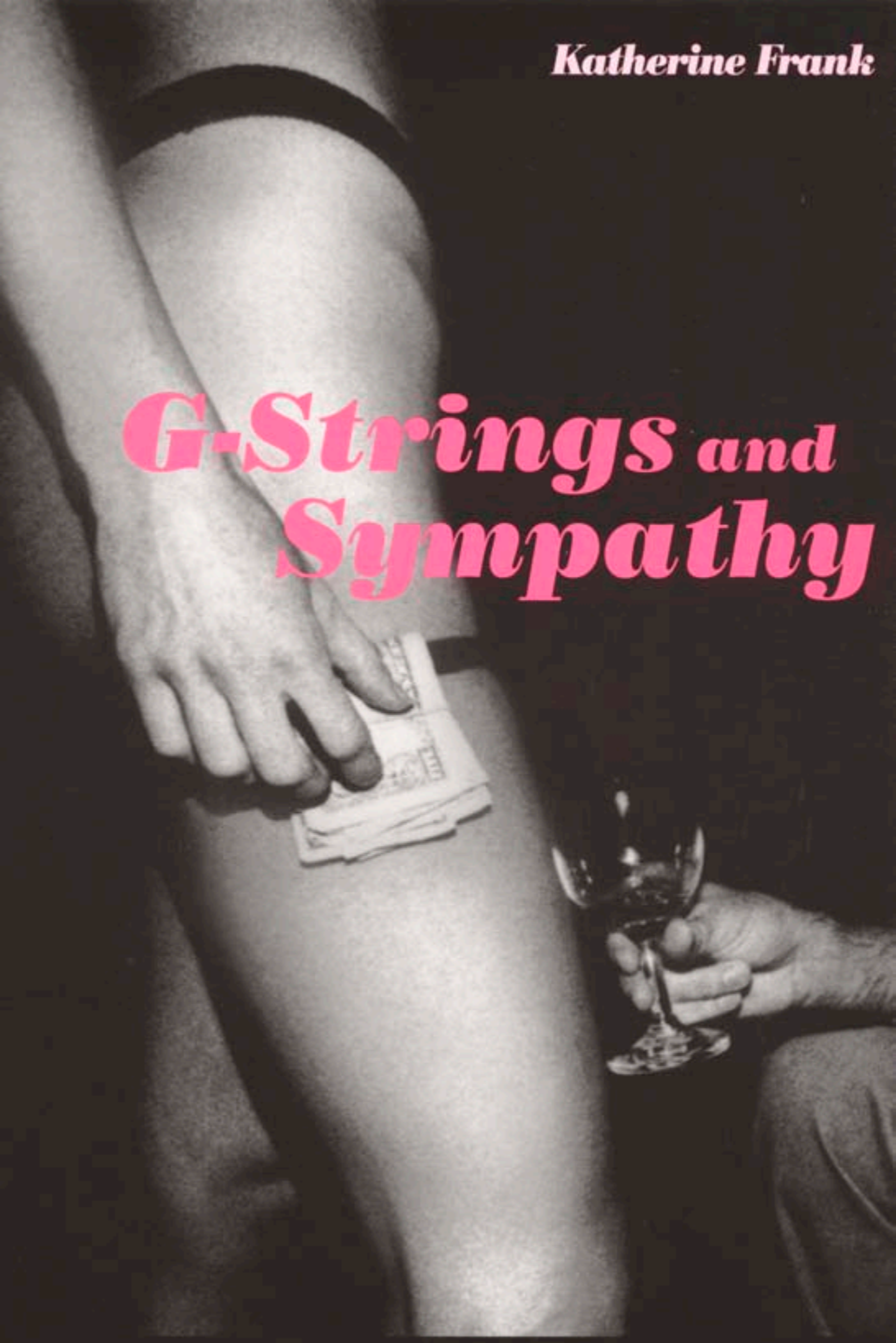
Katherine Frank



G-Strings and Sympathy

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In memory of

my grandfather,

John Murawski

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Preface

Skin Brings Men

Hi, sexy, you starting tonight? Got your permit from the police station? Good. Kind of like a mug shot, huh? Let me see those fingertips—yeah, you can start work even before the ink dries. Well, I'm your DJ. I do all the training of new girls here—I've been around a lot longer than any of these managers and I know what makes us money in this business. What's your name gonna be? Okay. We haven't had a Kate in a while. Well, here's how it works here at Tina's Revue, Kate, here's the spiel I give all the new dancers here. I know you're coming to us from Diamond Dolls, but I always like to start everyone off on the same foot. Have a seat on my stool there, or you're gonna be standing in those high-heeled shoes just a little longer than is comfortable for you. Don't worry, I'll have you out on the floor while the money's still here.

Your shift is eight hours. That's a long time. You've got to pace yourself, darling. Change your outfits, take a break when you need to. Have some dinner—it's okay to eat. But don't drink too much—they're gonna give you a breathalyzer when you get off work, and if you're drunk, you're not driving.

I take 10 percent of your money, sweetheart: 10 percent. I'm just like you, okay? I make a living from gratuities. Before you leave here each night, you're gonna tip me 10 percent, tip your floormen a couple of bucks each, tip your bartenders if you've been drinking, tip your housemom who's taking care of things backstage. You can't forget your housemom. She's gonna do your scheduling, get you some mascara if you forget your own, give you tampons if you suddenly need them. We all get tipped out. That's how it is. You got to realize that we're all leeches in this business. I'm sorry, but we're leeching off y'all.

You can write down the music you like on this little card but I can't

guarantee you that I'll be able to play it. I've got lots of people that I'm working for—management, dancers, customers. The girls right now all want to dance to Nine Inch Nails, they all want techno. Well, these customers don't want techno—they don't know it. They're from another generation. They don't get piercings, they don't get tattoos, they don't buy techno. I'll do my best to make you happy but that's all I can do. I've only got about twenty girls a night—that's a quarter of the girls that they've got at Diamond Dolls—but I still can't make everyone happy.

Now here's some tips on how to work. First, you've got to do your stage sets. It's very important that you come to stage for me when I call you. On every third song, the last song of the set for the girls who are up, I'll say "up next will be Carrie and Jessie." And then I've got a minute and a half, two minutes before the third song is over with and I need you up there. After the song, I'll call you again. You've got to be ready. So if you're one of those girls who needs to pee before you get on stage, then go pee when I say it the first time. Don't wait until there's a minute and a half left when you know it takes you three minutes to pee. Because it's a show, sweetheart. There's no excuse for you to miss your stage and I need you to be up there within twenty seconds of me firing your first song. If you're doing a table dance, you put on your dress a few seconds early. Wear practical clothes, okay? That cocktail dress looks fine. You don't need buttons and zippers that waste everyone's time.

In this business you got good girls, you got bad girls, you got girls in between. You've got drug users in this business. You've got alcoholics, okay? Just like anywhere. You've also got lawyers and schoolteachers. You've got girls like you that are gonna be professors or doctors in a year. You've got girls that are gonna be nurses. You've got girls that are going to college and gonna be something. You've got girls who are bitter, who hate dancing. You've got little girls like Serenity, young girls that are sweethearts. Supporting her mother, basically trying to just have a good time right now and, you know, no hassles, no real bills, okay. I can handle just making a hundred and fifty dollars a day. Hell, I really don't have to work. I'm hanging out in air conditioning in a bathing suit. You know?

As for the job, if you've ever wanted to be a flirt and a tease, then this is your chance. If you already are a flirt and a tease, then shift it into high

gear, sweetheart. Let's make some money, okay? If you're not a flirt and a tease and you think you've always wanted to be an actress, then *act* like a flirt and a tease. Okay? So the thing is, you're a party girl. It may not sound like a good thing, but you can make a whole lot of money out of it. So if you can think "happy happy joy joy, let's party and have some fun," and if you can handle taking your clothes off in front of guys and knowing that you're in a good clean place and nobody's gonna touch you or do anything rude, you're set. You're golden. Nobody's allowed to touch you. Even if there's instances where you might want to let him do something, it's against the law and WE don't let you do anything except maybe give him a peck on the cheek to say thanks, and that's with all your clothes on.

You've got to have a good attitude. You can't be moaning and groaning and saying "I need money" because then customers will think you're popping 'em. You've gotta know that these guys come here to have fun and if you can make it fun for them then they don't mind leaving broke.

Okay, here's the rules and then the ropes. Always take tips in your garter—never your mouth, never your knees, your tits, or anything else. No bending over, no kneeling down. Your feet can touch the stage and that's it, you got it? Don't ever take off your shoes. I don't care how much your dogs hurt. The Health Department'll shut us down in the blink of an eye.

Look, eye contact is important. Smile when you're on stage! You've got to try to talk to these guys, look them in the eye. If you've got a guy who's sitting there, sort of walk up to the end of the stage, look at him, smile . . . Use your facial expressions. Tease the guy, okay? And then he's gonna give you some money. Go up and say "Hi, how you doing?" What's so hard about that? That's what this is all about. Some guys'll give you ones on stage, some will give you fives or better. But if a girl is smart, she'll treat the dollar guy the same way she treats the five-dollar guy when she's on stage. Okay? You give no one special treatment when you're on stage. When you get off stage, that's when you can go over to that big tipper, you know, now you can give special treatment.

Say it's a slow night, and no one's tipping. Remember this: Skin brings men. So, say you don't feel like you've got enough money to take any clothes off the first song. Girl, I can live with that. But baby, if you're

smart, when you're on the second song you'll pop your top or drop your drawers, whichever you're most comfortable with. I suggest popping your top even if you don't have large breasts, okay? Just to get the clothing off . . . Because by the time I fire that third song, you still have your top and bottoms on, they're gonna go, well, she's not gonna get naked during this set. Why do I want to tip that bitch? And it's over for you. You may as well just hang out. You may as well just walk the hell off the stage. I mean, I'm not gonna let you leave the stage—the show must go on, so to speak. So even if you don't feel like you've got enough money by the middle of your second song, take something off anyway. Skin brings men. And there's a good chance by the third song, somewhere along that line, they will give you enough money so that you will get naked. I mean sometimes, you've got to go for broke.

Now look, when you get off the stage, you go to the floor, to go talk to these guys . . . You're trying to sell table dances, okay? Ten dollars a pop when they ask you for one. Private table dances—that's where you make your real money. They pay you directly, but if they run out of money they can waddle up to the bar and get funny money on their credit cards. Don't forget about that—you turn it in at the end of the night when you pay your taxes and it's the same as cash. So when you get off the stage, put on your clothes and go talk to these guys and say thank you for the tips, even the dollars. Use your voice, learn how to talk sexy. Lean over, maybe kiss them right by their ear, and use a low voice, say, "Well, I really appreciate that tip. If you'd like a table dance, all you have to do is ask." Okay? You set it up so that if he wants a table dance, all he's gotta do is ask. And you're asking without asking him, because in Laurelton it's illegal for you to ask directly for a table dance. It's considered solicitation.

As you're walking through the room, okay, you've gotta watch these guys. Watch his body language. You can tell if he's watching you and if he's interested in you. Look, like I said, eye contact's important. A guy smiles, he's a potential tipper, okay? If you want, you can sit down and talk to a guy. Remember, there's nothing more interesting in this world for men than to talk about ourselves. Okay? Ask him his name! Remember his name when he tells it to you! Ask these guys: What do you do for a living? What are your hobbies? You know, do you race trucks? Do you like speedboats? Do you ski? You know, what do you like to do? So you start trying to get personal on him. Now these guys are gonna ask you a

lot of questions about yourself, and you be real careful. Just ask them right back.

Couple more things, darling, are you comfortable on that stool? Okay. We're almost done. Now you can hang out with a guy two or three songs if you want to, but if after two or three songs he hasn't asked for a table dance, you now say, "Hey, I've got to make a living, I'm going to go see if I can find a table dance with someone, you know, but do you mind if I come back in a minute?" If he likes you, he'll ask you for a dance so that you'll stay.

Part of table dancing is planning ahead. You've gotta be looking around the room. Guys are gonna sneak a peek at your table dance so if you're watching, that's gonna be a clue to you . . . they're a potential table dance, too. And if you can, while you're turning around, you've got your backside to your customer at your table dance and you're arching your back for this guy and maybe you're winking at that other guy across the room! He says, oh wow . . . And you finish with your table dance and hang out with Guy #1 another minute or two and then, you say, "I'm gonna go see if that guy wants a table dance over there" and that guy's gonna buy a table dance from you too. They know you're out there making money, they see that other guys want you. And they'll start competing with each other.

If he's a big spender, we've got the VIP room. The way VIP rooms work, it's twenty dollars to the house right off the bat. Not like Diamond Dolls, it's a lot more money to do the VIP thing there. I think they charge up to five hundred an hour to go in those rooms, don't they? I thought so. Well, a lot of these girls think they're gonna make big bucks just by going in there. Let me tell you something. A new guy, not the regulars, but the new guy gets in the VIP room and thinks he's gonna get a blow job or that he's going in there to get laid. Or at least to touch, feel, whatever. And you've gotta make it clear to him that that's not the case. And if they try to do something in there, then doggone it, baby, I want you to step out of the room and let one of us know. That's not gonna make any of us money. But you can charge double for your dances and you can get a lot of money from him up front if you play it clean.

You need to get regulars, you probably know that. That's what keeps you going here. I mean, you got a girl like Carmen, over there on stage, okay, and she's not that beautiful but she's got six customers that she has

trained. Okay? And she gets three of those guys every other week coming in. Regular as clockwork. She schedules them. And the three days she works, okay, she makes a quick two hundred from each of those guys every day she works. She knows how to do this work. You get Ashley—she's got this same fellow, day after day, poking around in here looking for her. Okay? And that's what you've got to do.

My job is to get them tapping their foot and forgetting time, okay? Your job is to help me make them forget time. So what we've got to do here is we've both got to make this guy forget. Forget everything. The man's changed but in his mind's eye, he can go back in time. I'm looking out at the audience all day or all night. My job is to look out in the audience and get an average age in my brain. Okay? Like, look at this guy over here, right now, he's fifty-five years old at least, okay? Look at this guy over there, we've got a twenty-two-year-old over there at Sheena's stage. We've got four forty-year-olds over here, not talking to any girls yet, and a couple thirty-five-year-olds over here near the pool table. Now I'm just guessing, so I can be off by three years here and there, but you know, I think my average age in this room is about forty-five or younger. Okay? You know what I should be doing, as a good disc jockey? I should say, okay, my average age is forty-five or younger, that means when these guys were seventeen to twenty, that was twenty-five years ago. Okay? So I should be playing music from when these guys were young and sowing their wild oats and drinking booze and smoking pot and getting wild. And all of a sudden while you're dancing on stage and they're having that extra beer or a shot that we talked them into doing, you become that girl that they remember back in the seventies, okay? And suddenly instead of these guys coming in here for lunch or happy hour and leaving in forty-five minutes to an hour they stay here for an hour and a half, almost two hours, and then they got to leave because they're fucking broke.

When I got a hot crowd going, I know some things to say to get them laughing, okay? "Don't get your shorts so hot, it's like your crotch pot cooking. Say hello to the chef." Or "If you're a Republican, it's called trickle down economics. If you're a Democrat, it's called having a damn good time! If you're an Independent, then for crying out loud, act independently wealthy!" You know? Little shit like that. "Guys, you'd slap your momma's cousin's uncle a week past Thursday just to get

close to that lady! And all you've got to do is just walk up to that stage!" You know? And you'll have men laughing and they're chuckling and they're having a good time and that's what it's all about. Let's get drunk! Shots, yeah! And you know, when they get drinking I can do toasts. Look, "Here's to women in high-heeled shoes; they'll smoke your dope, they'll drink your booze. They lost their cherries a long time ago, but they'll say with a grin that that's no sin. They've still got the box their cherries came in!"

I say to the customers, "You are the king of your dreams. You're the king here at Tina's, gentlemen, now find the queen of your dreams." Okay? And that's just it. It doesn't have to be a really beautiful girl. Some guys, a beautiful woman intimidates them. They don't want to go to Diamond Dolls. They don't want model types. But a chubby little plain girl that's still willing to take her clothes off, that's . . . that's the queen of their dreams. I say, "Every man has his vision of the perfect lady and we've got them all here. Tall, small, short or fat, blondes, red heads, and brunettes. Who's your perfect lady?" You know?

Look sweetheart, I've told you you're a party girl. You've gotta realize this and what comes along with it. You're gonna have guys say "Oh baby, I'd like to eat that pussy." You're gonna have guys say "I'd like to fuck you." You're gonna have guys tell you what you're doing for a living, you're nothing but a whore. Look, honey, these guys don't know what they're talking about. Some of them, it's just their hormones running crazy on them, or the liquor, or whatever. Okay? It's gotta be water on a duck's back. You've gotta be secure enough about yourself to know that what they're saying is just bullshit. It's a job, it's a business. We sell the *idea* of sex. We do not sell the act of sex. We sell a sexual fantasy without actually copulating. We've caught guys in here jacking off sometimes and we throw 'em out! And then, there's guys that are straight out looking for sex, you know? Asking all the girls. And those guys you've just got to blow off, kick 'em out, send 'em elsewhere. There's plenty of other places to go.

Like I said, most customers, they're looking for a fantasy girl and they're looking for someone to fall in love with, but not be in love with, how's that? They're looking for someone to lust after.

Looking for that fantasy girl.

Yeah, sweetheart. This business can eat you alive or you can eat it

alive. And if you eat it alive you're gonna make money and you're gonna use your head and you're gonna do all right. But if you let this business get to you, it's gonna buck you out.

All right, Katie, girl. Are you ready to start working? You ready to dance?[1]

✻

When I began stripping in 1996, as both a means of earning extra cash for graduate school and as part of a feminist theory project investigating female objectification and body image, I had no idea how fascinating the world of adult entertainment would become to me. Quickly, however, my questions began multiplying: What did it take to be successful in this business? What was I actually selling to the customers, as I was providing no direct sexual release and no actual bodily contact? Who were these men who were so willing to open their wallets to the dancers night after night, paying us double or triple or quadruple the amount of money that we would make at our day jobs, to receive only a seemingly intangible, ephemeral service in return? What were the customers hoping to see, to discover, to buy in our young bodies, our attentions, and our complex financial, sexual, and emotional transactions in these dark, smoky rooms? This book, after dancing for over six years in more than six strip clubs, is my attempt to begin answering these questions and others that arose over the course of my research on the industry and my experiences as a dancer.

This ethnography specifically explores the personal and cultural fantasies underlying visits to strip clubs for certain groups of regular heterosexual male customers in the United States and, to a different degree and in a different manner, those of the women who dance in them. My primary argument is that the customers' understandings of their visits to strip clubs are deeply intertwined with cultural discourses about masculinity, sexuality, and consumption, but also that their visits become meaningful in relation to their everyday lives and relationships and their own personal and emotional experiences of gender and sexuality. Despite popular beliefs to the contrary, strippers[2] are generally not selling sex to their customers—although they are indeed selling sexualized and gendered services. Rather than fulfilling a biological need for sexual release or a masculine need for domination, strip clubs provide a kind of intermediate space (not work and not home, although

related to both) in which men can experience their bodies and identities in particular pleasurable ways. The sources and forms of this pleasure, as well as how the meanings of visits to strip clubs are intertwined with material inequalities and constraints, focus my investigation. Further, strip clubs, as part of the sex industry more broadly defined, are not necessarily antithetical to marriage, as some social theorists and community members would like to think, but neither are they unrelated to it. In fact, visits to the clubs are related to particular ways of *practicing* marriage (and heterosexual relationships more generally) that make this a desirable venue for some men.

Commercial sexual services and activities have long been a part of the entertainment and leisure industries in the United States. Given the continuing emphasis on leisure, entertainment, and pleasure in the American[3] economy, it is not surprising that the sex industry has grown and diversified even more rapidly throughout the second half of the twentieth century. In 1996 Americans spent "more than $8 billion on hard-core videos, peep shows, live sex acts, adult cable programming, sexual devices, computer porn, and sex magazines" (Schlosser 1997: 44).[4] In terms of strip clubs primarily catering to heterosexual men, the changes have also been dramatic. According to market researchers, the number of major strip clubs nearly doubled between 1987 and 1992, and an estimate for late 1998 puts the number of clubs at around three thousand (Hanna 1998b), with annual revenues ranging from $500,000 to more than $5 million (Schlosser 1997). In major cities, convention business and high-end gentlemen's clubs have become symbiotic. Strip clubs and exotic dancers have become a consistent presence in popular culture in recent years, both glamorized and stigmatized. Books about stripping written for popular audiences abound, such as *Strip City* by Lily Burana, *Ivy League Stripper* by Heidi Mattson, and *The King of Clubs* by Jay Bildstein, and movies set around women in the industry—*Show Girls, Striptease,* and *Exotica*—have been shown in mainstream theaters. On television, HBO recently ran a series called *The G-String Divas,* chronicling the lives of several exotic dancers, and another of their popular productions, *The Sopranos,* features a strip club as a hangout for several of the gangster characters. The number of scantily clad, suggestively dancing women in a recent string of R&B and hip-hop music videos has reporters wondering about "stripper mystique" (Jones 2001). Strippers are also recurrent guests on daytime television talk shows,

often being subjected to repeated appeals to get out of the business and clean up their lives. Media attention to the *customers* of strip clubs, however, is far less pervasive.

A strip club represents a different, perhaps even self-consciously aberrant social space for the customers, especially when it is contrasted with other spheres such as home and work. Compared with prostitution, however, strip clubs certainly fall on the more acceptable side of sexual behavior due to their legality. Part of the allure of strip clubs for their patrons lies in part in their very representation as somewhere out of the ordinary, somewhere proscribed—yet a *safe* space of play and fantasy where the pressures, expectations, and responsibilities of work and home can be left behind. Strip clubs thus provide a type of service that is distinct from other sectors of the sex industry. If a man is looking for quick sex, for example, there are usually many other arenas in which this desire can be met and he would be very unlikely to get it by going to a strip club. Similarly, if he wants a more private sexual experience he might visit a massage parlor, call a phone sex line, or rent a pornographic movie, depending on the level of interaction he desires. Moreover, he might have different desires on different occasions and thus avail himself of multiple services.

One important aspect of the contemporary strip clubs that I studied, then, is the fact that sexual release on the premises is generally not part of the experience. Although there are certainly exceptions, strip clubs in the United States generally privilege *looking* over touching or enacting sexual scenarios.[5] In many cities regulations prohibit any contact between the dancers and the customers. In such cases management is usually motivated to enforce these prohibitions inside the clubs, and if not, the dancers often do so. There are adult entertainment clubs in the United States that offer lap dancing (or "friction" dancing), a practice that involves varying amounts of contact between the dancer and the patron and can lead to sexual release for the customer, who may even wear a condom underneath his clothes. However, I consider this a different kind of entertainment because of this overt possibility of sexual release and did not select for my ethnographic sites clubs that offer this service. Table dancing, on the other hand, was one of the services offered at the clubs I investigated. Table dances were offered to the customers at their seats, either on a raised platform or table or while standing on the ground between the man's knees. These "private"

dances involve a more individualized interaction between the dancers and their customers, but although a dancer could disrobe completely and place her hands on the customers' shoulders, other forms of bodily contact were prohibited and she was required to keep at least one foot of distance between herself and the customer. Customers were not allowed to touch either the dancers or their own genitals. I was interested specifically in the customers who returned again and again to such a venue where contact and sexual release were prohibited, for whom voyeurism and conversation were the eroticized practices. The significance of this distinction is one to which I return throughout the text.

Despite the fact that some American customers do avail themselves of other services that involve sexual contact (illegally or legally inside strip clubs or lap dancing clubs, with prostitutes, or in other venues such as massage parlors), there is a significant population of heterosexual American males who are willing to spend their money on such a public, *voyeuristic* (although interactive) *fantasy.* Certainly, the desire to simply look without touching cannot be considered only American, as similar formats can be found in other countries as well. The particularity of the American male customer who explicitly does not want direct sexual release, however, is something that must be explored in more depth.

Another important aspect of contemporary American strip clubs is the public nature of the encounters involved. Semiotician Terry Prewitt terms modern exotic dance "porno-active performance" and distinguishes it from pornography in several ways: viewers are visible to both other customers and to the dancers, may become participants in the action in various ways, and may engage in a dialogue with the performers (1989: 140). As the dancers circulate among the customers to sell table dances, the individualized interactions that take place become an extremely important part of the experience. Although table dances are private in the sense that the dancer's gaze and attentions are focused on the man who has commissioned her for the dance, they are still public in that the man and his reactions remain visible to all. Dancers may also sit with customers between their sets and their table dances, and thus conversation becomes a (public) service in and of itself. The significance of the different kinds of visibility and intimacy involved in these transactions is also discussed throughout the text.

Strip clubs do not cater only to heterosexual males, of course. Nu-

merous clubs around the country feature male exotic dancers and cater to a female clientele, a homosexual male clientele, or both. Lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women may also visit clubs featuring female dancers. These populations and practices are significant and cannot be ignored when contemplating the changes that have occurred in the realm of adult entertainment in recent years. In this project, however, my focus remains on men who repeatedly visit strip clubs featuring female dancers, as this particular gendered pattern remains the most prominent in scale and scope and allows me to draw on my own experiences working as an exotic dancer.

Not all American men, of course, enjoy visiting strip clubs. Some may dislike them entirely, preferring another form of adult entertainment or preferring their own fantasy life to the options presented in the marketplace. Some visit only occasionally, such as for a bachelor party or other special event, or only during a particular period of their life. Some enjoy going to the clubs but do not because their wife or partner does not approve. Some men visit only with business associates; others visit only alone. Still others are "regulars," men who frequent a club or a number of clubs daily, weekly, or monthly and find these visits particularly satisfying for a variety of reasons. The focus in this text is on those male customers who visit the clubs *often enough to consider this a significant personal practice.* For these customers, visits to strip clubs are part of a meaningful and desirable repertoire of sexual and / or leisure practices, and are a form of consumption that is integrated with their other activities, pursuits, and relationships. These are not men who just happen to wander in off the street wondering what a strip club looks like inside or who accompany their friends or business acquaintances on a special excursion to the neighborhood "tittie bar." Men who do not find their desires represented here are urged to consider the *meaning* of visits to strip clubs in their own lives; this book may not be about them. However, though my focus is primarily limited to this particular group of customers, the themes taken up in this text—masculinity, sexuality, power, pleasure, erotics, authenticity, and commodification—are relevant to much broader debates about subjectivity, intimate relationships, and modern consumer practice.

This ethnography is also concerned with the differences among clubs in terms of "classiness." With the fairly recent advent of gentlemen's clubs, many of which trace their genealogy to the famous Rick's

Cabaret in Houston or Scores in New York City (Bildstein 1996), has come a highly stratified arrangement of strip clubs in terms of luxury, status, and other distinguishing features. Whereas strip clubs were once primarily located in red-light areas of towns and cities associated with crime and prostitution, the upscale clubs are now often quite visible and work to develop reputations for safety, comfort, and classiness. Drawing on cultural markers of status such as the provision of luxury liquors, fine dining, valet parking, and private conference rooms, upscale clubs advertise themselves as places for businessmen to entertain clients or for middle-class professionals to visit after work. Inflated drink prices and cover charges, along with strict dress codes, provide the management with some control over customer demographics. The dancers may be advertised as refined, well-educated women and referred to as entertainers rather than strippers. Sophisticated sound and lighting equipment, multiple video screens, and multimillion-dollar construction budgets help to make the glitzy environment of many contemporary strip clubs into high-tech entertainment centers. This is not to say that smaller or "seedier" clubs have disappeared, however, as they most certainly have not. The clubs in any given area, however, are categorized through their relationships to one another, and this system of relationships helps inform both the leisure experiences of the customers and the work experiences of the dancers.

The proliferation and upscaling of strip clubs during the 1980s needs to be situated in late capitalist consumer culture as well as within a variety of social changes and developments. A commonly noted feature of late capitalism is that more and more forms of entertainment become preoccupied with the commodification of spectacle and experience; certainly, the proliferation of strip clubs can be offered as an example of the profitability of this strategy. The changes in the format of entertainment venues featuring exotic dance, discussed in more detail in the pages that follow, have also followed a pattern of increasing individualization of services and interactions. In many ways it makes sense that strip clubs should have multiplied so wildly in the United States during the past several decades, along with the panic about AIDS and fears about the dissolution of "the family." The process of upscaling in strip clubs, with its promise of "clean" and respectable interactions, could alleviate certain fears about contamination and disease that escalated around prostitution. The fact that sexual activity is not generally

expected or offered in strip clubs also fits well with a growing emphasis on monogamy and marriage for heterosexuals after the sexual experimentation (and ensuing disillusionment for many) of the 1970s. There are numerous other social changes that may be influencing this rapid increase in strip clubs in the United States as well: the increased presence of women in the workforce, a continued backlash against feminism and the idea of "political correctness," ongoing and concerted marketing efforts to sexualize and masculinize particular forms of consumption ("sports, beer, and women," for example), changing patterns of mobility that have influenced dating practices and the formation of intimate partnerships, and changes in the nature of work that involve more out-of-town travel for businessmen and thus more anonymous opportunities to purchase commodified sexualized services, to name just a few. To situate the clubs and their customers in such a context, I draw on the idea of the spread of "touristic practices" (Urry 1990) in postmodern consumer culture.

Despite the increase in numbers of clubs and the money being spent in them, however, strip clubs remain a stigmatized entertainment venue, especially for the women who work in them. Dancers may still face prejudice and discrimination when searching for other forms of employment, when interacting with the courts and other bureaucratic agencies, in looking for housing, and in everyday interactions. Leilani Rios, a student at California State University–Fullerton, was asked to either give up her job as an exotic dancer or resign from the school's track team after she was recognized by fellow student athletes while working. As Rios herself noted, the members of the men's baseball team who recognized her were not reprimanded by the college or the coaches for visiting the club (Keichline 2001). Though she was eventually allowed to rejoin the team, her case is yet another example of the stigma strippers regularly face. Over the years, I have heard stories about women working as exotic dancers who have been fired from their other jobs, disowned by their family, and ostracized in their educational institution.

Strip clubs themselves are also often the subject of intense public scrutiny, debate, and regulation and such contention has been part of the history of venues which offer a chance for the eroticized viewing of naked or semi-naked bodies. Efforts to distance strip clubs from their illicit associations in the public imaginary, to bill them as a legitimate

form of entertainment, have become increasingly important given the opposition that has arisen with regard to exotic dance in the United States in recent years. Local ordinances have been drafted in cities across the nation to harass, limit, or eradicate venues that feature exotic dance, often citing as justification "adverse secondary effects" such as increased crime and decreased property values in neighborhoods that house such venues. A recent U.S. Supreme Court case, Erie, PA, et al. v. Pap's A.M., et al., upheld the constitutional validity of such regulation despite the often ambiguous and contradictory evidence for these kinds of effects and the previous legal understanding of exotic dance as a form of expression protected by the First Amendment. On an even more conservative note, Justices Scalia and Thompson argued that municipalities had the right to regulate the conduct of their residents through restrictive legislation regardless of whether this impinged on free expression.

Most of the ordinances drafted by local communities, as well as the Justices' decisions in the above case and others, seem to be based on conjectures about just what the men (and women) are up to when they set foot in such a venue. There is endless speculation about drugs, prostitution, and crime—by customers, lawmakers, and people who have never even entered a strip club. Yet my experiences as both an ethnographer of American strip clubs and an exotic dancer did not confirm the worst of these fears. Although these activities surface at times in often scandalous ways, as they do in many industries, I came away from my research with a belief that most of the customers were *in search of* something completely different through their interactions. I also came away with a strong conviction that moralistic regulation about the sex industry is harmful in the long run: not only does it reinstate binary distinctions between good girls and whores, but it tends to penalize and stigmatize women who may be using their most profitable assets to improve their lives and increase their opportunities. That women can earn more money in the sex industry than in many other kinds of work, however, is certainly an issue worthy of much discussion, as are workplace policies and regulations that protect workers' interests in these venues.

Moralistic regulation also seems based on an idea that there is one authentic sexuality that can be legislated and policed: heterosexual, reproductive, serial monogamous (and preferably married) coupling. In fact, I argue that strip clubs remain desirable and become meaningful

for their regular customers, in part, *because of* these kinds of sexual policing, not in spite of it. This is not to say that strip clubs, along with other forms of adult entertainment, would disappear if they ceased to be stigmatized and embattled venues; rather, the *meanings* of the interactions and services would change, possibly along with the clientele and the employees. And although there certainly are problems with adult entertainment in the forms in which it exists today, many of which are discussed in this text, these problems are not *intrinsic* to the commodification of sexualized services but are instead related to larger patterns of social inequality.

So what exactly is the appeal of modern strip clubs, in this particular voyeuristic form, for certain groups of late twentieth-century heterosexually identified American men? In the chapters that follow I explore this question through fieldwork in five different strip clubs, located in a large Southern city, referred to as Laurelton in this text, and through a series of in-depth interviews with some of the regular male customers of those clubs. The book is divided into four parts, moving from discussions of seemingly macrosociological considerations—history, geography, social positionings, and cultural ideologies, for example—toward discussions of increasingly microsociological and psychological processes and concerns: identities, fantasies, desire, and intimacy. Throughout the book, however, I return to the idea that personal erotics are deeply intertwined with material social relations and public fantasies, challenging easy distinctions between macro and micro, public and private, personal and cultural, or fantasy and reality.

Part 1 of this book situates both this study and the strip clubs I am investigating in time and space. In Chapter 1, I discuss my methodology, my positionality, and my theoretical approaches. The second chapter establishes striptease as a continually evolving form of entertainment, with the focus on three historical developments that have been particularly influential in shaping the contemporary world of exotic dance: the evolution of public voyeurism as masculinized leisure activity, the intermixing of entertainers and their audiences to produce new types of personalized performances, and the process of upscaling, or of coding particular leisure forms as "respectable." There are certainly other historical developments that are important, such as changes in cultural views on nudity in legitimate performances, the way striptease becomes distinguished from other kinds of entertainment in the cultural

imaginary, and the rise of particular forms of technology that intensify modern scopophilia; however, these are the three that most directly inform this project. This chapter also provides a spatial analysis of the strip clubs in Laurelton, along with a closer look at the internal geographies of and popular mythologies about two specific clubs: the upper-tier Diamond Dolls and the lower-tier Tina's Revue.

Exploring the interconnections among masculinity, leisure, and privilege is the work of Part 2 of this book. The way customers discursively understand their visits to strip clubs is the focus of Chapter 3: the clubs are seen as providing a space of relaxation and escape different from work and home, a safe place for transgression and fantasy, and a place to pursue personal and sexual acceptance. These understandings are then linked to discourses of masculinity. Chapter 4 explores embodiment and desire and the way sexual excitement comes to be figured as an authenticating and liberating experience of personal freedom.

Each of the chapters in Part 3 takes up the concept of authenticity, though in different ways. Investigating the various beliefs and fantasies about gender, social class, and race that inform the men's choice of venue and their perceptions of and claims to *authentic* experience is one of the ways I explore the material aspects of erotic fantasy throughout this text. Chapter 5, for example, looks more closely at the way that claims to authentic experience are made by the customers, and Chapter 6 explores the way ideas about class, race, and gender influence the customers' perceptions of authenticity, especially as it is embodied and performed by the dancers.

Finally, the chapters in Part 4 examine authenticity and erotics in wider social and institutional contexts. Chapter 7 examines the relational aspect of the encounters and their place in the everyday life of a specific group of customers involved in long-term relationships outside of the clubs, particularly in relation to a triadic relationship that shapes the meaning of these encounters: that between the customer, the dancer(s), and the "other women" in the customer's life. Here, authenticity appears relative to the meanings that sex, monogamy, and commitment hold for the customers. Chapter 8, the concluding chapter, addresses attempts to discipline and regulate erotic behavior by state and local governments, as well as the need to contest the recent spate of restrictive zoning ordinances being developed around the country that intend to harass or eradicate strip clubs and other forms of adult entertainment.

In addition to the more traditional chapters, I have included several short stories that address the issues raised in the text from the perspective of a dancer. While in the field, I began writing and publishing ethnographic fiction that integrated my experiences, my data, and my theoretical concerns, some of which appeared in local trade magazines and some in more national or scholarly publications. My original impetus for writing these stories was to reflect on my emotions and experiences in the field, as well as to better understand my theoretical questions; the response to the pieces was quite strong and made me aware of the vast potential of different kinds of writing to challenge stereotypes and add complexity to debates about the meaning of the sex industry. It is my hope that readers will come away from this ethnography with a more complex understanding of the forces that shape the meanings of contemporary strip clubs for the customers, of what precisely makes them exciting and erotic entertainment venues for some men, as well as with a different kind of critical eye toward adult entertainment than that often employed by the mainstream media and by both the foes and supporters of modern strip clubs.

Part One

Chapter One

Observing the Observers: Methods and Themes

This ethnography investigates the motivations and experiences of the regular male customers of strip clubs to explore both the personal and cultural aspects of gender, sexuality, and desire. My decision to focus on the male customers of the clubs rather than the women who dance in them was motivated by both political and theoretical concerns. On hearing that I have conducted research in strip clubs, the most common question people ask me is, "Why do the *women* do it?" Indeed, this was my initial question as well. My original project—and many people who do fieldwork know that one rarely sticks with one's original project—was to focus only on exotic dancers. After all, nearly all of the literature that I could find on strip clubs, both academic and popular, deals with the mythologies that surround the dancers: What kind of "personality" does a woman need to have to become an exotic dancer? How many dancers have been sexually abused or use drugs or alcohol to "make the work bearable"? How did the women go on to have meaningful relationships after transgressing the taboo on mixing money and sexualized encounters and appearing nude in public?

As a student of feminist anthropology, I was interested in the links between power, gender, and sexuality and concerned about the "culture of objectification" that I believed influenced women's experiences in the United States. I was also committed to studying these things anthropologically, by immersing myself in the community that I was studying and by qualitatively exploring what was meaningful to the people there. During an exploratory phase of research I interviewed women who worked in the sex industry—prostitutes, strippers, pornographic actresses, and dominatrixes—and began working myself as a topless en-

tertainer in an upscale table dancing club. Though I had been an anti-pornography feminist many years earlier, while still an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, my experiences during this early research phase caused me to rethink many of my deeply held assumptions about sex work and the women who engage in it. As I took up an identity as a sex worker, I began to deconstruct my earlier questions: Didn't a focus on the personal problems of strippers derive from the assumption that no one would do sex work unless she were forced, or unless there was something psychologically wrong with her? Didn't my questions show evidence of a preexisting perception of sex work as damaging in and of itself, both to one's "self" and to one's relationships? Didn't these questions sidestep issues of politics and economics in favor of individualistic explanations of deviance and psychopathology? And didn't a focus on the social transgressions of the women—actually, laborers who are providing a service and earning money often unavailable to them in other spheres—normalize the desires that motivated their *customers,* the men who paid them hundreds of dollars each evening to disrobe on stage and to talk to them at their tables?

I began to realize that these basic assumptions about the nature of sex work and sex workers, along with the power differentials that often exist between researchers and their subjects in terms of gender, educational level, economic resources, and cultural capital, were influencing not only the questions that were asked, but also *who* was studied, in what manner, and how the findings were represented. This is not to deny that some dancers have been sexually abused, use drugs or alcohol, or have difficulty forming intimate relationships—just as many secretaries, lawyers, professors, nurses, and housewives do. Rather, it is to point out that the kinds of information sought by researchers and the questions that one asks are in and of themselves political and based on cultural assumptions. An assumption that I make in this text, then, is that the behavior of the male customers of strip clubs needs to be interrogated as a modern form of voyeuristic, gendered leisure practice, rather than unproblematically taken to be an expression of some natural male sexuality.

Though the popular stereotype of anthropologists remains that of studying "primitive tribes," anthropologists have long turned their eyes homeward as well (e.g., Powdermaker 1950; Myerhoff 1978; Moffat 1989; Sanday 1990). However, social scientists, anthropologists included,

have tended until relatively recently to "study down," that is, to investigate groups with less social power instead of more dominant groups. Sex workers rather than their customers, for example, have long been the object of inquiry in the social sciences: as individuals working in "deviant" occupations (e.g., Thompson and Harred 1992; McCaghy and Skipper 1969), as examples of deviant, exhibitionistic, or unstable personalities (e.g., Greenwald 1958; Skeen 1991), and, especially in the popular media, as "carriers" of the HIV virus or other sexually transmitted diseases around the world (see Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Alexander 1987). Dominant forms of sexuality, such as those of heterosexual, middle-class, white males, have only recently become the object of critical analysis (Tiefer 1995: 20), despite the fact that, once interrogated, their practices and beliefs are every bit as theoretically interesting as those of other groups.

Anthropologists and feminist researchers both have paid close attention to the power dynamics inherent in ethnographic research (e.g., Wolf 1992; Stacey 1988). Being a woman and a sex worker studying in my own country and community made the power dynamics inherent in this project quite a bit different from those of studying another culture altogether or from studying more marginalized individuals. As I was studying educated, middle-class men, I was often interviewing from an inferior position in terms of gender, age, and resources as well as from a socially stigmatized position, and this was something that many of the interviewees were aware of and commented on. Studying individuals within my own culture also means that my informants will be able not only to read my text, but to comment on it as well. In fact, several of the interviewees, as well as other sex workers, have already provided comments and criticisms on a previous article (Frank 1998), the chapters here, and the short stories that I have published about the sex industry.

Interestingly, my simultaneous positioning and identification as a sex worker has also led to situations in which I was approached as a research subject, both outside and inside of the clubs. At a pornography conference, for example, I was sitting with a group of sex workers when we were approached by a male psychologist who asked if he could interview us about drug and alcohol use, sexual abuse, and the "problems caused by sex work." Although I had the background and training to respond to him directly with critiques of his methodology (Was he also interviewing women in other occupations to see if they had any of these

same problems? Was he going to examine the complexities of the work, many of which had already been presented in sex worker panels at the conference, as well as in the literature?), I also came to feel the frustration that accompanies being targeted by voyeuristic researchers who are not willing to interrogate their own assumptions and ideological beliefs about the population they wish to study. In other situations I spoke with researchers and journalists who were approaching dancers in the clubs while we were working and who did not seem to have any awareness of the problems with this approach ("I'll tell him anything he wants to hear as long as he keeps paying me for my time") or the privileges and assumptions that had led them to seek out strippers as exotic others worthy of study. In working as a dancer while studying the identities and motivations of the male customers, I have attempted, in part, to problematize this assumed relationship between the proper "subjects" and "objects" of social analysis.

After experiencing the financial rewards available to many women working in adult entertainment, as well as the flexibility of schedule that fit so well with my other pursuits, I also came to understand stripping as a type of work—certainly, a type of work deeply intertwined with gendered and sexual positionings and power relations, but as work, nonetheless. As I developed my own core of regular customers at the first club in which I worked, they became extremely interesting to me theoretically: Who were these men willing to spend large sums of money for relatively intangible services, who sought encounters with women that were *sexualized* but uncoupled from direct sexual release, at least in any overt way,[1] who found strip clubs exciting and transgressive (despite the clubs' very controlled and regulated atmosphere)? I came away from this initial research convinced that it was essential to turn the academic gaze on the men who quite literally funded this form of entertainment, especially the men who made regular use of the clubs by visiting monthly, weekly, or even daily. The book, based on additional research in a number of different strip clubs, takes the men's involvement in commodified sexualized entertainment as the primary object of investigation, allowing me to take up questions about desire and fantasy in leisure and consumption practices as well as questions about gender, sexuality, and power.

In the next several sections, my methodology and positionality are