

# *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers*

Bernadette Barton

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Guiding readers through the personal experiences of exotic dancers and their journey from novice to expert to ex-dancer, Bernadette Barton goes beyond the conventional framework of power and control in her book *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers*. For Barton, dancing and stripping enacts an emotional and physical “toll” on its workers. She argues that exotic dancers experience life on a Möbius strip<sup>1</sup>, a metaphor for a rollercoaster ride of feeling empowered and then disempowered. Rather than analyzing stripping in dichotomous terms, such as stripping being either exploitative or empowering, Barton argues that dancing fluctuates between the two throughout a dancer’s career. On the Möbius strip, empowerment easily leads to exploitation—from client to client and generally over time. However, the Möbius strip is not always the best metaphor for some of Barton’s interview participants because their narratives illustrate more than fluctuation between contrasting feelings; empowerment and exploitation may occur at the same time. By bringing to the foreground personal, emotional experiences, and the unseen positive and negative aspects of dancing, Barton contributes to the literature on exotic dancing, gender, sexuality, and sex work.

Barton examines the toll of sex work through 36 interviews with exotic dancers in San Francisco, Honolulu, and “Silverton,” a pseudonym for a midsized town in the Southeast. She observes workers in three strikingly different work environments: peep shows, live sex shows, and an employee-owned peep show. Although she briefly considered working at a strip club as part of her study, she realized that she could only “tolerate the noise, the smoke, and the undiluted testosterone for about one to two hours,” before she felt the need to leave (p. 4). Barton paints a detailed account of the Möbius strip through ethnographic work as a “sympathetic outsider,” which is quite rich throughout most of the book. Her outsider status sets her work apart from other recent ethnographies of stripping written by insiders and dancers (see Egan 2006, Frank 2002, Brukert 2002). As an outsider she draws heavily on the words and experiences of the women she interviews rather than her own experiences, which does not necessarily add value to her work, but does offer a divergent perspective.



Through the presentation of the stories and words of the exotic dancers she interviewed, readers learn about the unique experiences of dancers inside and beyond their workplace. Intimate stories of exotic dancers, from novice to experienced, draw the reader into the emotional labor involved in exotic dancing, while complicating old dichotomies of good or bad, and empowered or degraded. An examination of the Möbius strip of dancing highlights the complex reasons women enter the world of exotic dancing and choose to stay or leave. The toll of exotic dancing increases over time, affecting late career dancers more than early career dancers. Early career dancers speak more often of the benefits of dancing: enjoyment of dancing, male desire and compliments, money, and flexible hours. However, as early career dancers move past three years of dancing, they begin to focus more on the drawbacks of dancing, including the impact of the work on their bodies and the mental strain and abuse they consistently receive from male clients.

For a course on gender, Barton's chapter on "bad girls" offers a compelling and interesting story for undergraduates to analyze the role of stigma and the importance and role of unity between workers and women, while pushing the reader to go beyond the confining dichotomy of the "sex wars." Barton's Möbius strip offers an alternative possibility to the sex wars, one that dismantles the argument of sex work as either empowering or oppressive. Barton's interviews illustrate the complicated balance of social stigma and male degradation with the pleasure of dancing and female unity. Many dancers must confront the social stigma of exotic dancing in interactions with clients, friends and family; the label "stripper" and "bad girl" is carried with them outside the workplace and throughout their lives. Interestingly, dancers also use the label "bad girl" to condemn the behavior of dancers who engage in inappropriate acts (i.e. touching clients and sex acts). Some dancers distance themselves from the "bad girls" as a strategy to manage stripper stigma. However, Barton argues that as dancers recognize and critique these generalizations and the more each woman unites with her fellow dancers, the "more tools she has to survive and, for a finite period, even prosper in the sex industry" (p. 130).

For many dancers, their workplace is also a site of sexual exploration. Barton's interviews suggest that over half of her respondents are lesbian or bisexual. For some queer women, their sexuality offers a clear "boundary between the work of feigning desire for men and the more 'authentic' desire they feel for women" (p. 122). For a variety of women who possess diverse sexual identities, their sex work produces contempt for men as they deal with daily doses of insults and sexually oppressive behavior from male clients.

Barton's interview data is rich with compelling stories; however, she stops short of painting a complete picture of the diverse environments in which her respondents work, including an examination of the additional participants in the work environment, such as bartenders, managers, deejays, and bouncers (see Price 2008 and Lewis 2006). This is especially clear in her final chapter, which

introduces San Francisco's *Lusty Lady Theatre*, the first and only peep show to successfully unionize in the nation. Barton spends less time in this club than in the other workplaces she studied, thus presenting an ethnographic description that feels more like an after-thought than a thorough analysis of the unique setting and workers at the *Lusty Lady*. Her interview data is emphasized over her personal observations, which weakens sections like her description of the *Lusty Lady* and leaves the reader wanting more.

Although the final chapter would benefit from further development, *Stripped* is a great addition to a variety of Women's Studies and Sociology courses, particularly courses and subjects on gender, sexuality, work, and deviance. Barton's book is accessible to diverse groups of students and is an engaging read, ideal for a course syllabus. It is especially useful to professors who want to complicate popular assumptions about sex work and offer honest examples of the lives of exotic dancers.

### (Endnotes)

<sup>1</sup> A Möbius strip is a continuous one-sided strip formed by twisting a rectangular band and joining the ends. It is possible to walk the length of the band and traverse both sides without crossing an edge.

### References

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