Striptease: An anthropological view

Angela Lee Ramsey
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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STRIPTEASE

An Anthropological View

by

Angela Ramsey

Bachelor of Arts
University of Nevada, Las Vegas
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Striptease: An Anthropological View

by

Angela Ramsey

Dr William Jankowiak, Examination Committee Chair
Professor of Anthropology
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This following study serves as an attempt to apply theoretical questions to the phenomenon of striptease. I argue that striptease can be more fully understood as an act guided by the rules of performance. Strippers, and to a lesser extent the audience, can then be seen as actors employing a fantasy phase to sustain their respective roles within the charade of performance sex. Strippers and audiences are also players within the concept of performance itself, meaning they are simultaneously subject to and authors of the phenomenon. Using a biosocial approach, I explore the psychological, cultural, and physiological, etc., cues that may influence and/or motivate the characters involved in the performance of striptease. The formulations presented here are based on in-depth interviews with actual strippers and observations gathered during long-term strip club attendance.
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I would like to thank a very special group of friends who helped me grapple with this intimidating and overwhelming research topic: Stephanie Fox, Steve LaDouceur, Tony Strauss, Jodi Bechtel, Bomi Kim, Nate Perragine, Svetla Doncheva, Ron and Noel Brasi, Nancy Tufano, Gary Romano, and Russell Emde. Without their generosity, time, and patience, I would still be struggling to find the insight to complete this project.

Of course I must thank Dr. William Jankowiak, whose unwavering commitment to the pursuit of knowledge has always inspired me. His creative thoughts are the source, in fact, for much of the ideas presented in this study. Thanks also goes to my committee members, Drs. Gary Palmer, Tony Miranda, and Joe McCullough, for their gracious input.

Finally my parents, Joan and Jay Ramsey, deserve mention here because it was they who taught me to value my education and my mind. This gift I will always treasure.
The call for fantasy-derived pleasure was first revealed to me as I entered a Las Vegas striptease club for the first time two-and-a-half years ago. I thought to myself, "how does such an artificially constructed erotic scenario serve those who perform and those who watch?" The next question to myself, I have to admit, was..."what’s wrong with these men?"...and..."what’s wrong with these women?" Of course, I had to follow up with... "what am I doing here?" Despite this surge of uncertainty, I proceeded to watch intently what appeared to be lustful exchanges between strippers and patrons. While I recognized that the action before me was indeed an act, a sort of creatively-imposed realism seemed to take shape in the room. Suggestive glances and sensual movements were convincingly dangled in front of quietly yearning men. Soft, filtered lights and hypnotic tones combined to enhance the surreal effect.

Clearly, an invisible force was at work in the strip club, a force that was met by an unspoken, psychological surrender. Those who indulged in the strip club experience seemed to be rendezvousing with the human psyche’s most unwelcome foe: desire. The strip club setting seemed to somehow give momentary license to this leap of the senses.

While obviously fascinated by the strip club experience I, like others before me, had many reservations about exploring the sex industry. Scholarly research concerning
stripping was conspicuously absent from the library—a residue perhaps of Edward Sapir's position, which warned against mixing the subject of sex with "authentic culture" (quoted by Tuzin 1995:263). Strip tease, I assumed, had been dismissed as a vulgar preoccupation of Westerners, neither artistic nor ritualistic in nature, less of a cultural index and more of an insignificant fetish.

The minuscule amount of research I did manage to uncover proved to be painfully didactic. Missing were the personal views of the subjects. Doctors Kathryn Hausbeck and Barbara Brents, who are currently investigating the sex industry in Nevada, found this to be the case in their research efforts as well. According to Brents, work in this area is invariably produced by academics "looking almost voyeuristically at the people in the sex industry" (quoted by Ettinger 1997:45). The postulated theories, whether functional, structural, feminist and/or socialist in nature, exclude the interests of those involved—stripper and patron—as well as the relationship of the two groups as defined by each group.

A first-hand delving into the domain of the emic would certainly remedy this imbalance in data. I decided to elaborate on my original impression of the strip club, which had remained vivid in my mind. Words like "fantasy" and "otherworldly" surfaced again. Strip clubs seem to provide a setting where a melting of sex and theater, lust and performance can take place without social repercussion. My aim, I realized, was not to legitimize stripping in the eyes of artists or scholars; nor was it to sift through colliding moral issues. The purpose of my research was to explore—via interviews, observations, and research—the aesthetic and material ideologies of those involved in the stripping...
experience. Highlighting the performance aspect, I believed, would illuminate these respective ideologies.

But before the interviewing process could begin, I was faced with the challenge of finding information relevant to striptease and/or the striptease industry. Ideally, this search for data would serve the two-layered purpose of helping me formulate meaningful questions while providing me with possible theoretical applications. Early on, I realized that in order to conduct a genuine review of literature involving the phenomenon of stripping, a determination had to be made regarding data that would qualify as comparison-worthy.
CHAPTER I

LITERATURE REVIEW

Striptease and Prostitution

One of the primary obstacles encountered during the research was the scarcity of material specifically devoted to striptease. Stripping is briefly mentioned in texts that deal with the topic of prostitution and/or the "sale of sex." However, the variables involved with prostitution and striptease seem quite different. The very nature of teasing implies a withholding of sexual favors—a process rather than a payoff—a means rather than an end. Prostitution, conversely, offers a tangible promise of sex. Researchers have typically handled the subject of "selling sex" on a hierarchical scale that measures least explicit to most explicit: most explicit might include prostitution; least explicit might focus on peep shows. But again, this model takes for granted that the underlying architecture of these extremes is the same, an assumption I was not necessarily willing to accept. Decidedly, my work had to remain focused on striptease.

Initially, my pre-interview reading was clumsy and haphazard, but during the process, I was forced to consider all possible influences of strip club aesthetics—the sexual, moral, legal, social, psychological, and historical elements. Surprisingly, I found the most creative and thoughtful orchestration of these themes in popular texts. Such texts, for the most part, were the most current sources devoted to the topic of stripping.

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USA Today’s 1994 article “Pornography, peep shows, and the decline of morality” focuses attention on both strippers and patrons. The article aims to challenge the myth that the sex industry degrades women and degenerates neighborhoods. McLean’s (1997) and Utah’s independent newspaper Private Eye (1997) printed articles containing social commentary on the effects stripping in conservative cities. Mainly, these three articles explore the legal and moral ramifications of the stripping industry—topics I had already formally disqualified from my research—but I found them especially useful because they incorporate the personal accounts of participants of the sex industry. Furthermore, these pieces seemed relevant because they include speculation regarding the psychological aspects of sex, addressing mainly the distinction between the “healthy majority” of club goers and the uncommon deviant who is plagued by clinical disorders that can lead to delusional behavior, rape, and even murder. According to Dr. Gary L Brooks, the latter individual is “isolated in his own fantasies” unable to maintain reality-based relationships (Fulton 1997:15). But the strip club feeds on the merits and manipulation of fantasy, doesn’t it? This was certainly cause for further investigation.

Striptease and Performance

My determination to focus on the performance aspect of stripping was inspired mainly by two books: Lynn Snowden’s Nine Lives (1994) and Marianne Macy’s Working Sex: An Odyssey into our Cultural Underworld (1996). Both books contain popular accounts of strippers and the dynamics of the stripping industry. In each work, a purposeful claim is made that strippers are in fact “performers.” Snowden, who personally undertook nine separate careers including striptease, says stripping requires
the implementation of a separate self—a performer. Macy's informants agree, characterizing stripping as an act like any other performance.

Under the influence of Snowden, it also became clear that I must examine both strippers and patrons to produce a truly rich study. Snowden's participant observations detail the symbiotic exchange that occurs between stripper and client. Strippers, Snowden shows, are able to capture the imagination of the audience because the audience arrives in a highly suggestible state. This effect, which I later refer to as the "strip club effect," would become a major focus of my study.

After completing my initial reading and some subsequent interviews, I attempted to locate scholarly data that would help me test some brewing theoretical notions involving the importance of performance—its role and impact—in the striptease experience. I turned to research on theater and culture. The most intriguing found were the works of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, who explore performance as it relates to social transformation. Turner's *The Anthropology of Performance* establishes the framework for the concept of liminality, and Schechner's *Performance Theory* elaborates on the social and psychological attributes of performance. Schechner proposes that performers as well as spectators undergo a transformation during performances as a management technique. The performer's ability to manage stage identities may be difficult. Schechner suggests, as these transformations are often incomplete for the performer who is consistently reminded of the part of the self that must be compatible with accepted social customs (Schechner 1988:Preface). Reinelt and Roach support this model of the performer/audience transformation in *Critical Theory and Performance*.
The sources described here seemed to give further credence to my original notion of the "strip club effect," which relies on a personal/social transformation.

**Strip tease and Tourism**

Other considerations were made while narrowing down useful source material. I wanted perspectives that would enhance the folk interpretations of my interviews, specifically work that was sensitive to the dynamics of tourism. Lenore Manderson (1995) discusses the fantasy-driven behavior of sex club patrons in her *Sexual Nature Sexual Culture* contributing article "The Pursuit of Pleasure and the Sale of Sex." This work is particularly enlightening not only because it addresses the power of fantasy inherent in the sex club, it also attends to the role tourism plays in this scenario. Manderson applies J. Urry's concept of the "tourist gaze" to Bangkok's famed red-light district known as Patpong. The tourist gaze phenomenon is characterized by the "anticipation of place and experience by the tourist which is sustained by media representations, and the construction of the gaze through signs" (Manderson 1995 308).

Las Vegas, a city which has historically sold itself as the "Disneyland for Adults" (Kaufman 1996:306), may very well incite tourists to experience a visitor's euphoria similar to that felt by a Patpong sojourner.

**Strip tease, the Body, and the Self**

The symbolic associations with the body must affect its manipulative power, especially upon a highly suggestible audience such as the striptease spectator. Modern body scholars address far-ranging questions—from the political to the pragmatic. Following the pragmatic model, body scholars usually make the claim that culture's
symbolic world attaches meaning to the body. David Le Breton, for instance, says the Cuna Indians of Panama regard the body as a "uniting force" that links individual to group (Le Breton 1994:89). Body scholars challenge the idea of the body as "literal" or "fixed" compilation of matter and focus attention on the body's multi-layered, symbolic, and political significance. Study of the political significance of the body has largely been produced by feminists concerned with denaturalizing the bodies "they found themselves discursively and materially trapped within" (Zito 1994:4). This work is often in the form of cultural critique.

For centuries biological differences of the body had been used to justify male superiority over women, according to feminist researchers who in more recent years have worked to discredit such biases. Susan Bordo points out that women have been historically portrayed as a metaphor for the body, and the body—by virtue of its carnal limitations—is viewed as a distraction from divine pursuits (Bordo 1993:5). Questions of the symbolic nature of the feminine body and larger issues of power and domination materialize in the works of many feminist writers including Lynn Hunt's (1991) *Eroticism and the Body Politic*. Nineteenth-century European women who sought power were marginalized sexually, according to Hunt. Her body and its sexual connotations served as her destroyer. Hunt and other body scholars maintain that such socially elaborated representations of the body are derived from cultural norms.

But rather than passive receptors for cultural influence, striptease participants play a part in shaping their symbolic worlds—incorporating and rejecting cultural images as seen necessary. Research in the area of the psychology of the self explains that individuals, as self-reflecting objects, draw from cultural symbols to cue behavior and
responses. Symbols that provoke sexual responses are actually elaborations of the self, chosen and manipulated by the self. Self-consciousness is brought on by residual conceptions of what a correct person should be (Duval and Wicklund 1972 Preface) coupled by cultural associations with shame (Hastings 1996:108).

Historically, studies of the self have been presented in the vein of classical psychoanalysis, focusing on pathologies of the self and the functional restoration of the self (Kohut 1977:3). Newer studies explore the self and corresponding social roles or the altered self phenomenon (Johnson 1985:7). Still, there is little research focusing on how the integrity of the self is maintained in the face of cultural inhibitors and the particular mechanisms that are used to negotiate disparate identities.

*Strip tease and Sex*

Performance and imagination are critical in striptease, but while the experience of fantasy may be pleasing in and of itself, the sexual element of stripping is powerful, to be sure. The male informants I spoke with maintained that they visit nude and topless clubs because they find it sexually appealing. The union of sex and fantasy in a single venue must appeal to a variety of symbolic and/or material aesthetics. For this reason, I began the intense search for scientific data that could provide insights into this relatively uncharted domain.

I became interested in the work of John Elsom because he offers penetrating insights into the realm of sexual aesthetics and the symbolic world that shapes these aesthetics. Elsom's (1974) *Erotic Theater* points out that stripping is not about the "nakedness of the body:" it is the "teasing" that stimulates the erotic effect—a means, not an end. He points out that ideas about eroticism, sensuality, and the body fluctuate over
time depending upon a culture’s particular “language of love.” Social class is thus a powerful determinant in the process of developing this love language and other aesthetic tastes (Elsom 1974:184).

But is the patron’s culturally constructed symbolic world solely responsible for his desire to watch striptease? Famous sexologist Havelock Ellis (1897) wrote that “sex lies at the root of life,” implying that human sexuality transcends the bounds of cultural reason. Don Symon’s (1979) *The Evolution of Human Sexuality* examines the adaptive, sex-linked differences between males and females—highlighting the male affinity for sexual variety and the visual orientation of the male in regards to sexual arousal. David Buss’ (1994) *The Evolution of Desire* elaborates on this biosocial theme by discussing the behavior of the male in reaction to cultural institutions that attempt to control his primordial sex urges. Stripping is not referred to specifically as an outlet for these innate desires, but the strip club certainly offers the opportunity to experience a sort of sexual variety. While I was unable to find evolutionary material pertaining to stripping in particular, I wanted to utilize concepts of evolutionary theory, along with performance theory, to see if a biosocial appraisal might illuminate aspects of the stripping phenomenon, specifically how participants of striptease manage themselves during an essentially “deviant” activity.
CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Over a period of three months, I frequented five strip clubs in the Las Vegas area. For the purposes of confidentiality I will not reveal club names. I will simply refer to them as Club A, Club B, Club C, Club D, and Club E. The clubs in Las Vegas are ranked according to a hierarchy that is commonly accepted among most strippers and club-goers. The five clubs discussed in this research are representative of the differing levels within this assumed hierarchy, which consists of low-end, middle-of-the-road clubs, and high-end clubs. These descriptions are based upon subjective comments made by dancers and/or club personnel as well as my own impressions of the clubs. Low-end clubs are considered less expensive ($5 cover-charge or free entry), less clean, and they feature a "lower class of dancers" and cater to a "lower class of clientele." The drinks in low-end clubs are moderately priced ($3.50-$5.50 per drink). Middle-of-the-road clubs are average priced ($5 cover charge) and reasonably maintained; the quality of dancers (attractiveness and skill) ranges from average to very high. Drink prices in middle-of-the-road clubs are similar to those found in low-end clubs. High-end clubs are more expensive ($10 cover charge and up). Drink prices are reasonable ($6-$8 per drink) in the earlier hours of the evening but go up sharply after hours ($8-10 per drink). High-end clubs are usually considered clean and more elaborately furnished catering to a "higher
class" of patrons. Dancers are expected to be “gorgeous” and highly skilled in high-end clubs as well. It should be noted that high-end clubs usually pay more attention to “conduct rules” and invest more in security personnel and equipment.

During each visit, I would calculate the number of patrons present over a period of two or three hours, taking note of general ages and outward appearance (dressed up? dressed down?). Then I would calculate those who appeared to be alone and those who sat in groups, during which time I would simultaneously evaluate the relative behavior displayed by each group (example: which is more vocal? which received more private dances? which seemed to receive more unsolicited attention from dancers?) I intended to tally the number of intoxicated patrons in my study but was unable to determine its incidence. It soon became clear to me that interviewing patrons was unrealistic as well, because most were either overcome with liveliness or so distracted by the surrounding events, I was unwilling to interfere. The few instances I did attempt to speak to patrons, I unwittingly became the target of questions posed by the patrons themselves. Questioning my friends about their strip club experiences proved to be helpful in some instances, and I will refer to their comments whenever relevant.

During the same three-month period, I interviewed a total of 20 strippers—all of whom worked at one of my five designated Las Vegas strip clubs. I met with each stripper for at least an hour at a time. Our conversations often became extemporaneous exchanges, during which time I learned a great deal about their lives, their ambitions, and their regrets. But for the most part, the interviews were based upon a series of formulated questions (Table 1), which were designed to gather personal data, determine what effect, if any, the striptease profession has on strippers’ lives; and to gain an impression of how
strippers feel about striptease, customers, and the industry in general. As expected, some of the questions ultimately lost their significance once my research was fully underway.

Table 1. Base questions I asked informants.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Question</th>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you lived in Las Vegas?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long have you stripped?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What other types of jobs have you had?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you compare stripping to other jobs you have had?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you compare Las Vegas to other cities?</td>
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<tr>
<td>If you could have any job you wanted, what would it be?</td>
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<td>What motivated you to get into stripping?</td>
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<td>Did you have to physically or mentally prepare to become a stripper?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How would you compare stripping to performing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you plan to continue to strip? For how long?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What are your impressions of the people that come to your strip club?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Who are they?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do patrons behave differently when they are alone as opposed to groups?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you consider the most inappropriate behavior you've seen in a strip club?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you think patrons see you as performers?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What sort of questions do they ask you?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you ever date patrons? Do you think that they think you will date them?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What to you think about other strippers? Do you socialize with other strippers?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What do you talk about in the dressing room?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In general, what do you think about the stripping industry in Las Vegas?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are you married?</td>
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<tr>
<td>How long has your longest relationship lasted?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Do you have any children?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is your education level?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How would you describe your family life when you were growing up?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What was your family's income level when you were growing up?</td>
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</table>
The strippers I interviewed range in ages, family-backgrounds, ethnicity, education, and income levels and are grouped in the following section according to club affiliation. Using an agreed-upon pseudonym or stage name, I briefly introduce each informant and take note of some of the personal data I was able to gather:

(Club A (low-end, top-less bar features 15-20 strippers per night, seats approx. 100))

**Ginger:** 28 year-old African American from Las Vegas; worked 4 1/2 years as a stripper; other jobs include waitress and taxi-driver; ideal job is owning a catering business; high-school graduate; married once for 3 years (this was her longest relationship); divorced; 2 children; comes from a middle-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with parents as "good."

**Lena:** 22 year-old Caucasian Northern Nevada; worked 1 year as a stripper; other jobs include waitress and sales clerk; ideal job is "modeling;" GED recipient; never married; longest relationship-8 months; no children; comes from a middle-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with parents as "very good."

**Sage:** 24 year-old Caucasian from Wichita; worked 1 year and 8 months as a stripper; other jobs include secretary, aerobics instructor, and jewelry sales; ideal job is corporate public relations; university student-junior standing; never married; longest relationship-3 years; no children; comes from a low-income household; she was raised by grandparents who are both deceased; she describes her relationship with her brother as "good."

**Jamie:** 20 year-old Hispanic from Los Angeles; worked 9 months as a stripper; other jobs include retail clerk and runner; ideal job is elementary teacher; GED recipient; aspires to go to college; never married; longest relationship-6 months; no children; comes from a
low-income household; describes her relationship with mother (father is deceased) as "OK."

*Club B* (middle-of-the-road, top-less club features 75-100 strippers per evening seats approx. 500)

**Kamiah**: 18 year-old Caucasian from Las Vegas; worked 6 months as a stripper; other jobs include front desk clerk in a real-estate office; ideal job is attorney; high school graduate; aspires to go to college; never married; longest relationship-5 months; no children; comes from a middle to lower-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with her parents as "bad."

**Precious**: 21 year-old Caucasian from Phoenix; worked 2 or 3 years (she's "not sure") as a stripper; other jobs include receptionist; ideal job is strip club owner; graduated vocational school; aspires to attain a business degree; married once for 1 year (this was her longest relationship); divorced; one daughter; comes from a "wealthy" family; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with her mother as "getting better" and with her father as "non-existent."

**Legacy**: 24 year-old Caucasian from Los Angeles; worked 5 years as a stripper; other jobs include housekeeper, waitress, bartender; ideal job is strip club owner; high school graduate; never married; current relationship has lasted for 2 ½ years (her longest to date); no children; comes from a middle to lower-income household; parents are married; describes her relationship with her parents as "wonderful."

**Roxy**: 28 year-old Caucasian from Seattle; worked 5 ½ years as a stripper; other jobs include model, receptionist in a real-estate office, stripper for "vidostrip;" ideal job is real-estate investor; high school graduate with some college; never married; longest

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relationship-3 ½ years; no children; comes from a middle-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with her parents as “good.”

_Club C_ (middle-of-the-road, all-nude club features 30 strippers per evening; seats approx 250; no alcohol served)

_Sara_: 19 year-old Caucasian from Las Vegas; worked 10 months as a stripper; other jobs include secretary; ideal job is math teacher, although she “loves” stripping; sophomore at community college-math major; never married; current relationship has lasted 5 years (her longest to date); no children; comes from a middle to upper-income household; parents are divorced; describes her past relationship with parents as “good” but “not so good now.”

_Nadia_: 19 year-old Caucasian from Bulgaria; worked 6 months as a stripper; she has never had another job; ideal job is undecided; freshman at community college-economics major; never married; longest relationship-3 years; no children; comes from a middle to upper-income household; parents are married; describes her relationship with parents as “great.”

_Adina_: 20 year-old Polynesian from San Diego; worked 1 year as a stripper (divides work between club in San Diego and club in Las Vegas); other jobs include sales clerk and waitress; ideal job is singer; sophomore at junior college in San Diego-undeclared major; never married; longest relationship-2 ½ years; no children; comes from a middle to upper-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with parents as “fair.”

_Tiana_: 20 year-old Caucasian from San Diego; worked 7 months as a stripper (divides work between club in San Diego and Club in Las Vegas); other jobs include bank clerk;
ideal job involves owning a business in the fashion industry; university student-business major; never married; longest relationship-2 years; no children; comes from a middle-income household; parents are married; describes her relationship with parents as “good.”

Club D (high-end, top-less club features 75-100 strippers per evening; seats approx. 500)

Sydney: 26 year-old Caucasian from Portland, worked 5 years as a stripper; other jobs include health spa attendant, model, and clothing store clerk; ideal job is animal trainer; GED recipient; never married; longest relationship-1 year; no children; comes from a low income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with her parents as “OK.”

Carmen: 29 year-old Hispanic from Bakersfield, worked 7 ½ years as a stripper; other jobs include receptionist at dentist's office; ideal job is real-estate agent; high school graduate; married 2 years; longest relationship-2 ½ years; no children; comes from a middle to lower income household; parents were “never married;” describes her relationship with her mother as “fantastic;” she does not know her father.

Shauna: 21 year-old Caucasian from Buffalo; worked 6 months as a stripper; other jobs include bus girl and dish washer; ideal job is strip club owner; high school graduate with one semester of college; never married; longest relationship-months; no children; comes from a middle-income household; parents were married (mother is deceased); describes her relationship with her father as “touchy.”

Blaze: 24 year-old African American from Toledo; worked 1 year 7 months as a stripper; other jobs include disk jockey and voice-over talent; ideal job is housewife; high school graduate; never married; longest relationship-2 ½ years; 1 daughter; comes from a
middle-income household; parents are married; describes her relationship with her parents as "very good."

Club E (high-end, top-less club features 50-75 strippers per evening; seats approx. 400)

Regan: 22 year-old Caucasian from Columbus; worked 1 year as a stripper (divides work between Columbus club and Las Vegas club; other jobs include Pizza Hut waitress. ideal job is elementary teacher; junior in college-education major; never married; longest relationship-8 months; no children; comes from a low-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with her parents as "solid."

Amanda: 24-year-old Caucasian from North Carolina; worked 1½ years as a stripper (divides work between Columbus club and Las Vegas club); other jobs include bank clerk, horse stable attendant, and waitress; ideal job involves environmental science; high school graduate with definite plans to go to college; never married; longest relationship-2 years; no children; comes from a low-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with her mother as "getting better." She does not know her father.

Marilyn: 18 year-old Caucasian from Las Vegas; worked 1 year as a stripper; other jobs include waitress at pizza restaurant; ideal job is undecided; high school graduate; never married; longest relationship-6 months; no children; comes from a middle-income household; parents are divorced; describes her relationship with her parents as "pretty good."

Billy: 21 year-old Caucasian from San Francisco; worked 2 years as a stripper; other jobs include receptionist at real-estate firm, sales clerk at Macy's; ideal job is Shakespearean actor; 2 years of college; never married; longest relationship-8 months; no children.
comes from a middle to upper-income household; parents are divorced; she doesn’t speak
to her mother; she “likes” her father but “hates” her stepmother.

Observations Summary

The interviews brought out a social dimension that is difficult, if not impossible.
to measure—meaning that my impressions regarding the personalities of the informants
were certainly tied to subjective interpretation. But while I do not claim the status of
professional character or psychological analyst, I believe my impressions add to the
richness of the study because they provide an emotional and human basis for the
responses that will follow.

Gauging the emotional health of the individuals discussed here is a difficult but
worthwhile task for a study, which proposes to analyze the dimensions of the self as it,
relates to performance. As performers, the strippers are constantly challenged with
negotiating their core selves with their roles. Curiously, nearly all of my informants
appear to arm themselves with what I would call a forced callousness. During discourse,
a deliberate coarseness seems to overlap even the most vulnerable responses. Roxy,
especially, exuded this hardened, disconnected style of interaction. Many of the others
waffled between displays of fragility and aloofness. This may be merely a sign of
discomfort at being interviewed, but this reaction could also be an unconscious defense
mechanism against many of the stigma associated with stripping. As will be proposed
later in this study, most strippers never fully escape the expectations of mainstream
culture and constantly fear being judged. So what strippers share is an internalized
anxiety which may be concealed by feigned confidence or indifference. Even Amanda
and Regan, who I would consider the most compassionate of the group, became agitated by the prospect of being "labeled" strippers.

The personalities of several of the informants were more difficult to discern. Sydney and Sara, for instance, were friendly yet abrupt, offering very little elaboration in our conversations. Tiana was relatively bright but rather shy. Marilyn, it seemed, could scarcely understand my questions and would often strain to produce relevant answers.

It was easier to identify the emotional statuses of some of the more outwardly pained individuals. Cynicism brought on by disappointment weighed heavily on Billy, who was particularly articulate and introspective. She appeared troubled by self-appraisal in that she feels her stripping experience has contributed to a degeneration in her character. Ironically, Billy’s intellect has become her enemy, but the “Billy” type was unique. While other informants were clearly troubled, their emotional awareness was less sophisticated than Billy’s. Kamiah, who openly admits to being abused by her father, and Precious, who belabors the fact that she is “bisexual exhibitionist,” use desperate measures to gain acceptance. In fact, both argued jealously over which of the two I should pay more attention. With Kamiah and Precious, I had the clear feeling they were trying to “show off” for me in some childish way. Nadia was similar in intensity and was wildly hateful toward the subject of customers. She, Shauna, and Jamie all seemed to possess an angry undercurrent to their personalities. As one might expect, the more troubled women admitted to having questionable relationships with their parents. I suspect that several members of my sample group may be in need of some psychological counseling. The six described above are certainly the most glaring examples of emotional distress.
The elements included in the sample group descriptions were designed to serve as indicators to identify unique trends that might distinguish strippers from a general pool of like-individuals, in this case, young females. All of the informants included here are younger than 30-years old—a number which I regard as representative of the stripping occupation supported by the fact that the majority of the strippers I encountered were under 30. Most of the informants represented in the study were younger than 25-years old. Of the 20 actual informants, 16 (80 percent) were under 25; the other 4 (20 percent) were under 20-years old.

The length of the informants' romantic relationships seemed somewhat linked to their respective ages. Like most postadolescent, young adults, relationships of the youngest strippers are ephemeral. The seven girls who identified their longest lasting relationships as 8 months or less were all 22-years old or younger during these interviews. Eleven (55 percent) of the informants, ages ranging from 19 to 29, said they have experienced relationships lasting more than 24 months. Five (25 percent) of this same group said their relationships have lasted for over 36 months. Of course, the nature and stability of these relationships are important issues and will be explored in some detail in the coming chapters. But as far as identifying length of relationships, these strippers do not seem unusual for their age cohort.¹

While the sample group utilized for this study represents a varied demographic base, this research did not reveal any patterns relating to social and/or economic backgrounds. For example, strippers from families of lower economic class were no more likely to value money than strippers from middle-class families. Career length

¹ A 1997 study focusing on the romantic relationships of 160 college students found the average relationship length to be between 17.2 and 19.5 months (Van Horn 1997:25-34)
seemed to produce some response patterns. Girls who had stripped for a year or more expressed heightened feelings of negativity toward stripping and the strip club business in general. Club affiliation seemed to be another factor prompting particular responses to certain questions. Strippers from the all-nude, Club C. were particularly hostile when discussing patrons. They also reported to witnessing the most inappropriate conduct by patrons (ex. jumping on stage to fondle and/or lick girls).

The education-levels of sample group members do not fall into an identifiable pattern. All of the informants claimed to possess high-school diplomas, three of which were obtained through the GED process. While none had graduated, almost half of the informants (9 or 45 percent) said they have experienced some college, which is a fairly high number.footnote[2] I did notice, however, that the level of dedication involved in the pursuit of higher education varied from individual to individual. For instance, of the nine informants who said they had gone to college, only four seemed committed enough to actually graduate. I was convinced by Amanda, Regan, Auna, and Tiana that they were serious about earning college degrees, supported by the fact that each of these women travels to Las Vegas on a weekly basis to earn enough money to attend college in their home states. The other informants who reportedly attended college spoke about it in a casual manner and seemed unsure whether or not they would finished, some were even unclear about the process required to graduate.

Only four of the study's 20 informants are natives to Las Vegas. This information is provocative because it quickly dispels any notion that the behavior or emotional base represented here is a direct product of a Las Vegas upbringing. In fact, the individuals

footnote[2] A 1994 U.S. Census Bureau study found that one-fifth (21.9 percent) of American people had completed four or more years of college.
discussed in this study represent elements of America as a whole: California, Arizona, Washington, Oregon, Kansas, Ohio, North Carolina, and New York. However, it will become clear within this study that Las Vegas, or at least the perception of Las Vegas, does play a role in inviting a unique dynamic into the strip club, wherein the majority of participants (strippers and patrons) may be visitors.
CHAPTER 3

THE PERFORMANCE

Strippers confront an unusual dynamic within their profession—sexual desire—and the task of separating oneself from the embedded cultural associations with sex may be difficult; even a performer must deal with elements of his/her former self (Schechner 1988). Notions of shame are ever present in American culture, according to Anne Stirling Hastings, who proposes that cultures are socialized to associate sex with shame (Hastings 1996:108). Since individuals cannot separate desire from shame, they create “shame compartments,” or places where it is acceptable to be “sexual/shameful people” (1996:109). A strip club can thus be viewed as one large “shame compartment”—ideal for the occasional visitor who wishes to experiment with cultural boundaries. But for professionals like strippers, who encounter this scenario routinely, the challenge of fending off cultural expectations may be great.

Notions of sexual deviance may be partially responsible for activating the shame mechanism. Janice Irvine postulates that in the absence of moral frameworks, sexual appetite as “deviance” has become an unconscious script in Western thought (Irvine 1995:329). Ironically, the stigma associated with appearing “abnormal” may be greater than that of seeming “amoral.” It is this sex as disease model for which Foucault took exception. He wrote that Freud was responsible for perpetuating the trend that treated
sexuality “as though it were an area of particular pathological fragility in human existence” (Foucault 1980:191). In this vein, the prospect of rebelling against cultural prescriptions of “normalcy” becomes dangerous and exciting when experienced in small doses but becomes difficult the more often the rebelling is required. In an attempt to set aside cultural expectations, I propose that strippers attempt to employ a performance self or character to carry out their professional expectations.

As “performers,” strippers are uniquely equipped with the power to embellish upon and even alter their selves while manipulating those who find themselves inside the fantasy theater of the strip club. My informants’ faithful qualification of striptease as “performance” prompted me to value the concept’s importance even more. Although performance can be defined differently depending upon context and disciplinary perspective, it generally implies a temporary lifting or inverting of identity or a “splitting” from the self (Turner 1986:25). This transformation becomes a crucial precondition for the stripper because it gives her temporary immunity from the conduct codes of her socialized core self. My informants consistently used the words “performing” and “acting” to describe what the act of stripping entails:

Nadia: “You have to be a different person... it’s acting.”

Sydney: “It’s more acting than dancing; guys want fantasy.”

Regan: “Of course, it’s performing; it’s all about fantasy.”

Billy: “Acting... it’s acting. That’s the only way I can tolerate these assholes.”

Roxy: “I’m trying to get a reaction from the audience: it’s performing

In Marianne Macy’s book, famous triple X star Amber Lynne concurs with the performance interpretation. Lynn is quoted as saying that stripping resembles
“a show.” “Nudity just happens to be a part of the show,” she explains. “As any actor will tell you, even in love scenes in a movie, you act” (Macy 1996:126).

My informant “Marilyn” told me that stripping provides her with an outlet to play “dress-up.” The process of elaborate costuming, which includes exaggerated make-up, Marilyn wig, and sequined evening gown, allows for an easier transformation of the self into the other: “I don’t have to pretend as much; it’s like I’m a character.” According to Snowden, the physical transformation of the self is equally as important as any psychological switch. Generous cosmetic application, creative hair removal, nipple taping, and dramatic costumes all play a role in this metamorphosis (Snowden 1994:190-191). And drama is the key, says Snowden, who admits strippers often shop at stores that cater to transsexuals because the clothes are so “outrageous, campy and such an exaggeration of female sexuality” they are ideal for the strip club venue: “I bought the shortest, tightest shorts, a wild fringed bikini, a bondage dress, black patent leather garter belts, G-strings, stocking of every description, and a black leather studded bra” (1994:189). The “costuming” process itself serves to cement the conceptual orientation of the performer.

Frank Johnson (1985) proposes that the self can be customized to suit shifting contexts. In this sense, the self is always seen as an actor or performer (Johnson 1985:94). But the conscious employment of the “performer” mentality in the context of stripping can be seen as the psychological tonic to overcoming modesty and/or shyness. According to my informant Carmen, the transformation of self into performer saves her from personal humiliation and allows her to continue working. “I was embarrassed at first: I’m very shy... you have no idea; this is not me out there; if you only knew how
insecure I am, you’d be amazed!” Thirteen out of my twenty informants told me that shyness is or was an obstacle for them at some point. But, like Carmen, the following girls were particularly affected:

Adina: “On stage, I’m performing. But it’s hard to get up in front of strangers. It took me a long time to finally get up there... and my legs were shaking the whole time. I had to change mentally.”

Regan: “The first time, I had to get drunk to do it. Then, I use to do drugs... it was easier. Now, I just have to come in here like I’m the shit... you have to. For me it’s hard because I care too much what people think about me.”

Amanda: “It (stripping) forces you to get over obstacles. I was nervous about dancing because I’m insecure. Well, I’m still insecure, but it gets easier.”

Ginger: “I thought... my body is not good enough... how can I display it publicly? I was so nervous... but then I just did it... I don’t even remember. I threw up after.”

Kamiah: “I’m very self-conscious. It’s about pleasing someone else... it’s hard. I act totally different though. I mean, the men think I’m older... they think a lot of things.”

For these women, stripping may be an uncomfortable affront to personal notions of modesty and shame. While on stage, strippers have a tendency to pretend that they are someone else and/or use alcohol to enhance feelings of confidence in the performance.

While most of my informants admitted to some feelings of stage fright or nervousness, they were, however, not stifled by shyness in a lasting way. The most
extreme of these cases were Sydney, Sara, and Lena who essentially told me they were "exhibitionists" by nature:

**Sydney:** "Taking my clothes off is natural for me... I'm kind of like an exhibitionist."

**Sara:** "I don't even see what the big deal is... I take my clothes off at home. It's just a naked body... who cares?"

**Lena:** "I work out to keep a good body... and that makes me want to show it off."

The reality of being nude in front of an audience, for the above-mentioned women, does not seem to offend personal comfort levels or notions of privacy.

The performance aspect of stripping is important for my research because it carries an obvious significance for strippers. *Becoming someone else* at work is a challenge of which strippers are consistently conscious. Strippers speak about "performing" and "acting like someone else" freely and matter-of-factly... to the point where the performance and/or acting element of stripping seems to be considered prerequisite within the occupation and nearly taken for granted.

*I Just Want to Get Paid*

Although the "performer" orientation may be an important psychological tool for the stripper, the opportunity to "perform" is not the motivating force inspiring women to strip, according to my findings. All twenty strippers I interviewed cite "money" as the primary reason they decided to strip and "money" as the reason they continue to strip; most of my informants answered the question before I even asked it. When I began my research, I assumed a small portion might say they were lured by the opportunity for artistic expression or the chance to indulge in fantasy. But *all* of my informants were
very clear that they strip in order to make money. Several girls were quick to add that stripping offers absolutely no other redeeming value than its moneymaking potential:

**Regan:** “I do it for the money... that’s all... nothing else.”

**Jamie:** “When I strip, I think about money, money, and then money again.”

**Sage:** “I do it for the money. why else would anyone do this?”

My informant Billy quickly echoed these sentiments when I asked her why she had decided to get into striping; and then several times during our conversation she returned to the topic of money, elaborating on its powerful grip in the life of a stripper and the negative toll it had taken on her personally: “I look at them (patrons) like they’re a 6-foot wallet. I don’t know... it’s Vegas... it’s made me jaded and materialistic. I used to want a house with a white picket fence. Now, I want a mansion with a Mercedes. I don’t like what this business has turned me into.”

Money is the primary motivator for the stripper; and according to my sample group, there is plenty of money to be made. My informants reported to me that on occasion they had made $1,000 in one night. Many, possibly exaggerated, figures were given regarding average “take-home” pay, but I assume the amounts depend largely on the club, shift, and day of the week “Some nights are slow, but you can usually get away with working a couple of shifts a week.” Sage gloated. Freedom of schedule (Table 2), in fact, became the second runner-up in the “reasons for stripping category” after money. Club formats in Las Vegas apparently allow dancers to work as independent contractors with a great deal of discretion over work frequency. The resulting freedom is sometimes followed by an overly relaxed work ethic, according to several of my
informants: “If I have to pay my electric bill, I go to work and get the money.” Precious explained, “but sometimes I’m so lazy, I just can’t get in here.”

**Table 2.** Ranked incentives for stripping according to sample group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Incentive</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Money</td>
<td>20 out of 20 informants gave as #1 incentive for stripping.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Flexible schedule</td>
<td>15 out of 20 informants gave as #2 incentive for stripping... after money.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Curiosity</td>
<td>12 out of 20 informants gave at least one of these responses as a third incentive for stripping... after money and flexible schedule</td>
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Precious elaborated that many of the girls work the minimal amount possible and end up struggling to pay the bills. For example, eighteen-year-old Kamiah actually left my table with the intention of “paying rent.” She returned an hour later, unloaded a wad of twenties from her various garments and exclaimed, “only six more lap dances and a table dance to go.”

My informant Adina reported that she was often dismayed by the common opinion that strippers are “a disaster when it comes to money.” but she followed with a hesitant admission that the stereotype is in fact true for “most of the girls”:

**Adina:** “I can’t keep money to save my life”

**Me:** “Why not?”

**Adina:** “I like shopping too much, and I have a lot of bills.”

**Me:** “What about the other girls?”

**Adina:** “Are you kidding! Most of the girls work paycheck to paycheck. You’ve heard that strippers are a disaster when it comes to money? I mean some of the girls put some money away, I guess, but it’s like you get used to the money... and you want more stuff. Sometimes stereotypes are there for a reason.”
Eleven of my twenty informants mentioned that maintaining finances is a problem for "other girls" but stopped short of admitting that it was a problem for them personally. But judging from the statements just discussed involving Precious and Kamiah, some of the girls seem to contradict themselves by revealing a definite anxiety about paying bills. The six girls I interviewed who said they had either gone to college or were presently in college said they managed to save money for school, but they also remarked that their thriftiness was an uncommon attribute in their business.

It is reasonable, I conclude, to assert that each stripper interviewed here values the monetary aspect of striptease over any other motivator. Every customer is a potential buyer; every move is calculated for its potential monetary return. But while every participant in my sample group declared "money" as the primary incentive for stripping, there were mixed reactions about the effects that accompany money. It appears some feel originally charmed by the money but ultimately ruined by the effects of materialism. Others said they feel "proud" and "self-sufficient" that they earn a substantial amount of money.

*She's Dancing For Me!*

The concept of working for money is an acceptable reality for workers in most professions, but as performers, strippers are players in a unique web of circumstance. To succeed in luring patrons into a monetary exchange they must establish an erotic scene that mirrors reality. At this point, the perception of oneself as a "performer" or an "actor" not only serves as a psychological cushion for the stripper but it also becomes the crucial means in the realization of the stripper's definitive goal which, as established, is to make money. The stripper is then challenged with mastering a delicate line between perception...
and reality—the perception being that stripping is truly sexually exciting for the performer and that it prompts a feeling of personal enjoyment, not merely monetary satisfaction.

And the act is successful more often than not, according to Snowden, who says most patrons are truly convinced that strippers are sexually aroused during their performances. Any hint to the contrary, in fact, can be deadly in the way of tips. To illustrate this point, she describes an incident with mocking disgust where a French man became "infuriated" when she insinuated that his compliments should accompany a tip. He responded indignantly, "Ees zat why you were smiling at me? To get ze dollar. Ees zat why you are doing zees? For ze money?" Snowden's frustrated reply was "yes, you fucking moron" (Snowden 1994:201).

The reality is that while strippers are fully aware they are "acting," they must not allow patrons to perceive their actions as an act. It's all about attitude, according to Snowden. Following the advice of more seasoned stripper, she describes how she achieved a convincingly erotic stage persona by walking on stage and pretending like she was "going shopping" (Snowden 1994:187). Learning how to fake personal interest is essential, Snowden maintains, because it creates the "illusion" that the stripper is dancing just for him. Making eye contact, she adds, helps "reinforce this charade of exclusivity" (1994:199) and disguise the real motive which is to make a gratuity.

And the charade is seemingly effective. The strippers I observed seemed to be captivating attractions for their customers, even though in my opinion the private dance presentations became fairly predictable after just a few viewings. I observed more than a hundred lap dances over my three months and noted the same movements repeated again and again in a routine which unfolds with very little variation in the following manner.
the stripper tosses her hair forward into their customer’s lap, slowly moves her body upwards to either make seductive eye contact with the patron or nuzzle the patron’s neck; the stripper then ends straddling the patron with her breasts pressed in his/her face; next, the stripper might turn around so that she is facing away from the customer and begin to gyrate back and forth in his/her lap, sometimes bending forward with her head leaning towards the floor and her backside ascending upwards or maybe leaning back on his/her shoulder and slowly moving down into a squatting position between his/her legs. I observed strippers whispering into the patron’s ear. I also saw them engage in what appeared to be playful banter with patrons, during which time they would smile and laugh enthusiastically. The people receiving lap dances seemed to be sitting in an almost paralyzed state...seldom moving and seldom touching the girls (a practice which is formally prohibited in all clubs but loosely monitored and mildly tolerated in a couple of the clubs that I frequented).

In short, it is essential that the performance is convincing because it underlies the most practical element of the strip tease profession, which is to command enough realism and attention to persuade current buyers to tip and potential buyers to purchase future private dances.

The Power of Persuasion

In order to sustain the eroticized fantasy realm present in the strip club, it appears some spectators either consciously distort reality or unconsciously succumb to the false charms of the stripper. A state of “suspended disbelief” takes control. As mentioned before, there is common misconception among patrons that stripper are sexually excited...
during strip routines. In fact, the overall effectiveness of the strip tease essentially depends upon the stripper's perceived sexual involvement and sincerity.

According to my informants, there are a percentage of customers who are "susceptible" and a group who are not susceptible to this suspended state. They reported their opinion that anywhere from 10 percent to 25 percent of men are aware that stripping is a "performance" designed to entertain and generate tips. The remaining 75 to 90 percent of men, they say view stripping as an authentic erotic scenario and are therefore more "susceptible" to manipulation—manipulation that often results in relationship fantasies. My informants told me that "susceptible" club patrons generally believe that attentive strippers will date them. All twenty of my informants, in fact, stated they believe the previous statement to be true. The following are some related comments:

Tiana: "Of course (they think we'll go out with them)! At a certain point, it just becomes a joke to you."

Adina: "Oh yeah (they think we'll go out with them)! A lot of guys think this is whorehouse. They think this is big turn-on for us."

Kamiah: "Most of these guys are pigs... pricks! They think I'll go out with them. I've given them my phone number before, but I never call them back."

Roxy: "Yes (they think we'll go out with them). It's like they're looking for a girlfriend or something."

Ginger: "They ask me out all the time... and I think what kind of mental problem does this guy have?"

Macy illustrates this phenomenon when she describes a similar story involving her stripper informant, Dianah: "She said that most men would ask if she'd go out with
them. When she said no, the idea was to dance for a living, they'd say. well, I'll spend my money somewhere else" (Macy 1996:131). This kind of individual is "hopelessly deluded," according to Fulton, if he "thinks that the more he gazes at a dancer the more likely she is to become his willing adulteress" (Fulton 1997:14).

In fact, the majority of the strippers I interviewed maintain the position that relationships with patrons are either unlikely or completely out of the question. When asked if they ever date club patrons, fifteen out of my twenty informants said they "never" date patrons. Four admitted to dating patrons on one or two occasions but quickly qualified their responses by stating that they ended the practice and considered it a mistake. One of my informants hinted to me that she would "go gambling" with patrons if they appeared to have a lot of money but said she would "never sleep with them."

But strippers often use tactics to encourage a sense of realism about the possibility of a relationship. Like Kamiah, several of my informants admit to giving their phone numbers out on occasion. Kamiah says it's all "part of the tease." For centuries, prostitutes commonly practiced the act of falsely proclaiming love to clients in order to establish consistent relations with them. Japanese courtesans of the late sixteen-hundreds, for example, were encouraged to become experts in the "art of duplicity" (Seigle 1993:190). This form of calculated deceit is not favored by all strippers, however. Regan and Amanda feel that teasing can go "too far": "Most of the girls make them believe they'll go out with them (patrons)." Amanda reported shyly, "but I think it's wrong... I feel sorry for them." "There is a fine line," Regan added, "you want to get
‘em hooked, but if you go too far, it can be dangerous.” She followed by saying that despite this fact “most girls will do anything to get money out of customers.”

It appears that some strippers relish any trickery involving clients. Other than the few of my informants who reported they “felt sorry” for customers, the majority expressed what appeared to be a heated animosity toward them. My informant Nadia was particularly vocal concerning this point: “When a man walks into the club,” she pointed out, “I lose all respect for them... they’re all assholes.” This negative sentiment, according to my sample group, is the leading topic of conversation in the dressing room (Table 3).

**Table 3. Top five topics discussed in dressing room conversations**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Unsavory customers (“stupid,” “horrible,” “pathetic,” “creepy”)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Money and/or “cheap” customers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Boyfriends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Bad moods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Clothes, costumes</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Sixteen out of my twenty informants said backstage talk invariably gravitates to the subject of “stupid,” “disgusting,” “horrible,” “pathetic,” “creepy” customers. Money and “cheap” customers was identified as the second choice for backstage discussion:

**Roxy:** “We talk about how these fucking assholes aren’t spending any money. I swear, the ones that want the most offer the least.”

Although the previously characterized customers do not constitute the entire audience—many patrons are “normal” according to my informants—the unappealing types become
the subjects of ongoing private ridicule: Ginger exemplified this point: "The guys I
dance for are pathetic... they think it's real."

The charade of performance sex may transcend cultures. Many men that frequent
the strip clubs of Bangkok, according to Manderson, are likewise unaware they are being viewed as money objects and are "fooled" by the stripper's romantic pretenses. A sense of "authenticity" prevails between stripper and patron that is sustained by the latter's "failure or unwillingness to perceive the staged or inauthentic nature of the scene" (Manderson 1995:319).

But is this deception self-imposed? Several of my informants indicated that "susceptible" club patrons respond to this "charade of exclusivity" because they want to be seduced. Customers, in other words, are willing players in the charade rather than hapless victims.

Regan: "They want to hear make-believe... not real life."

Sydney: "They want attention... they want fantasy... they want girls to find them attractive."

Lena: "These guys want to believe it's real... it's like a fantasy... you know... what can I do to this girl that I can't do to my wife."

Regardless if the customer is oblivious or indifferent to the actual motives of the stripper, the patron's "suspended belief" works in her favor... as she is consistently challenged with creating a fantasy mood laced with hints of realism.

In summary, the stripping experience hinges upon a delicate balance of competing realities between strippers and patrons. Strippers are fully aware that the strip club effect is produced through the creative muscle of performance—a front that quickly dissolves.
the moment the actor retreats backstage. The reality of the customer, however, is created by the performance, causing very real physical and emotional responses.
CHAPTER 4
THE STRIP CLUB EFFECT

Performance, according to Schechner and Appel, requires a “transformation of being or consciousness” on the part of the performer (Schechner 1990:4). As mentioned previously, strippers faithfully qualify their work as an act or a performance, and this performance persona requires the temporary employment of an alternate identity... often through the use of stage names, costuming, make-up and lighting effects. It is not a complete abandon of the former self but a relative transformation. This transformation is perpetuated and defined by the lie, which stubbornly hovers between stripper and patron. Herbert Blau explains that with performance there is always the “residue of a lie or self-deception” present (Blau 1990:261). Schechner and Appel agree in their assertion that “lying as much as truth-telling is the stock-trade of theater” (Schechner 1990:37).

The theatrical experience of the strip club identified in previous sections, however, seems to be formulated and sustained as much by the spectator as the performer. Performance theory accommodates the notion that the audience can play a role in the production of meaning and can therefore “finally be interrogated as to its role in the production of meaning” (Reinelt 1992:5). In the case of strip clubs, patrons may believe strippers are sexually aroused during performances, and they may believe they are involved in an authentic sexual encounter; but whether this is true perception or
creative will, it is audience interpretation that spells life or death in the strip club business.

The Truth of Performance

The journey from reality to fantasy, I argue, is the crucial event for the consumer of strip tease. According to Blau, this "momentary usurpation of reality" is sealed by the "truth of performance" (Blau 1990:258). At the height of this journey, the stripper becomes the representation of erotic gratification; the strip club itself becomes a place of culminated antistructure—a domain similar to Victor Turner's "sacred play-space" (Turner 1986:133). Patrons then become travelers crossing over into a realm where rules do not apply and conventional notions of morality dissolve.

It is the promise of a world that could anytime become present that captivates the mind, according to David Cole. His theory of "imaginative truth" as applied to theater devotes itself to this assumed sensory longing which is so commonly expressed in humans: "To prefer the imaginary... is not only as escape from the content of the real (poverty, frustrated love, failure of one's enterprises, etc.), but from the form of the real itself, its character of presence" (Cole 1975:5). The instrument of theater, Cole says, serves to separate oneself from "present truth." The performance atmosphere found in the strip club, like theater, I argue can be viewed as a subjective realm where "imaginative truth" prevails.

Liminality

In his book The Anthropology of Performance, Victor Turner highlights a concept known as "liminality" in the elusive realm of performance. He uses the term to qualify
"the betwixt and between" layer of reality that operates during public display or ritual. Liminality is the abstract, suspended state of being that serves as a kind of bridge between fantasy and reality. This liminal phase, according to Turner, is not limited to the performance stage but is in progress much of the time... even during certain mundane social processes he refers to as "social dramas" (Turner 1974:37-41). But certainly liminality is described most often in relation to cultural performances "ranging from ritual, to theater, the novel, folk-drama, art exhibitions, ballet, modern dance, poetry readings, to film and television" (Turner 1986:124).

In his work dealing with Rio De Janeiro's famous *Carnaval* celebration, Victor Turner exemplifies the notion of liminality when he describes the carnival reveler as a "denizen of a place which is no place, and a time which is no time" (Turner 1986:123). DeMatta says that *Carnaval* is an arena for "conscious displacement" wherein the pursuit of laughter, joy, music, and sexual pleasure invites a "transformation" and/or "invention" of the collective self (DaMatta 1991: 82-84). It is also a place that transcends identity. During carnival the structure of conventional society disappears, participants are transformed into whomever or whatever they wish, and while they may realize they are involved in pretense, they remain engaged in a sort "shared flow" or suspension of disbelief (Turner 1986:133). It is a time of irony and role-reversal, flaunting and intensification. What allows this collective intensification to occur is the "subjunctive mood" or "fantasizing mood" of those involved and a need, perhaps, to embrace the liminal.

It seems that when patrons step into a striptease club they, like *Carnaval* revelers, encounter a zone stripped of worldly concern. They are energized by the opportunity to
manipulate gender images and engage in a kind of unacceptable, "naughty" behavior. Unlike altered states of consciousness, which are the result of internal "neurophysiological" transformation (Bourguignon 1973:6), the liminal journey is context-dependent—meaning that the place and time are paramount. For this reason, strip clubs somehow materialize as mentally and physically set apart from the outside; strippers themselves seem to become ephemeral characters within the walls of the make-believe. Entering into this "liminal" nether state allows all parties to maintain their role in the charade of performance sex. In Thailand, for example, the promise of erotic, fantastic escape is a primary marketing tool for the strip club industry which caters to Western clientele: "The marketing of destination through sex is itself predicated upon the liminality that the journey affords: the tourist steps outside of (his own) culture; unconstrained/temporarily unenculturated, he is able to act in ways unimagined or barely imagined at home" (Manderson 1995:318-19)

The highly marketed allure of Las Vegas, with its reputation for sin and its identification as an adult playground, may distort the expectations of strip club patrons. Those who travel to Las Vegas expect the bawdy resort town of the 1960's—the antithesis to all that is cultural ... all that is moral. Following this prescribed code, tourists seem to expect more from Las Vegas strip clubs. According to my informant Billy, "they (patrons) come in here and ask me how much it costs to go to bed... they think we're prostitutes. When I tell them that prostitution is illegal, they say... 'aren't we in Las Vegas'?” Several of the girls I interviewed who once danced or are currently dancing in other cities corroborated this sentiments commenting on how the Las Vegas club scene differs from others at which they worked.
Adina: “It’s much more conservative in San Diego. I have a saying... if it’s not legal... it’s in Vegas.”

Amanda: “It’s a lot more flashy here. You have to be very aggressive.”

Regan: “It’s so competitive here. In Ohio, everyone is nice. The girls here are vultures... they don’t come here to socialize.”

Tiana: “It’s more dangerous in Vegas because they want... expect more. It’s way more competitive, and girls are mean to new dancers... but it’s like sucks and stones.

Inside the walls of the strip club, it seems there is a widening of boundaries that govern socially prescribed behavior, an effect my informants acknowledged. But the overall tourist experience provides the opportunity to experiment with boundaries as well (Manderson 1995:309). Like Thailand, which thrives on its promotional status as the “land of smiles,” the brothel of the East.” and the “world’s largest sex resort” (1995:309). Las Vegas becomes a metaphor for “pleasure periphery.” or “place of sex.”

In this example, the liminal phase is layered. The temporal, experimental nature of this tourist experience or “gaze” serves to legitimize the norms and commonalties found in everyday life (1995:308). Turnbull calls the journey from reality’s structure to experimental antistructure a corrective measure where “disorder is ordered, doubts and problems removed, the ‘right’ course of action made clear...” (Turnbull 1985:80)

Who’s Performing for Whom?

Since all of the clubs I frequented were tourist attractions, I witnessed a phenomenon similar to what Manderson describes. As patrons enter the club, cultural
boundaries and traditional rules of conduct dissolve, and their behavior becomes more explicit. The following scene that occurred at club E exemplifies this transition:

My male companion and I arrived at club E around 11 p.m. The maître d' motioned us to the bar area to wait for the next available table. A group of four men entered behind us to wait for a table, they fidgeted impatiently as their eyes darted frantically from the main stage dancers to the bar dancers, from the girls walking by to the lap dancers, sporadically tapping each other and laughing. Their arms went from crossed to their hips and back to crossed—all in uncanny unison. When my friend left for the restroom, I witnessed an uncomfortable display of stares darting my way. One of the men said something to his friend, then the friend said something back, then one of the other men jumped in with a comment, and then suddenly they were locked in a huddle, all the while giggling and staring. Apparently their curiosity had become too much to handle, so they elected a representative to approach me. In the next instance, I was talking with a tall, blonde man:

**Man:** “Hi... are you a stripper?”

**Me:** “No”

**Man:** “What are you doing here?”

**Me:** “I’m here to see a friend.”

**Man:** (he glances back at his friends and laughs) “Are you a lesbian?”

**Me:** (at this point I degenerated into a lie) “No, I’m actually a local reporter, and I’m doing an expose on men who go to strip clubs. What’s your name, by the way?”

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 Needless to say, when I reached into my purse and pulled out my note pad and pen, the man scurried away like I was diseased. These men, though stunned by an unexpected dose of reality, were apparently dabbling in a new set of rules: the liminal force of the club had erased previously valued inhibitions inviting a new and daring candidness. My informants agreed, stating that men generally act differently in strip clubs: “They (men) let go of their inhibitions (in the strip club).” Jamie told me. “They act like kids in a candy store.”

“What do they do differently.” I asked.

“They’re loud, they say crazy shit...they just let it all go.”

Intrigued, I asked my informants to describe the most extreme cases of patron behavior they had witnessed. The incidents they recalled usually involved patrons “jumping on stage” and either “grabbing the girls” “slapping” them on the buttocks or “licking” them.

During subsequent visits to club E and my other sample clubs, I continued to observe the behavior of club-goers. I determined that men in groups appear to behave differently than men who are alone. For example, the men in groups I observed were more likely to talk during performances, more likely to tap their hand or sing to the music, and more likely to smile or laugh. While it was difficult to measure, men in groups seem to drink more and consequently talk to the cocktail waitresses more as well. All twenty of my informants agreed that men in groups tend to be more boisterous than solitary patrons:

(“Do men in groups act differently than men who are alone?)

Precious: “Men in groups are more open. They’re not afraid to ask for what they want”
Regan: “Most definitely... with a group of buddies... they’ll act like the biggest pigs.”

Lena: “Guys in groups are more rowdy... more touchy.”

Adina: “In groups, they’re dangerous. They think... ‘I’m going to take a girl home with me.’”

Tiana: “They’re more extreme... more talkative... more rowdy.”

Sara: “a group of guys are much more forward... they’re like... ‘you’re going to go out with me.’”

Sage: “They want to show-off to their friends... sometimes I think they’re going to pull out their dicks and compare.”

Responding to personal notions of acceptable behavior, unaccompanied customers may feel less inclined to highlight personal machismo. The men I observed who sat alone, and sometimes even men in pairs, were considerably less vocal and less expressive than the men in groups. In such cases, I recorded very few laughs and instances of speaking to others. But while they are generally quiet, men who come to strip clubs alone seem to make good customers--meaning that they purchase more private dances. Each time I paid a visit to one of my designated clubs, I would monitor the behavior of three groups of men as compared to the behavior of three men sitting by themselves. Consistently, men who were by themselves bought more dances than did men in groups. While the latter group might buy one dance for each member of the group, men alone bought two or more dances for themselves. When asked about this breach in customer behavior, my informant Carmen rationalized in the following way: “Men in groups are out for a good time with the boys. When men are alone, you know..."
they’re serious about one thing... and that’s to look at girls. That’s why they’re quiet and that’s why they pay attention.”

The difference in behavior between men in groups and individuals may be the result of male group psychology. David Buss points out that such “displays of bravado and confidence” are not always employed for the sake of attracting the opposite sex. “These displays,” Buss points out, “are also directed toward other men in an attempt to elevate status and prestige within the group” (Buss 1994:108). In an ironic shift of dynamics, patrons essentially become performers for each other.

It has been shown that the strip club effect and be evaluated as kind of invitation into the liminal, a domain outside the boundaries of everyday cultural codes. There is a “there and then” (Schechner 1988) quality that takes place, and behavior becomes inextricably linked to the time and space of the strip club event. The actions of the spectators become overtly sexual, daring, and hypermasculine. Strippers transform or “dress up” to appeal to the male notion of desirability—a sort of sexual hyperbole. The strip club then becomes a place for marking gender roles, however caricaturized
CHAPTER 5

THE AESTHETICS OF STRIPTEASE

Performance sex, as shown earlier, involves the same kind of self-imposed illusion found in most theater and public display: but it is unique in the way that it involves sexuality. While Turner and DaMatta acknowledge the presence of erotic elements in many of the festival activities of *Carnaval*, the purpose of the spectacle is to highlight the permanence of structurally important institutions in the face of outsider influence (DaMatta 1991:15). Whether stripping is viewed as a significant ritual event or just an entertaining “play-space” for lusty adults, sexuality seems to occupy a domain all its own—blurry when it comes to investigation and cultural interpretation. According to Spillers, “sexual experience... is so boundlessly imagined that it loses meaning and becomes, quite simply, a medium through which the individual is suspended” (Spillers 1992:84). But while the sexual dynamics operating in the strip club may prove to be confounding for researchers, the phenomenon continues its relentless plight night after night, unconsciously and without permission.

*Lust for Lust’s Sake?*

Patrons of strip clubs seemingly indulge in this apparent lapse in social consciousness or psychological vacation into the liminal, but the sexual element of the
strip club is certainly the main attraction. When I asked several of my male friends why they enjoy strip clubs, they responded frankly that they “like to look at a lot of naked women.” And as I continued my strip club quest, I became aware that quantity and variety of dancers seem to take an unusual precedence. Fifty to a hundred strippers could be working on a given night; the evening’s lineup would likely include thin women, heavy women, small-breasted women, large-breasted women, short women, tall women, blond...brunette...red-headed...dark...pale...long hair...short hair...pierced...tattooed. The ages of strippers (which ranged anywhere between 18 and 40) appeared fairly irrelevant as well.

The element of variety was acknowledged by most of my informants. Amanda mentioned to me that “all the girls are beautiful here...in a different way. Some customers ask for me because I have blonde hair. Others want Sylvia because she’s the girl with the real tits.” Marilyn, my fire-dancing Monroe impersonator, reported to me that when she first entertained the idea of stripping, she thought she would have to “get a boob job.” She was later thrilled to discover that the less endowed are considered of equal value to their busty counterparts in the strip club. The owner of club E concurred saying that the club’s diverse group of clients demands a “variety of women on the floor.”

The tendency to enjoy sexual variety is often reported to be a staple in the male sexual repertoire. Whether this tendency is predisposed or culturally ingrained remains a point of contention in anthropological discourse today. Biological determinists favor the opinion that man’s “powerful desire for the access to variety of women” is based in evolutionary fact (Buss 1994:77). David Buss in The Evolution of Desire (1994) points
to a study in which unmarried American college students were asked the number of sexual partners they would ideally like to have over several designated periods of time. Men consistently chose a number three to four times higher than the females represented in the study (1994:77). The evolutionary logic resides in the notion that men and women have developed different erotic criteria: one organized around variety, and the other around investment. It has been written that institutions like prostitution have remained vital throughout history because of the unrelenting male sexual appetite for novelty (Truong 1990:27). The strip club, unlike prostitution, offers the anticipation of sex rather than the actual thing.

Other scholars disagree asserting that men seek erotic fulfillment in the variety-driven milieu of performance sex only because culture has equipped its members with the devices of male dominance over women. According to Charlotte Furth, the Chinese affinity for young, beautiful women has little to do with an innately spawned "erotic appetite." These "desires" spring from culturally articulated images; inherent within these images are "powers of control" (Furth 1996:135).

I found that a hearty tension between what could be called biologically bound lust and cultural perceptions of love materialized within the drama of the strip club. Far from indulging in anonymous erotic abundance, patrons were often disposed to fixating on particular dancers. As previously described, my informants reported the common practice of customers dwelling on the prospect of "dating" or "having a relationship" with strippers. In fact, my informants related to me that the most common question asked by clients is to whether or not a girl "has a boyfriend" (Table 4). The frequency of this scenario indicates that a romantic idealization often takes the place of random
objectification—a process that can engender a loving sentiment and a yearning for emotional intimacy.

In short, patrons at striptease clubs seem to find the experience gratifying and appealing on an aesthetic level. Extending beyond basic biological urges, it appears that levels of male/female emotional involvement seem to be tied to personally orchestrated ideology. For example, the strippers I interviewed were repelled by the suggestion of dating patrons, regardless of their income-levels. This formula seems to contradict the evolutionary psychological assumption that women are status seekers. Their adamant objections to dating patrons, which were detailed in earlier quotes, stem from various sets of rationales: Some of my informants are “disgusted” by anyone who enters a strip club; others are involved in committed relationships; and the majority are simply unwilling to mix the business of making money with personal concerns.

Table 4. Common questions asked strippers by patrons other than “do you have a boyfriend?” (Not Ranked)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is your real name?</td>
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<tr>
<td>What is your real job? What do you want to do with your life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does your family know you do this for a living?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Are your breasts real?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where are you from?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much is a private dance?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How much do you cost?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will you talk dirty to me?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is your accent? (Directed to Nadia, who is from Bulgaria)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Art for Art's Sake?

Performance, by virtue, is often accompanied by a feeling of transcendence experienced on the part of the performer as well as the audience. But the performance inherent in striptease, by design, seems to defy this expectation. It became obvious to me after conducting my interviews that while patrons seem to be engaged aesthetically in the striptease performance, the performers themselves are strangely alienated from the experience. When I asked my informants whether or not they enjoyed working as strippers, most of the responses ranged from ambivalent to blatantly negative.

Shauna: “No (I don’t like stripping)... no ..not at all.”

Nadia: “I hate my job... it’s so humiliating!”

Regan: “I definitely don’t like it (stripping).”

Jamie: “It sucks... it really sucks.”

Adina: “Not that much.. mentally it (stripping) drags you down.”

Sydney: “It’s (stripping) so routine. I don’t even think about it.”

Lena: “It’s (stripping) OK. I guess. I mean... it’s no big deal.”

Blaze: “I don’t love it... I can’t really even say that I like it. I just do it.

Carmen: “It’s (stripping) OK... it’s just a job.”

Roxy: “I’m tired of it (stripping). It was interesting in the beginning... but you get tired of all the bullshit.”

Amanda: “It’s (stripping) all right... it gets old after while... just like any other job.”

Ginger: “It depends on what mood I’m in. Last night, I loved my job. Tonight it’s crap.”
**Tiana:** “It’s (stripping) an OK job... but I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t have to.”

**Legacy:** “I use to like it (stripping)... now, it’s just like blah.”

Two of my informants reported finding the act of striptease favorable because it provides them with a venue for “teasing” men.

**Kamiah:** “I wish I could use my mind more... you don’t need a brain for this job. But I like getting fucked-up and teasing fine guys.”

**Precious:** “I enjoy it (stripping). Where else can I tease men all day long.”

John Elsom names “teasing” as a fundamental tool in the art of seduction (Elsom 1974:171). It is the promise of sex that ignites sexual desire for spectators. But for strippers like Kamiah and Precious, teasing seems to be a way to achieve a quiet victory, one that involves inviting men to play in the futile game of wanting them.

Questioning my informants about professional satisfaction prompted a variety of further complaints about the nature of stripping. The following complaints, in the expressed order, were the most common among my informants: dealing with **Difficult customers**, **job-related mental stress**, **reduced sex drive**, **difficulty in staying away from drugs and alcohol**, and **getting along with other strippers**.

My informants describe **difficult customers** using the terms “rowdy,” “touchy,” “obnoxious,” and “creepy.” Sage elaborated on a frustrating exchange that erupted between a customer and her: “I couldn’t get this creepy guy off my back... he had greasy hair and thick glasses; he kept pawing me... trying to kiss me on the neck... I had given this guy one dance already... but I guess he thought I would hang out with his sorry ass all night. I basically had to tell this guy to get the fuck away from me.” As mentioned earlier, such “problem customers” frequently become the topic of unflattering
conversation in the dressing room, a tactic that could be seen as a form of passive retaliation. Public praise gives way to private insults, according to Billy: “You make them feel like they’re the sexiest thing on earth, and then backstage, you talk about how stupid they are.”

The affinity for insulting patrons privately or covertly is not unusual for performers in the sex industry. Manderson suggests that in Thailand strippers engage in sexual parody and ironic display: “…performances in the bars of Patpong provide women with the opportunity to invert, caricature, tease, manipulate and exploit those who use their bodies” (Manderson 1995:314). Playing the part of the “passive” “eroticized” woman, she proposes, can be a disguised outlet for power. By literally performing over the heads of men with genitals displayed, Thai strippers are insulting customers who may or may not be aware of Thai notions of sexual pollution and the profaneness of the genitals (1995:314).

Five of my informants cited mental stress as another obstacle facing strippers. Adina elaborated on this apparent “mental” hardship: “mentally it (stripping) drags you down. Some girls can’t handle the pressure... the game here. I can better than some.” “The game.” according to Adina and others afflicted with this brand of mental stress, stems from attempts to conjure enthusiasm while simultaneously managing personal insecurities, social stigmas, competitive fellow workers, and the previously named difficult customer.

Evidence of job-related anxiety became more and more apparent to me as my informants moved to the topic of the future. One hundred percent of my participants noted a specific time limit when asked how much longer they plan on stripping: Billy
told me "two more months and then I’m back in San Francisco." Roxy "give(s) it six months." Jamie says she will definitely "making a change" in the coming months."

Another drawback noted by several of my informants was that they had experienced a **decreased sex drive** since they began stripping:

**Adina:** "This business kills your sex drive. I feel sorry for my boyfriend."

**Sara:** "I tell you ... when I get home... the last thing on my mind is sex. I'm just like... get away from me" (to my boyfriend).

**Blaze:** "I'm not a lesbian... but this business makes you lose your taste for men."

**Shauna:** "My body just shuts down... it's like... sex? what's that?"

In her book, Macy includes a dressing room discussion where a group of strippers lamented over the loss of sexual desire:

Pamela said the one bad thing about the business is a decrease in sex drive.

Everyone agreed. "I used to love men, say hello to everyone. Since I've been doing this if some guy looks at me in public I want to snarl... what are you looking at? If I wasn't married, I probably wouldn't even date" (Macy 1996:131).

Macy goes on to describe the problems which arose relating to sex between a married couple who strip:

When Kirk would hug her or touch her, she'd recoil. "I get touched so much it makes me sick." She usually needed a day or so after work to get over the feeling. Kirk called it the "I Hate Men" phase" (Macy 1996:131).

While strippers are constantly challenged with playing the seductive game, the sexual aspect of stripping does not seem to appeal to the female aesthetic. According to certain scholars, visually inspired erotica is found to be less appealing to women than
men (Kelley 1987:157). It could indeed be asserted here that engaging in performance
sex might serve to damage personal notions of sexuality and result in mental stress.

Strippers are not opposed to relationships altogether it appears. According to
Macy, "many female strippers report that when they're working, they want
companionship and friendship, not sex" (Macy 1996:131). Long-term commitments may
fulfill this need. Five of my informants said that they were currently involved in romantic
relationships; 13 said they have been involved in long term relationships at some time
(long-term refers to relationships lasting six months to three years). Most of the strippers
who had experienced long-term relationships blamed the demise of the relationship on
the partners' behavior. "Laziness" and "jealousy" were cited as the common defects
displayed by past lovers.

According to my sample group, another obstacle in the way of job satisfaction is
the difficulty that exists staying away from drugs and alcohol. Without being asked
about the subject directly, sixteen out my twenty informants mentioned drugs and alcohol
within our discussions; most complained about "being exposed" to drugs. I questioned
them whether or not drug and alcohol use is a problem for them: eleven admitted that
drugs had been a "problem" in the past and continued to be problem for "other girls."
Nadia went so far as to make the bold claim that "95 percent (of these girls) are on drugs
and bisexuals"—which probably is not completely accurate on either count at least as
far as my sample group is concerned. But Marilyn, who referred to certain group of
strippers as "major junkies," seemed to hold a similar opinion. My informant Regan,
quoted earlier as saying that drugs make it "easier" to overcome insecurities, was quick to
report the fact that she is “clean” now. Five others said they continue to use “mild” drugs (pills, marijuana).

Sixteen out of the twenty said they “drink” alcohol on the job. The remaining four informants, incidentally, worked at “all-nude” clubs which prohibit the sale of alcohol on the premises. Several (Regan, Precious, Kamiah, Sydney, Amanda) admitted to being “tipsy” during our initial interviews. Although some of these girls said drinking “a little” helps “get you in the mood” for stripping, it is difficult to determine what constitutes “a little” and whether or not alcohol represents a problem for my informants. It is also difficult for me to know whether or not my informants are in fact “clean,” as it is reasonable to assume that admitting to a drug habit is embarrassing and a possible threat to their jobs.

While prevalence and risk-related use of drugs and alcohol is an ambiguous and possibly sensitive topic for strippers, drugs and alcohol became a common denominator in discussions with my informants. Those who admit that it is a problem, however, generally identify it as another girl’s disease. My informant Blaze made the point that the problem of drug abuse in strip clubs eventually spells professional death for strippers: “Strippers who use don’t last... mostly because they can’t keep a job. Anyway, you think clubs are going to put up with that bullshit? There are plenty of other girls who can do the same thing as you... probably better.”

A final issue some strippers complain about is difficulty “getting along” with other strippers. Overall, my informants who find this to be a problem cited “competitiveness” as the main source of tension. As mentioned earlier, Regan and Tiana find the “competitive” nature of stripping to be an element unique to Las Vegas. But
regardless, their characterizations of strippers as "mean" and likened to "vultures" are accurate according to several of my informants:

**Billy:** "They’re (strippers) cold... they’ll stab you in the back."

**Jamie:** "I don’t associate with them (strippers). They’re petty and mean."

**Shauna:** "They’re (strippers) kinda bitchy. Everything depends on what mood a girl is in."

**Marilyn:** "They’re (strippers) territorial. It’s like... don’t get in my way."

Critical views about other strippers were not shared by all of my informants, however. In fact, an equal number of informants were complimentary toward other strippers:

**Precious:** "My best friend is a dancer, a lot of the girls are cool."

**Amanda:** "Most of my friends are dancers... and they’re wonderful people."

**Sydney:** "Even though I’m not close friends with a lot of the girls, they’re all real friendly."

Generally, it seems my informants do not perceive stripping as a source of personal fulfillment or enjoyment. Many strippers are even ashamed of their profession. It is generally known that strippers prefer not to be identified as dancers in public. Many lie about their professions to friends and family as well. Fifteen of my informants (all except for two were on speaking terms their parents) said they deceive their families regarding their occupations: Tiana’s family believes she works at a bank; Adina’s family thinks she is a cocktail waitress; Carmen’s mother is under the impression that she’s a travel agent; Sara’s parents think she sells jewelry. They generally cite fear of “being judged” rather than personally derived guilt as the culprit for their dishonesty.
My informant Sara, who reportedly "loves stripping," distinguished herself as the only participant to give a positive assessment of the business without offering a qualifying remark. Several of my informants answered positively, but their responses reflected an underlying assumption that job satisfaction is implicitly linked to monetary concerns.

**Marilyn:** "I never really think about it. I like making money."

**Billy:** "The money is addictive. I enjoy the money."

**Sage:** "I like being able to pay my bills. I think the credit card companies like it too."

When asked to rate stripping as far as job satisfaction compared to other jobs, some of my informants appeared puzzled by the question. Jamie’s response exemplifies this point: "Well, I make a shit load more money... if that’s what you mean." Marilyn seemed to struggle with an answer: "My other job was... well, it was kinda boring. This job is a lot more... it’s a lot more money. Are you talking about money?" These responses seem to support the idea that, in general, strippers derive little aesthetic pleasure from stripping. Highlighting the "money" aspect of stripping seems to help strippers overcome, at least in the short term, this fundamental aesthetic compromise in addition to any other job-related complaint.

In summary, the aesthetic appeal of striptease is interpreted and understood in a manner relative to the perspective of the participant. Patrons are attracted to the strippers, and this attraction may stem from a personal sexual and/or emotional aesthetic. This research shows, however, that the stripper/performer typically does not achieve the aesthetic pleasure often experienced during artistic expression. I have argued, in fact.
that the performance aspect involved in stripping takes on a more pragmatic purpose than a pleasurable one. Playing the role of erotic seductress apparently does little to distract from the stripping-related angst that causes the professional experience to be tense and anxiety-ridden.
Anthropological study of the body today often focuses on how the sexual affinity is influenced by internalized representations of the body, representations which are culturally constructed. Marshall McLuhan asserts that the body in industrial societies represents the epitome of anti-structure: "...to a person using the whole sensorium, nudity is the richest possible expression of structural form. But to the highly visual and lopsided sensibility of industrial societies, the sudden confrontation with tactile flesh is heady music indeed" (quoted by Elsom 1974:171). The practice of viewing the human form as a separate or scientific compilation of matter is simply not found in traditional cultures, especially those which incorporate eroticism into art and expression (Giddens 1992:20).

Strip club attendance can be seen as culturally salient because patrons of strip clubs may be grappling with a larger cultural issue—the aesthetic of Western culture from the body. But as quietly yearning adults attempt to re-acquaint themselves with sexuality—how do they organize this symbolic world? To the patron, the stripper may represent many different persons: a lover, a whore, a dominator, a slave, a confidant, and an unobtainable dream. The symbol the patron chooses to incorporate serves his/her unique purpose or fantasy. The goddess/whore dichotomy so often discussed in literature highlights how the image of the body and the self can be manipulated. The stripper can
take direction from that internalized symbol of the whore for the sake of work, perhaps even "valuing the power that comes with being able to service men" (Hastings 1996:113).

Some scholars, however, say that history reveals that sex and power do not mix for women. Lynn Hunt (1991) in *Eroticism and the Body Politic* asserts that representations of the female body in European history had power in the sense that it often represented a multitude of important universal struggles and values (ex... nurturance vs. corruption). But the female who tried to make her way into public or political life was considered a sexual nuisance by watchful men (Hunt 1991:2). Historian Thomas Laqueur agrees proposing that eighteenth century women were marginalized sexually only after they began to seek social change. The female body, according to Laqueur, became the last defense against dissolving the invisible yet firmly placed line between her public and private life (Laqueur 1990).

My informants reported that taking on the role of stripper equips them with a great feeling of power: Club D informant Shauna said the following: "No, here's a place where the women are in charge. Look around! Who's begging for what?" Club A participant Ginger echoed this sentiment: "In here, I say what goes... it's all up to me... these guys have no control over me." As demonstrated earlier, a certain amount of satisfaction stems from taking financial advantage of spectators--a reality that seems to heighten this sense of power.

While the female body may represent a variety of meanings to a man, class association may unconsciously influence his symbolic world. John Elsom (1974) writes that as stripping evolved through the early to mid-nineteen hundreds, class exploitation lost its grip upon industrial societies. A society that frowns upon class exploitation.
Elsom argues, can no longer justify the existence of pornographic theater as a subjugation
device over the economically deprived female. A new myth had to be a subjugation
device over the economically deprived female. A new myth had to be invented to replace
"the old economic submission of women to men" in sex (Elsom 1974:188). According to
Elsom “this myth is that all women crave to be fucked all the time, that they are always
raring to go—although they may pretend to be coy—and that the man can therefore do
what he likes with them. The old reason why some women would automatically submit
to a man’s pleasure had a basis in observable fact: women could be bought because the
social conditions were such that they often needed the money. The new reason is an
observable fiction” (1974:188). The illusion-bound nature of the strip club experience
thrives on the patrons’ predisposition to accept the authenticity of the performance, a
reality most certainly reinforced by such embedded cultural myths.

In summary, strip club patrons have the capacity to conjure a variety of images
inside the club; meanwhile, embedded cultural associations with the body may influence
these selected images. The stripper may incorporate useful symbols in order to portray
the culturally agreed upon vision of seductress. Patrons may be blind to the manipulation
that is inherent in this performance, fully embracing the sexual realism of the event. It is
important to note that strippers say they feel power in this deception. But the following
question arises: does personal self-esteem or the culturally weighty dollar bill fuel their
power? The reality remains that while some strippers revel in their apparent monetary
victory, others lament over the destructive effects of greed and the ephemeral nature of
the business.
CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

Striptease provides the materials for the construction of fantasy. The liminal journey into fantasy, according to Goldstein and Kant, serves as "a guide to unexplored areas of the self," a domain which releases us "from the conforming strictures of everyday and enable(s) us to experiment with new roles, relationships, ideas, and situations" (Goldstein 1973:122). Strip clubs then become the symbolic culmination of all that is prohibited in conventional circles--the antithesis to prevailing cultural codes.

While escape into the erotic is the underlying aim, I have argued that performance seals the experience. It is the public display of the private and the presentation of the unobtainable that evokes the erotic sensibility. The invisible power, which exists inside the concept of performance, serves only to produce more desire (Blau 1990:10).

I have also argued that the participants of striptease are not completely powerless. Both stripper and patron are players, in fact--subjects and authors--in the strip club phenomenon, each bringing his/her own set of cultural symbols and expectations to the performance. So while under the charmed influence of the performance and/or audience, participants may nonetheless define their experiences, respectively.

It has been shown that performing is not the most attractive element for strippers. The employment of performance psychology, however, does help some strippers
overcome the self-consciousness involved as well as add legitimacy to their jobs; this process involves a deliberate transformation of the self into other. But as noted earlier, the transformation is often incomplete, meaning that separating the core self from the character entirely is somehow impossible. A social stigma resonates from the subject of sex—a stigma that serves to marginalize strippers sexually as well as professionally. As mentioned earlier, strippers work diligently to conceal their professional identities through the use of stage names, costumes, and carefully orchestrated deception.

Undeniably, the unifying theme for Las Vegas strippers is money. The group of informants interviewed here suggests that money primarily, not performance creativity, motivates and sustains them in the business. This is not to say that reasons beyond economics do not exist, as several of my informants offered a variety of motivating factors ranked after money. Several informants demonstrated a serious ambivalence toward money even, but the importance of money in Las Vegas stripping cannot be understated.

Although the sample group represented in this study was fairly small, the informants produced surprisingly consistent results, findings which I hope will enrich future studies. The overall strength of the results could be improved of course by expanding the size of the sample group. Recognizing the possibly unique dynamics of Las Vegas, a study comparing stripping in several different cities would be a fascinating option for future study as well.

Study of this nature could be enhanced most significantly, however, by interviewing strip club patrons. Researchers could explore the emotional and financial status of patrons in relation to cultural notions of love, lust, and sexual deviance. A
research design such as this would prove not only culturally provocative for social
scientist but also stirringly controversial for the general public.
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