can keep a total emotional detachment. You make a heck of a lot more money. You keep your mind on your money.

Vera and Sara, friends who traveled from New England to San Francisco to dance at the Lusty Lady, like Darby, also feel that sex work is more emotionally demanding for the dancers who are heterosexual. Vera explained:

I think I would be sad for a dancer who was straight because it would really disillusion her. If I could only be sexual towards men, I'd be in a big problem right now. I guess it would show me the real true gems of men who are out there, very few and far between.

Furthermore, Sarah thinks that lesbians cope with the abusive clients better than heterosexual women do because they don't have to go home to a man.

I think it's good that lesbians do it (dancing), because they can handle men being assholes better. You come home, you're not bringing any of that stuff with you. Whereas, if you get off work and you go to a bar and guys are treating you the same way as they did at the club, that's got to suck. I don't ever want to experience that.

Logically then, it would be harder for a lesbian to dance for, or prostitute herself with, a woman and remain emotionally detached. Darby, who has worked both as a dancer and for an escort service, shared that she has violated her own boundaries around having sex with her female clients. Nevertheless, she struggles not to do this, especially when she is in a relationship.

If they're really good-looking, if they turn me on, I go there, I can't help it. That's why I don't think I could be straight and do this job 'cause if it turned me on I'd be hey, getting paid to do something I'd do for free here. But with women, one out of every three times I've did it (had sex with them), but I don't see many women. I see a lot of couples. And couples, some of them want sex, and I won't give it to them. A lot of them just like me to be in the room while they have sex. I think it would be a hell of a lot harder if I weren't gay. That's the only time I've ever had sex for money is with women; and that's just really 'cause I would do it for free. I figure, 'Hell, I can get paid for something I do for free.' Except for when I was with

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Shannon. When I'm dating somebody I don't believe in cheating, but that hurts my money. 'Cause I got a couple of women clients that do call me on a regular basis. Actually I don't know why they pay. I'd come give them the sex without them having to pay me.

Beatrice also became involved with one of her female customers. In her case, the bond was both sexual and romantic. They sustained a relationship outside the club. As the emotional connection grew, Beatrice felt uncomfortable accepting money from her.

There was a customer that came in and I ended up having a relationship with her. I cut off any customer relationship with her. She would come in and give me money to talk to her. And we ended up having a relationship. And I told her that, if she comes into the club, I'll sit with you and spend time with you, but I don't want money. I just don't feel right about it.

Beatrice did not "feel right" about taking money from her lover as the line between partner and client blurred. That line is inevitably blurrier for women involved in, or seeking, heterosexual partnerships. Some straight women, like Dana, avoid this emotional conundrum by staying single.

With me, I push everybody away. I could have a relationship probably with several people, but I push everybody away. I think it's not that I don't want one. Because I think, I really think, that I would like to have a relationship with somebody. But I think a lot of people have the wrong idea of a dancer in the first place. And then with me, I'm really particular about what I want. However, if a man comes in, they think, 'Oh wow, she's a dancer, this is great!' And I'm like, that's not what I'm all about. My ultimate goal is not to do this for the rest of my life, or go back and work 40 hours a week. 'Cause now that I got a taste of what being a mom can be like, I don't want to go back and work 40 hours and put my kids in day care for 60 hours. That's just crazy. So when I stop dancing, hopefully by the time I stop dancing, I will settle down with someone who can offer that to me. I'd like to settle down and be a mom and be a wife and do the family thing. I'm afraid of relationships because you never know if a guy you meet is genuine or not. Because so many men that I've met are so full of it that I tend to push people away. They may be a really great person but I would never find out. I don't give them a chance.

Joscelyn suggested yet another reason why lesbians and bisexuals are drawn to dancing: strip bars are places where they can be



around other supportive, open-minded women. Contrary to stereotypes of dancers as battling bitches, epitomized in the film *Showgirls*, all of my informants emphasized that the friendship and caring of other dancers is the most rewarding part of the job.<sup>10</sup> Joscelyn shared:

At this point, because there is such a large gay community here, and because other gay communities are gaining more visibility and people are coming out more, I think it's natural that there is a population that is bisexual or lesbian that are working in these clubs. For some women, it's a comfortable environment to be in, among other women. And there is some level of support among the women. It isn't totally cutthroat. There were times when you were in the dressing room, and everyone was just hanging out and having fun.

Like Joscelyn, Sara and Vera appreciate that the Lusty Lady is a place where they can be around other women, where they can be "out" and not be judged.

- V: Sex work is marginal and fear is marginal. I think that Lusty Lady is a job that allows you to look the way you want to, with the tattoos and piercings, although, in more strip clubs they're allowing that too. I guess it's a job that lets you be more 'out' at work with your colleagues.
- S: Yeah, that's nice. Everybody at work knows Morgan is my wife. Everybody I know is cool with it. And that's beautiful. You can't find that in most work places. That's wonderful. And when I take my wig off at the end of the evening, the girls say 'you look so much better with your real hair, it's so much sexier.' And that is really gratifying, because I think so too.

Janeen, who shared the most examples of any of my informants of the negative consequences of sex work, still had only positive things to say about the relationships she developed with other sex workers.

I liked being around all those women, all day long, wearing cool costumes, feeling like it's glamorous, it's free, I'm really free, I can come and go as I please. I don't have to be accountable. I don't have to work 9 to 5. I get to live in this sort of fantasy world. I used to watch *Wonder Woman* as a child and she lived on Paradise Island. The strip part wasn't Paradise Island, but the women part felt like it. They reminded me of that. And they're totally cool, and they're wearing *Wonder Woman* type outfits, so you get to wear the *Wonder Woman* outfit and it was like the whole Para-

dise Island thing. I loved that. I miss that so much. That felt really spiritual to me. I can't tell you how much I miss that.

### **Coping with Abuse in the Sex Industry**

In some cases, sex work causes women to develop disdain for men, which then encourages them to explore sexual intimacy with other women. Richard Perry and Lisa Sanchez' article, "Transactions in the Flesh," supports this claim. Their work documents the subordination, coercion, and objectification some women experience in the sex industry. Far from arguing a poststructural, sex radical perspective that sex work subverts and destabilizes heteropatriarchy, Perry and Sanchez instead found that sex workers struggle, sometimes unsuccessfully, to remain subjects in the eyes of customers and other men in their lives. The authors analyzed specific instances when clients and pimps deliberately treated the sex workers they encountered as property. These men took advantage of the marginal location sex workers inhabit to improve their social standing with one another and to provide evidence of their sexual mastery within their social sphere. The women, then, were simply the commodity men bartered to enhance their masculine status. Indeed, Perry and Sanchez argue that what nude dancers really sell is not the opportunity to gaze at a naked form, but the possibility for men to buy a position of sexual dominance in the eyes of sex workers *and* other men.

My informants clearly expressed that dancing encourages women to form relationships with other women because sex work teaches them contempt for their clients and then contempt for men in general. Beatrice demonstrates this connection:

That's another reason that women get turned off to men—just working in the job. They just get turned off because they see a sexual side of men that they don't like. And, it makes them more appreciative of women.

Insulting clients are common enough that every dancer shared stories of contemptuous and contemptible, male behavior. Violations of their physical space through uninvited touch and cruel insults about their bodies and character, were among the worst abuses

dancers described. Moreover, clients often do not know how to behave with dancers. Instead of treating a dancer like any other person he or she might meet, the customer is ultra conscious of the dancer's sexuality. Sometimes this consciousness dismantles all the communicative niceties of society. In a strip club, among other possible motivations, men are buying the company of a nude or semi-nude woman feigning sexual interest in them. This elaborate charade encourages even the men who do not intend to be rude to have unrealistic expectations about dancers' sexual availability. Rachel feels that dealing with rude customers is the hardest part about working at the Lusty Lady:<sup>11</sup>

The job is bad because you have to deal with the customers who can be problematic and rude. Most of the time, the customers are okay, but that one bad apple can really ruin your day. I guess they feel like the normal laws of etiquette that govern any other social or business interaction are suspended there. It is okay to call someone a bad name or use foul language. They'll say, 'Turn around bitch, I want to see your ass. I'm paying.' Just to talk to someone in a way you'd never in a million years think of talking to someone in any other business or social interaction. That's just not allowed; they get thrown out, but still to have to deal with that at all is a real drawback. That's not something you have to contend with systematically in other jobs.

In addition to dealing with generally rude behavior, every dancer talked with me about fending off clients who tried to touch her. They all have had men kiss them. One dancer told me about having a client shove his tongue down her throat. Janeen vividly described a "sexual side of men" that she wishes she never had to encounter:

Even though you may like dancing, there are days that, shit, you don't feel like seeing somebody shitting butt mucus into a cylinder behind the glass. It's disgusting. But there you are. You already saw it. Too late now. Here I am sitting here, and he did it. He just shit yams into a plastic bag. And you have to see that, and that's your job, whether you want to see it or not. Just like the sticking pencils in your labia comment, you might have quit, but you heard that. You may sit down and not tolerate men touching you, but he got you once before you slapped him; he already pinched you or bit you or already tried to stick his raw dick up your ass. I was affected by that. Stricter laws at the clubs would help. But it is still an environment that people are coming in at their worst.

Unfortunately, the sex industry brings out rude behavior in everyone, not just the die-hard “assholes” that Beatrice speaks of or the sadistic misogynists and perverted exhibitionists Janeen describes. There is no Miss Manners teaching us proper etiquette in strip clubs during conversations with dancers. Clubs will have a set of rules regulating customer and dancer behaviors, but these rules do not protect dancers from “mere” insults whether intended or unconscious.

Generally, if a client asks questions or makes assumptions out of ignorance but otherwise treats her with respect, most dancers do not become upset. It is when the men feel entitled to judge dancers, to stereotype and degrade them, as Perry and Sanchez vividly describe in their study, that dancers feel very demeaned and annoyed. One long-term consequence of this is that women ultimately become contemptuous of the clients who visit them. When a woman is constantly perceived as sexually available by men she may in reality find extremely unattractive and/or men who behave abusively toward her, she begins to develop disgust for men in general. She thinks, “how can they be so stupid as to imagine I would really desire them?” Darby feels that most dancers do not respect their clients.

You tell a guy you’re a dancer and it’s like sparks fly off his eyes at you. Then you got a neon sign that says, ‘fuck me’ on your forehead. I don’t know, guys just think of you different. They really do, they look at you different. They think of you as easy. And then the ones that treat you like gold are butt ugly. And you don’t want to have nothing to do with them. I think the other dancers respect them less than I do. My roommate, she’s real respectful with her men, but most of them, no. Men are just big wallets, they either got hair on them or they’re bald. All you see is wallets with feet walking around a club, some of them fatter than the others. You go for the fattest wallets you can find. Everybody runs for the biggest wallet.

Darby then observed that the women she worked with would get tired of putting up with men and turn to one another. She argued that just being a sex worker of some sort can make a woman queer:

They get sick of men, they just would get fucked up. There’s always one in the crowd and that makes all the straight ones think about it. They get drunk and they get tired of putting up with all them men. And they try it

and they like it. I can have me a woman instead of one of these fucking men. Because putting up with men all the time, it just turns you off towards them. Working in those clubs, being around so many men, so much. It just turns you off towards them 'cause you meet so many assholes and pricks and you think, 'God, are all men like this?' And you stereotype men, and you don't have nothing to do with them because they get on your nerves. Then you get with a chick and she flips your shit upside down and there you go.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, through the course of my research, I observed that sex workers express lesbian and bisexual desire in a myriad of overlapping forms. Strip bars are liminal sites where, under the right circumstances, rules about "appropriate" sexual behavior might be temporarily suspended. They are places where dancers learn disdain for men and develop attractions for each other; where they take off their clothes in public; where they might welcome the sexual gaze of another woman. Exotic dancing may challenge a woman's sexual paradigm; then, having broken one taboo, it's easier for her to break others. All of the elements are present to encourage women to be sexual with one another—access, attractive women, a sexual environment, the taboo breaking process, frustrations with men, as well as the need to separate the sexuality one engages in for work and the sexuality reserved for one's pleasure. For women who are already lesbian or bisexual, dancing is a way to make a lot of money and be around other queer women. For a woman interested in exploring her bisexuality, deciding to be romantically involved with another woman may be among the most significant changes she undergoes in the sex industry. For both, being with a woman may function as a buffer against the insults of male clients and a way to preserve a not-for-sale sexuality of one's own.

At the close of our interview, Darby gleefully described participating in an all women orgy in the dressing room of one of her first strip bars in Silverton:

Oh man. One time in Lace and Lashes we had a big queer happening. All the dancers got suspended, or at least eight of us did. I was in the dressing room. I don't know who started it, but I was in the dressing room at Lace

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

Manifestations of queer desire such as this (a vivid image of bored men waiting for dancers who are humping each other in the dressing room!), as well as others I have discussed in this article, complicate feminist analyses of gender relations in the sex industry.

So far, feminist discourse on the sex industry has largely emerged out of the "sex wars": a polarized debate between radical (Barry, 1995; Dworkin, 1974, 1987; MacKinnon, 1989) and sex radical feminists (Califia, 1988; Chapkis, 1997; Paglia, 1992; Rubin, 1984) about whether women's labor in the sex industry is altogether exploitative or holds the potential to empower women as well as oppress them.<sup>12</sup> One powerful implication of my research on queer desire among sex workers is that it confirms *both* radical and sex radical theories about sex work. As the radical feminists so vividly describe, the sex industry abuses women and, more generally, perpetuates patriarchal attitudes about women's sexuality. Consequently, one way women might adapt to the worst parts of the labor—physical and emotional abuse, the insults, objectification, rejection, the disgust they feel for the clients—is to develop romantic and sexual relationships with other women. Dancers who choose to expand their sexuality by exploring their attractions to other women thus illustrate the perspective of the sex radical feminists: they are empowering themselves through a subversive act.

This suggests that the presence of, and research on, queer desire in the sex industry can connect divisive radical and sex radical feminists. It illustrates that both sex radical and radical feminists are *correct at the same time*. Yet, few works have sought to expli-

cate—or even explored—the linkages between sex work and sexual orientation, nor how queer sex workers might bridge sex radical and radical feminist theories of the sex industry. Examining those links as I have done in this article demonstrates that the sexual experimentation of sex workers is a useful site for complicating feminist analyses on the sex industry.

### Notes

1. This presence can be easily documented by entering any sex store, or watching pornographic cable stations.
2. Most strip bars do not allow women unaccompanied by a man to enter. This was a significant problem for me when I was collecting data. The official reason of this policy was explained to me by one manager who claimed that he could not guarantee my safety around “a bunch of drunk and horny men.” The unofficial reasons clubs bar entry to unescorted women is because they do not want prostitutes, lesbians, and jealous wives and girlfriends on the premises.
3. Carol Leigh, aka the Scarlett Harlot, invented the term “sex work” to demonstrate both that women in the sex industry are actively engaged in a form of labor as well as change the focus from women being “used” to being subjects.
4. One exception to this is Eva Pendleton’s article “Love for Sale: Queering Heterosexuality,” in *Whores and Other Feminists*. In her work, Pendleton examines how lesbianism and sex work destabilizes heteronormativity. She suggests an alliance between queer theory and politics and sex work. This work is more an exploration of theoretical connections between sex radical feminists, queer theorists, and sex workers than social science exploring the range of queer desire in the sex industry.
5. In her case, Janeen has questioned the high incidence of previous sexual and physical abuse among sex workers.
6. In her book *The Managed Heart*, Arlie Hochschild defines emotional labor as face-to-face or voice-to-voice contact that “requires one to induce or suppress feelings in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (p. 7). I discuss the emotional labor dancers perform in more detail in my manuscript, “Dancing on the Mobius Strip: Challenging the Sex War Paradigm.”
7. Janeen is referring to Andrea Dworkin.
8. In addition to inappropriate comments and insults, dancers described discrimination they experienced in housing, other employment, and medical care.
9. I say this not to condescend to any male researcher, but because conversation after conversation with dancers has demonstrated that sex workers largely hold men in contempt. Dancers expressed that they feel almost no actual arousal. They are in fact most often bored, drunk, dissociated, or on an ego trip, which is not necessarily erotically charged.

10. The solidarity that women form with one another is the topic of another manuscript in progress, "Female Solidarity in the Sex Industry."
11. The Lusty Lady is a peep show located in Northern San Francisco. Dancers are separated from clients by a glass partition. The Lusty Lady is also the site of a famous unionization effort documented in the film *Live Girls Unite!* It is also the subject of a manuscript I am working on titled "Sex Activism and Social Change in San Francisco."
12. This is a topic of a manuscript revised and resubmitted to *Gender and Society*, titled, "Dancing on the Mobius Strip: Challenging the Sex War Paradigm." In this paper, I introduce a new theoretical paradigm to the feminist sex wars by valuing the contributions of both sex radical and radical feminists. I articulate a two-fold temporal dimension of sex worker's experiences: one, how women's feelings of pleasure and empowerment gradually decline over time, and, two, how good and bad experiences rapidly transform into their opposites over the course of a single evening, making the strip bar a precarious site for performers.

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