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A Stripped Classroom: Exotic Dancers, Sexuality, University Teaching, and Community Engagement

Carrie Jo Coaplen-Anderson, Morehead State University

... This essay shares stories and valorizes concepts related to sexualized
... identities, highlighting details and reflections about exotic dancing
... and Bernadette Barton's *Stripped*. Further, the essay contends that
... potentially powerful and profound pedagogy exists in exploring these
✱ identities, and that explorations leading to developed awareness of
... sexually stigmatized individuals and groups may encourage student
... writers to become more engaged in supporting related community
... engagement.

Even though a decade has passed since I last danced nude center stage for dozens of strange men, and their dollar tips, I would do it again. If I thought that I could earn five hundred dollars this Saturday night, dancing at Déjà Vu, I would dance. I would wear black, vinyl short-shorts, a tight, white tank top, and cabernet lipstick. I would spray Clinique *Happy* perfume on my hair and skin. I loved the rush, the power, and the energy of performing and being adored, center stage on Saturday night, with Nine Inch Nails blasting and a wad of twenties wrapped around my wrist on an elastic garter band. Whatever the audience's motivations, or the customers' twisted proclivities, I transformed their attention into a positive thing, as pure an affirmation of my unique persona and looks as I could muster: accentuated hips and smallish breasts, easy smile, dynamic attitude, athleticism (I could climb a pole, flip upside down, and remove my top hanging there), and even my ability to talk to and bond with strangers. I manipulated them to buy private dances for their own good, their fun in the club, and my



rent money. *Thanks for donating to my grocery-wardrobe-education fund. We had a great time together, didn't we?*

Writing the above paragraph felt good; confessing and sharing it with an imagined audience. I would like to share more details about my stripping days—more often—but don't feel at liberty to do so. As Morehead State University sociologist Bernadette Barton explains in *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers*, “Because stripping is such a socially stigmatized employment, the average performer has few opportunities to share her stories—not in the classroom, not with researchers, not with friends, and especially not with parents and partners” (xi). Of course, we all decide which personal details to share based on a complicated set of social, professional, cultural, or other factors, and the fact that I instinctively place my stripping experiences alongside seemingly mundane disclosures explains much about my views on stripping. Who cares? And why? Stripping was a job that I worked while in my twenties. We all have them. I understand that my dancing history is not usually appropriate to disclose, yet enjoy talking about the years that I spent working as a dancer, readily offering details when the subject arises, welcoming any and all questions. I tend to openly share life details anyway, being naturally candid, but also want to talk about stripping because my tenure as a dancer lasted eight years. My persona became infused with “Tempest,” my stage identity. I *am* an ex-stripper and always will be regardless of how many decades come between my last lap dance and me.

Using *Stripped* as this essay's key text, I respond to stories, interview segments, and Barton's views, adding my perspectives and experiences, even as I contradict her conclusions, many of which I relate to and agree with. I also join with other academic professionals who have investigated sexualized identities to discuss the unusual and/or useful manifestations of Tempest in the university classroom: flattery, flirting, and disrobing. Engaging with Barton's work as well as confessing Tempest's teaching strategies in the composition classroom, implicitly



argue that creating and offering strippers and other sex workers (and anyone with underrepresented or stigmatized experiences related to a sexualized sense of self) opportunities to share their stories and act on their concerns will provide opportunities for community engagement that can lead to social action.

Considering community engagement and social action in this way, through awareness of stories about and by marginalized individuals and groups, I recall a concept expressed in a life-writing seminar taught by Min Zhan Lu. The course texts shared underrepresented views and stories including Linda Hogan's *Dwellings* and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's ethnography, *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*. Hogan meditates about the lost place of the natural world, and Tsing investigates the Meratus Dayak while writing about gender issues and power relations. I paraphrase Lu here, but when a student in that seminar asked about how reading texts like these could create social action, Lu commented that we might then assign one of the texts in our courses, and so on. Her response implies that a chain of interaction can be created through academic communities, and that reading and awareness constitute and lead to social actions.

Further, I want students to leave my classroom with a developed understanding of the often marginalized, ergo silenced, unknown, and complicated nature of sexualized identities. I want them to feel less afraid of discussing and valorizing anyone who might have suffered from circumstances caused by marginalization, especially within their digital, religious, athletic, social, cultural, and family communities: Facebook, Campus ministries, their university women's soccer team, role playing club, arts center, and immediate family. More, I want writing students especially to create opportunities for sexualized others' stories and concerns to be expressed, shared, and acted on. An ideal project would, for example, require students to visit strip clubs and interview sex workers to learn about what kinds of projects these community members would most want to pursue toward enacting positive change.



Additionally, and perhaps obviously, implicit is my contention that experiential narratives, shared and shaped personal experiences, become rightfully valorized through their authority. In “Redefining the Literate Self: The Politics of Critical Affirmation” Lu expresses thoughts that support my view:

All experiences which do not fit directly and neatly within simplistic notions of race, sex, class, and gender identity are then dismissed as private, non-political, and therefore, irrelevant. Such critical attention disembodies the personal by privileging theory over lived experience, the “social” over the “private,” “politics” over “pleasure” (175).

In my experience, the categories Lu lists here—private, personal, experience—have traditionally been seen by academia as unofficial, nontraditional, and even wrong. This essay challenges these views.

I hope, as you read my responses to Barton’s text, and as you become aware of *Stripped*, that a chain of community engagement will occur, as will an affirmation of shaped personal experiences being understood as reflective research. For example, I view Bernadette Barton’s project as nothing short of profoundly miraculous. Who in academia has ever (openly) cared so much about strippers, or so thoughtfully? Yet, I find myself yearning to contradict details or conclusions about the pleasures of stripping, and a sexualized identity by adding my memories and experiences to her findings. I do both throughout this essay, and ideally want students to create opportunities for members of marginalized sexual identity communities to do the same, whether through direct social actions, community projects, word of mouth testimonies, or even through an expanded awareness that might be shared casually in conversations.



I. Being Heard, Five-Dollar “Bills,” and Male Attention

“Hegemony is virtually watertight [in the United States] but not quite. There is leakage most often caused by those who have been traditionally excluded from the bounties of the dominant hegemony.”

Victor Villanueva

According to Barton’s research, including extensive and numerous interviews with and observations of exotic dancers, current or ex-strippers like me express a desire to be heard. One dancer relayed a story about a troubled co-worker:

Here I am in the fucking Cinema, in a bad wig, in a stall with no door, next to a woman who’s saying ‘I hate my life’ and puking. And no one can hear us. No one is even listening. And nobody gave a goddamn...No one ever listened to her. No one ever heard her. She never got any fuckin’ help. She bought five dollars worth of gasoline, sat in the back of a pickup truck, and lit a fucking match to herself and went up in flames and died (108).

This story, especially its vituperative nature, tragic outcome, and indirect call to action, points to the possibility that strippers could benefit from opportunities to share their experiences, to be “heard.” This passage also highlights that, unlike me, most strippers do not or did not experience their work as positive, or as I often expressed to customers “Are you kidding? I love my job. I get paid to dance and flirt all night.” Not that Tempest didn’t encounter the occasional dickhead customer, bitchy dancer, or jerk off manager, but generally I feel good about my stripping years. Barton summarizes, “There are, of course, exceptions, but overall and over time the toll of sex work is high” (42). For the rare ex-dancer who remembers stripping fondly, as well as those who might describe themselves as recovering from grabby men, customer rejection, poor body image, alcoholism, sexual dysfunction, or shame, the opportunity to compose and share and also act on their experiences and concerns would support community



engagement founded in awareness. Some of us enjoyed our work but, understandably, don't often express that attitude. "Morgan" perfectly and colorfully assesses this conundrum: "It's okay to say, 'I used to be a stripper, but I got out of it.' It's not okay to say, 'I was a stripper for several years. I fucking loved it. I had a blast and I still miss it today' " (*Stripped* 79).

I got a kick out of lap dancing for a former Presbyterian elder from my childhood church. He reacted with as much shock at seeing me as I did him. One customer mooned about my knowledge of Latin, and without fail, referenced the couch I danced for him on as a "chariot." An 80 year-old regular, "Bill," who visited me in the club once or twice a month, spent 200 dollars each visit. I had his home phone number, and would call him with my schedule. On Valentine's Day one year, I asked if, rather than a dozen roses, he would put that money toward a pair of Lowa hiking boots. He delivered a dozen red carnations, each holding a five-dollar "Bill." Despite sound bites like these that could be interpreted as superficially fond memories, I remember ugly details like not exactly relishing lap dancing for an 80 year-old man. I do not mean to flatten my experiences.

More significantly—more than chariots, five dollar bills, or 150 dollars tips on Derby Eve—I almost always enjoyed the work for the work itself. The money, of course, comprised a large percentage of that equation. Having been raised by a strong, outgoing, witty, flirtatious 5'8", D-cupped, green-eyed woman, one who placed a prime on enjoying life at the micro-level (smell of jonquils, homemade butter cookies, heavy snow fall), I understand life's sometimes overlooked charms and have loved to dance since I could remember Elton John's "Crocodile Rock," and Helen Reddy's "I am Woman Hear Me Roar" at around age 5. Our home was celebratory. Music was part of that. My unusual experience of understanding how to talk with customers, and more specifically, how to talk them into spending money on dances, came from an inherited ability to not only enjoy life in most



circumstances, but also feel comfortable and confident with anyone. I am 5'3" tall. My hair is curly-frizzy. Freckles cover my face and arms, but at age twenty-two when I began stripping, my curves, eye contact, strength, brains, open spirit, and easy smile constituted a kind of Super Stripper. I was made for the work and it was made for me. Other less positive experiences, like my parent's divorce and my father's eventual abandonment when I was twelve years old, must also have contributed to my acumen with garnering male attention. This characteristic need of unhealthy male approval would have been present whether or not I became a stripper. I concede that dancing may have given me an outlet for that need as well as a kind of revenge against my father.

II. Lesbians, Stereotypes, Stigma, and Sex

"As long as young females are socialized to see themselves as incapable of choosing those situations of erotic engagement which would be most constructive for their lives, they will always be more vulnerable to victimization. This does not mean that they will not make mistakes..."

-bell hooks

Sharing stories and histories like mine, writing that provides insights about an often stigmatized and at least misunderstood sexual identity, can ideally lead to community acceptance of strippers' thoughts, feelings, and concerns about their work, especially if, as is true of a number of women Barton interviewed, a dancer also identifies as lesbian or bisexual. "When questioned, my subjects had varying reactions to discussing sexual identity. Some said baldly that most dancers are queer...several suggested that the sex industry turns women into lesbians" (112). Based on her research, Barton also claims that " 'mainstream society' stereotypes [female] 'turn' me into a lesbian. Very few of the dancers I worked with openly identified themselves as bisexual or lesbian, but the few women who alluded to either lesbian or bisexual orientations more often presented themselves as bisexual experimenters. My coworkers, of course, may have chosen not to share



their sexual orientation with me because I spent the largest percentage of my shift hustling dances on the floor, rather than in the dressing room smoking cigarettes and dishing, nor did I disclose my bisexual identity, a disclosure that may have facilitated open discussion between us about sexual orientation.

Whatever the case, I find Barton's use of the word "stereotypes" in the passage referred to above troubling (even as she seems to refer to those outside the industry who hold narrow minded views of strippers), in reference to strippers being *labeled* lesbians, for the generally negative connotations associated with stereotypes. I feel especially troubled because Barton is an out lesbian. When I hear this kind of expression, when students for example salaciously report or question sexual identity, my response is "So what?" The possibility that lesbian strippers, through sharing their stories and working with students on opportunities to do so, might express truths about their sexual identity related to their exotic dancer identity could serve doubly. Such work could provide positive experiences for dancers, and students working with dancers, as well as create nascent community attitudes and actions, especially because stigmatization, unfortunately but admittedly, surrounds both strippers and lesbians.

The problematic stigma surrounding lesbian strippers, and strippers generally, also exists because, as Barton aptly summarizes:

Even if [a stripper] has danced for a short time, the shadow of the strip bar obscures the rest of her life. We do not see her as a student, an activist, a daughter, a mother, a gardener, a *Star Trek* fan, or a master carpenter. Because she works as a stripper, she is a stripper twenty-four hours a day. This means that she, above all else, is an easy lay (88).

I applaud Barton's understanding of strippers as complex; unfortunately, her research leads to this easy generalization: "[Being a stripper] means that she, above all else, is an easy lay." I assume that Barton means to



identify a general stigma rather than to express a personal belief. Still to the extent that it recalls the double standards related to gender and sexual activities that have troubled me almost as soon as I became sexually active, it too seems problematic.

Regardless of negative experiences and circumstances that *periodically* lead to a woman's becoming more sexually active than her peers, some women enjoy sex for the sake of sex. Additionally, the phrase "is an easy lay" implies that someone else is doing the laying, which further implies that a woman who more easily engages in sexual activity is being done to rather than equally or even more aggressively seeking to do to. Barton later adds that, "Most stereotypes of dancers in mainstream society characterize them as sexually promiscuous" (99). She further elaborates that, "This would not be so terrible if our culture did not classify women who have sex for money as worthless, dirty, and stupid" (99). Because a meaningful and upsetting aspect of the stripper stigma as Barton comes to understand it includes the "easy lay" notion, I find myself passionately joining the din of voices who express disgust at the double standard applied to women about sex, especially because, as a stripper, I felt more comfortable than many women with my hyper-sexualized sense of self. More, I join these voices as a woman who had become more sexually active than her peers by the time I began stripping at twenty-two years old. Strippers, as well as women who enjoy and engage in sex more often than their peers, are wrongly labeled "easy lays." Technically, I understand that both strippers and highly sexually active women may be viewed as promiscuous and, if so, I view this adjective's negative connotations to be as equally inappropriate as I do the associated phrase "easy lay."

I trust that the following observation need not be expressed, but I articulate it here to be clear: Some of the dancers I worked with presented themselves as engaging in less sexual activity than I did. And again I ask "So What?" Commenting about stripping and sexual authority, one of Barton's informants responded with a line of



thought that relates to mine. “I thought [exotic dancing] was really empowering; I’m using my sexuality and getting paid what I’m worth” (27). This attitude characterizes one side of the “sex wars” that is often epitomized in feminist conversations about sex work. Barton summarizes these sides as “[conceptualizing] sex workers either as victims of patriarchy and perpetrators of sexism or as transgressive feminine warriors battling sexism through their resistance to ‘respectable womanhood’ ” (32).

A decade removed from the work, I still maintain that the latter seemed to have been truer than the former for most of the women I worked with. Further, the ideal response to sex workers *of any type* mirrors dancers’ often-warm attitudes toward one another. As did I, Barton found that “meeting other dancers and making friends with them was an unexpected reward of stripping,” a reward which led to the additional comment that, “Treating one another with dignity, affection, and respect is a feminist response to the toll of stripping and provides the foundation for a deeper critique of social inequality” (139). Writing and sharing my experiences, perceptions, and analysis of the sexualized nature of the work will ideally lead to community engagement, an engagement that shares less stereotyped and stigmatized dichotomous understandings about strippers and lesbians, and anyone with a marginalized sexual identity, and that also inspires students to create similar opportunities. I want these opportunities to involve collaborative efforts with local strippers, sex workers, or campus LGBTQ groups toward celebrating their experiences, challenging policies, or other social actions that might improve both their quality of living as well as larger community perceptions of these often marginalized individuals and groups. Further, all aspects of stripping, sex work, or sexual orientation may not seem worthy of celebration per se. In sharing and exposing our varied perceptions, memories, and attitudes about these sexualized identities, however, communities might learn best how to engage with, support, and serve us toward equality, inclusion, and informed social change.



III. Hot for teacher

“Some people who manage to write their way out of the working class describe the classroom as an oasis of possibility.”

Mike Rose

The identity described above, the woman who easily became Tempest, who easily flirted and performed sexual dancing nude or half naked for money, informs my practice as a professor of writing. I am one among many college and university instructors and professors who claim similar sexually or erotically charged classroom influences. In “Erotic student/faculty relationships,” for example, bell hooks asserts that “Passionate pedagogy in any setting is likely to spark erotic energy,” and that “erotic energy can be used in constructive ways both in individual relationships and in the classroom setting.” Using erotic gestures, I flatter, flirt, laugh, and move around a classroom using the logistics of working a strip club floor as much as I do the logistics of working an individual. “Working” here refers to concepts like teaching, engaging with, and facilitating guided learning. “Tempest,” for example, intuitively uses a simple social theory that I perfected in the club: Pay the customer an honest compliment, even one as shallow as “That’s a great shirt.”

As obvious as such a move may seem customers often appreciated *any* personal affirmation. Who doesn’t? I do not mean to directly compare students’ needs with those of strip club customers, but do point to persuasive behaviors that have become an application of seductive code switching. I find reasons to compliment students’ thoughts or stances, even as I disagree with them. My disagreements might even offer an element of seduction: “Thank you for speaking up, but I don’t know about that. Have you considered...?” Specifically, my interest in suggesting a new line of thought or leading the student elsewhere becomes an intimate event occurring between us. James McNinch claims that, “...good teaching, defined, in part, as effective teaching that positively influences learning, is seldom possible unless there is



an element of seduction in it” (“Queering”). Though he also makes the compelling claim that “it is teachers who are seduced by their students, not the other way around, as Hollywood would have us believe,” a claim I do not wish to unpack here, he adds that “Good teaching may also be defined as ethical teaching which celebrates differences by exploring them” (“Queering”). This claim is easy to agree with, even coupled with complicated sexualized classroom practices. Both claims contribute to the various and valuable erotic foundations upon which many classroom communities are built.

More superficially, embodying aspects of *Tempest*, I may also comment on a new haircut or sharp outfit. I want students to know that I notice them as individuals, not only as students. I also joke with them or laugh at their jokes. (In doing so, perhaps students *do* seduce me, as McNinch suggests. Either possibility—my seduction or theirs—activates erotic energy). I flirt, sort of. If a student asks a question, I may walk to her desk, responding as if we were the only people in the room. I move around as if the classroom is a stage, keeping students guessing about where I might land next, even as I maintain strong eye contact with one or several of them. I use my physically embodied self, aware of the power that strategic movements can achieve, simultaneously building confidence and safety among a developing community that trusts one another and me. Power, persuasion, and playfulness: *All the better to teach you with*. My performance is gendered, admittedly so.

In *The Lipstick Proviso* Karen Lehrman expresses an understanding of a gendered performance, specifically a sexualized feminine one. Embedded in a section about “sexy clothing,” bucking the patriarchy, and feminine stereotypes, she contends that:

What this analysis completely misses is the sense of power women derive from wearing sexual clothing. They strut when they put on clingy dresses, sheer black stockings and heels. And they strut not just because they’re fulfilling stereotypes. They strut because sexuality is a form of power, a strength, an asset...” (94).



Strippers know this. So do their customers. And so do students. I often take the classroom stage wanting students to feel my confidence and become aware of the purposeful and authoritative embodiment that wearing pumps and a black pencil skirt evoke. This display of authority is also an invitation to see me as a woman empowered by femininity.

Additionally, if I'm unsure about a definition or concept, I admit that uncertainty, *exposing* myself, disrobing the typical professorial identity clothed in omniscience and ultimate authority. I want students to understand that I am a person, imagine that I like them (even if I don't), while I manipulate and judge their writing: We are endeavoring toward developing understandings of the world, and our separate worlds, through language.

Ideally, the exchanges described in the paragraphs above contribute to the construction of a classroom that feels safe and communal, one that offers experiences and assignments that engage the personal even while they require critical research and rhetorical engagement. Because I require much, personally, from my students (researched personal narratives, in-class writing journals, individual presentations about their fields, reflective comments about scholarship), I want to discuss the connections between my personal experiences, teaching, and writing, including how exotic dancing comes into the classroom and my research. Hell, I would like to begin such a class by stating the following on the first moment of the first day: "I spent the better part of eight years dancing topless and nude at a strip club."

Such an approach may not prove as fruitful as it might be saved for a more pedagogically productive exercise. I might ask students, for instance, to write a description of "professor," a description of "student," and the same for a stripper, drag queen, homosexual, prostitute, and lesbian. In small groups, students could share their writings then create new descriptions that coupled either "student" or "professor" with any of the other identities. These descriptions would be reported out to class, and discussed toward processing the veracity



and usefulness of stereotypes as well as the multi-dimensional nature of sexuality and identity, including identity's role in writing. Such work would respond to Maria Gonzalez' thoughts on students' lack of maturity in discussing sexuality in the classroom:

I think that their emotionally immature responses result from the lack of adult dialogue about sexuality among students. This ability to openly and maturely discuss sexuality certainly has profound implications beyond students' abilities to learn about the diversity of their world. Problems of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases as well as those of sexual violence must be exacerbated as a result of this avoidance of discussion. ("Overcoming").

Along with the possibility that a more sexually open and engaged classroom might lead to new awareness and perceptions about HIV, sexually transmitted diseases, and sexual violence, asking students to consider critical perspectives about their identities aligns with a concept summarized in *Literacy: Reading The Word and the World*.

Freire would have students look at their individual histories and cultures and compare those histories and ways of being with what they are led to believe is their place in the world, making the contradiction between their world views and the official world views explicit. This is the dialectic between the subjective and objective, the stuff known from within and the stuff from external forces (Macedo 54).

Transparency about my stripping past and sexuality, practice, and scholarship seems especially appropriate considering the complicated nature of the "subjective" and "objective" as referenced in the preceding passage.

Ergo, along with related writing exercises like the one described above, as well as the fruitful possibilities that can result from the explicit exploration of seemingly contrasting identities, I would like



to challenge students to critically reflect about sexualized others in literature, life writing, and scholarship: Dorothy Allison's *Bastard Out of Carolina*, bell hooks' "Passionate Pedagogy; erotic student/faculty relationships," Julie Lindquist's *A Place to Stand: Politics and Persuasion in a Working Class Bar*, Lily Burana's *Strip City: A Stripper's Farewell Journey Across America*, and Paul Monette's *Becoming a Man: Half a Life Story*. Each piece listed shares the story of a person exploring, coping with, and/or valorizing a marginalized identity: lesbian, erotic professor, female bartender cum academic, stripper, and homosexual male.

Ideally, community engagement that inspires students to learn more about lesbians, strippers, and other people with stigmatized sexual identities would occur as a result of the work described in the above paragraphs. I want students to leave my classroom and a course that explores the sexually stigmatized questioning and analyzing their own sexualized personas, including becoming aware of the privileges and social norms that they take for granted. In doing so, further critical thinking could lead students to create collaborative community projects such as erotic LGBTQ poetry readings, or petitioning city officials to change unfair exotic dancing ordinances.

I am proud of my Tempest years and have written essays, poems, and scholarship that connect with stripping. I felt powerful when I saw those pieces in print, or read that work out loud to a crowd that included friends, family, university peers, professors, acquaintances, and strangers. To know that a group of people chose to buy my stripper chapbook, or listened to a symposium presentation about stripping and my university identity, transformed my sense of self. I have come to appreciate the many ways that Tempest positively influenced my life after Déjà Vu, including subsequent reflections about troubling moments that I survived and still cringe about.



Ideally, my writing here will continue to do more of the same and in doing so, invite students, professors, instructors, and others in our community, as well as those on the fringes, to introduce *Tempest*, and others like me, to more students, colleagues, and friends. Ideally, my work in the classroom will lead students to connect with sexually othered communities. If so, our university community can participate in a kind of engagement invested in robust identity awareness and social responses, including supporting our pursuit to share stories, and act on our concerns, even as we strive to fully understand them. As Barton points out, “Dancers have only recently begun to publicly share their personal narratives; thus, their stories are still new to themselves and to the culture. It is logical that the writers of such a young genre would still be processing their own experiences” (131). Composition’s contemporary foundations are founded in writing and discovery. Victor Villanueva addresses this aspect of writing in *Bootstraps*, contending that, “Change is possible, I believe. Language used consciously, a matter of rhetoric, is a principal means—perhaps *the* means—by which change can begin to take place. The rhetorical includes writing, a means of learning, of discovery ...” (Italics in the original, 121).

Finally, if the following general conclusion seems idealistic, it is nonetheless sincere. The more that we can learn about each other, especially connected to our unique identities, separate and at the same time inherently tied to our academic selves, the better our comprehension and application of that knowledge. The possible recipients who might benefit from those applications include students and colleagues who often seek to be understood for who they are alongside our necessary judgments of their work in our worlds.



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