

Stripping, Sex, and Popular Culture

Dress, Body, Culture

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ISSN: 1360-466X

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Stripping, Sex, and Popular Culture

Catherine M. Roach



Oxford • New York

First published in 2007 by

Berg

Editorial offices:

1st Floor, Angel Court, 81 St Clements Street, Oxford, OX4 1AW, UK
175 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA

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Berg is the imprint of Oxford International Publishers Ltd.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Roach, Catherine M., 1965-

Stripping, sex, and popular culture / Catherine M. Roach.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN-13: 978-1-84520-128-9 (cloth)

ISBN-10: 1-84520-128-0 (cloth)

ISBN-13: 978-1-84520-129-6 (pbk.)

ISBN-10: 1-84520-129-9 (pbk.)

1. Sex—Social aspects—United States. 2. Sex in popular
culture—United States. 3. Striptease—United States. 4.
Stripteasers—United States—Biography. I. Title.

HQ18.U5R62 2007

306.77—dc22

2007030715

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 84520 128 9 (Cloth)

ISBN 978 1 84520 129 6 (Paper)

Typeset by Avocet Typeset, Chilton, Aylesbury, Bucks
Printed in the United Kingdom by Biddles Ltd, King's Lynn

www.bergpublishers.com

To KMM
and also to MAM,
in a lifetime of sisterhood

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Acknowledgements

I didn't know I had this book in me. It developed quite suddenly. The idea to write it came about as a result of my good fortune in three areas. First, although my university degrees are all in the academic study of religion and culture and although I have a cross-appointment in the Department of Religious Studies, as well as in Women's Studies, my main appointment at the University of Alabama is in New College. This program is an interdisciplinary one wherein undergraduate students – often purple-haired and multiple-pierced – design their own majors. Not only students but faculty members as well enjoy an unusual degree of freedom from their association with New College. As my senior colleague Ed Passerini has said on many occasions, part of the reward of New College is that it allows you, indeed challenges you, “to play in many puddles.” My interdisciplinary appointment grants me the latitude to pursue research topics somewhat outside the main and certainly outside the disciplinary boundaries of religious studies. Through the process of writing this book, I've come to understand more and more what Ed means and to appreciate this freedom. I thank New College for its steadfast dedication to the art of interdisciplinary teaching and research. I thank the Directors of New College, Dave Klemmack and then Jim Hall, for both being a junior professor's dream-come-true of the supportive and encouraging boss. I thank Ed, Jerry Rosenberg, Bing Blewitt, and the other visionary founders of New College for creating this special place. And I thank the students, too numerous to mention here, from several years' worth of New College seminars who helped me to think through this book's ideas and who so graciously volunteered to assist me on any field trips necessary for the research. The students of “Gender, Sexuality, and Society” in Fall 2006 were particularly astute peer reviewers of the book manuscript in its final draft.

My second piece of good fortune lies in my ongoing membership in the Interpretive and Interdisciplinary Research Group of the University of Alabama. This group of faculty from across the university gathers weekly to read and critique each other's works in progress. With members from history, American studies, women's studies, French, anthropology, social work, communications, education, psychology, law, film, and more, it is by far the most intellectually stimulating and collegial group I've encountered anywhere in academia. Several of my colleagues from this group do qualitative research using methodologies such as in-

depth interview techniques. Reading their work and learning from it led me to develop my own qualitative interview-based research project, a methodology I might never have adopted without having had this possibility opened up for me by their example. In particular here, I thank Jerry Rosiek, whose work first inspired me. Whether explicating John Dewey, breaking new ground in antiracist educational research, or dry smoking the hind quarter of a Mississippi deer, Jerry's exuberant leadership of our research group has helped keep many of us afloat in the treacherous waters of the tenure track. I also thank the group as a whole for their insightful critique of drafts of this book; I benefited enormously from their feedback and encouragement.

Finally, and most importantly, this book came about because of my friendship with Marie, whose story I tell in the Introduction. Without her, I could never have written this book. Indeed, I doubt it would ever have occurred to me to do so.

Also due my sincere thanks for aid, encouragement, and critical feedback on the project are Kelley Raab, Naomi Goldenberg, Ted Trost, Russ McCutcheon, Carol Pierman, Jennifer Purvis, Kurtis Schaeffer, Ann Pellegrini, Louise Bernikow, Carmen Taylor, Michael Conaway, Andy Valvur, Maryan McCarrey, and my family members Danielle Perron Roach, Michael Roach, Diane Roach, and Joseph Roach. I also thank the staff at Berg Publishing in Oxford, UK, who graciously shepherded this book to publication. Audience members at academic conferences and lectures spurred me in my thinking while I was trying out the book's ideas (at American Academy of Religion meetings in Atlanta and Toronto, in talks in Tuscaloosa, Ottawa, Vancouver, and Halifax), and I appreciate their engagement. I am grateful to the students who transcribed interview tapes for me: Adam Beach, Christina Corley, Tiffany Self, and Christine Scott. For financial support of the research and writing time that made this book possible, I appreciate the assistance of New College, Religious Studies, the College of Arts and Sciences, and the Research Advisory Council of The University of Alabama. For providing a most collegial setting during my final year of writing while I was on sabbatical leave, I thank Farhang Rajaei and the faculty of the College of the Humanities at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Finally, to all the people who agreed to be interviewed for this project and who gave so generously of their time, I am indebted and deeply thankful. Their stories are the warp threads on which I have woven this book.

Introduction: Marie/Foxy

One of my best friends is a stripper.

We met as five-year-old girls, growing up in the same middle-class leafy suburb of Ottawa, in Canada. It was a new residential development, full of kids riding bicycles and playing in the woods down by the Ottawa River. Marie's family lived on the street behind mine. The streets formed two interlocking crescents whose pattern meant that we passed each other's house all the time. Our families stayed put for twenty-five years – indeed, mine is still there – while we went to the same Catholic elementary school; the same junior high; and then on to high school together, in a building just across the playing fields from our old elementary school. I often went with her family to their cottage on a lake in the Gatineau Hills north of the city. Because my mother wouldn't let me have a cat or a dog, their Black Lab became my surrogate pet. We both went to the University of Ottawa for our undergraduate and master's degrees, while still living at home with our families. We often took the bus downtown to campus together where we met up with another neighborhood friend, Anita, for a weekly breakfast club.

Marie and I then came down to the United States at the same time to do our Ph.D.s, hers in English literature and medieval studies at a prestigious Midwestern university and mine in religious studies at Harvard. Marie used feminist theory in her research and teaching; she was, and remains now, a self-avowed feminist. After several years studying full-time, she switched to part-time status before leaving school completely for a while to work in administration at the Gender/Women's Studies Department of her university. She then decided to resume her program full-time in order to determine once and for all if she wanted to finish her degree. Knowing that she couldn't combine school work with her administrative job, she quit her position and, for income and out of curiosity, started dancing at the local strip club (there was only one in her small town), first on the day shift and then on the more lucrative night shift. She found that she enjoyed the job and that it let her manage her expenses, while still leaving plenty of time for library research and classes. At the end of the calendar year, she made the decision that she truly didn't want to be employed in academia. So, like many other people and for a variety of reasons, Marie left her Ph.D. program. But "Foxy" kept on dancing.

Meanwhile, I finished my degree and was hired at The University of Alabama as an assistant professor. My appointment was shared between the Department of

Religious Studies and New College, an interdisciplinary liberal arts program where students design their own majors and where I teach courses in ethics and in gender studies. When we both started our new jobs Marie said to me, “Working as a stripper makes me feel much better about myself than trying to do a Ph.D. ever did.” I think that even those of us who haven’t worked as exotic dancers but who have emerged, intact but frayed, from the Ph.D. process can sympathize with what she means. Little I’ve ever done, save raise two children, has been as emotionally taxing to my sense of self. When I mention my friend’s quote in academic circles, practically everyone nods his or her head.

I was at first a little shocked and quite concerned to learn that one of my best friends had become a stripper. What did it involve, I wanted to know? Why was she doing it? Was it a dangerous, seedy profession and one damaging to her self-esteem, as I initially assumed? Should I, as her friend, try to talk her out of it? Well, talk we did. We began to have long talks about stripping. And what I began to realize was that exotic dance raises all sorts of fascinating questions about gender, sexuality, sexism, feminism, consumerism, agency, power, empowerment, exploitation, and male-female relations in contemporary society. Moreover, I saw that this realm of exotic dance, at precisely the time when Marie entered the industry, was coincidentally making more and more incursions into the mainstream of popular culture. Accordingly, this book isn’t just about strippers. As I did the research, I realized that the book needed to address this impact of “striptease culture” on the wider popular culture. As a result, the book is about the complexities and ambivalences of sex-positive popular culture, particularly in regards to our cultural attitudes toward the sexuality of girls and women. Or to put it another way, more and more I realized that stripping wasn’t just about strippers, but was about Everywoman.

Exotic dancers are interesting because they illuminate Everywoman, as just a more curvaceously enhanced version of her. What the stripper does and the pressures she is under to look and act a certain way are the same pressures under which Everywoman operates, but in more exaggerated form. It is precisely this exaggeration that allows us to see more clearly the workings of gender. Just as Freud studied neurotics because their exaggerated psychological traits permitted him to see more easily how the mind works and thereby to develop a theory of human psychology, so too studying exotic dance allows us to see more clearly how gender works as a regulatory system that is transmitted, performed, and enforced by the culture. It is a system whereby we arrange and stratify society, act out and repress fantasy and desire, exercise and abuse power, exert and resist authority. Gender does all that and more, and exotic dance is the perfect Petri dish from which to study its workings. In the putatively sex-positive pop culture of the twenty-first century, amidst the gender upset over meanings of “masculinity” and “femininity,” and in all our glorious baroque confusion over male-female gender relations, the strip club and striptease culture have become key places of experimentation and

questioning in which we try to figure out what constitutes a liberated woman and an enlightened man. The chapters in the first part of this book are all devoted to an exploration of these issues by focusing on the life and work of the strippers themselves and of the stripping industry.

The book's second half then broadens the scope of inquiry to the wider popular culture and asks about the meaning and role of exotic dance in contemporary society. Chapter 5 investigates what the stripping industry reveals about the increasingly sexualized tenor of our times, wherein the stripper look has gone mainstream and exotic dance paradoxically both flourishes and is condemned. What does it mean that striptease culture is spreading like wildfire as everyone is now taking it off in the name of political protest, charity fund-raising, aerobic workout, personal empowerment, and good old-fashioned fun? Chapter 6 looks at efforts to organize dancers through unions and professional associations as the profession becomes ironically – and somewhat tragically – both more socially acceptable and more sexually hardcore (partly because of increased competition from the entry of additional young women into the industry). It examines the link to prostitution here and raises the larger question, “What makes sex ethical?” Finally, on this question of the broader social and cultural meaning of stripping, various comments by dancers and others lead me to explore in Chapter 7 whether religious scripts might provide some of this meaning. By “religious scripts,” I have in mind long-standing religious narratives, myths, or archetypes that have become embedded in our wider culture and that we use to assign meaning to behavior. I am thinking here of stories about the fallen good woman (Eve), or the wicked dancing temptress (Salome, with her Dance of the Seven Veils), or the magical female being who is sexually independent and life-giving (the Goddess). In particular, I look at the connection of sex work to a type of “goddess spirituality” that finds in women's sexuality and the naked female form a playful, powerful, creative, and healing force.

My talks with Marie thus eventually led me to the idea of writing this book about stripping and its current major impact on society based on interviews with the dancers themselves. I wanted a chance to explore the complexities and ambiguities of the profession and to try to figure out this new world in which Marie had involved herself and which was increasingly intersecting with the mainstream. My goal was to explore the culture's fascination with stripping while coming to grips with my own, with neither bias nor ridicule.

The following pages are the result.

* * * *

This book is based, in part, on in-depth interviews with women who are current or former exotic dancers in the United States and Canada. The interview research was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at the University of Alabama. I interview the dancers using an

open-ended questionnaire in order to elicit their stories of what they do, how they got into it, and what they think about their work. My friend Marie agreed to act as my principal informant and introduced me to many of the other dancers with whom I spoke. These women were generous with their time and quite willing to reflect on their work and its role in their lives and in society. In addition, I talk with other people identified as knowledgeable and willing informants, such as neo-burlesque performers; political organizers in the sex workers' rights movement; other sex workers such as prostitutes; strip club patrons; the boyfriends or husbands or lesbian partners of some of the dancers; and DJs and bouncers at the clubs. I interview a total of about forty people from the areas of West Palm Beach, Florida; Tuscaloosa and Birmingham, Alabama; Atlanta; San Francisco; Toronto; and Ottawa. Some of the interviews are formal, sit-down taped events of one to two hours duration, conducted in my office, at a restaurant, or interviewee's home, or by phone, and sometimes then repeated with the same person at a later date and followed up with email clarifications. Other interviews are briefer and more informal talks with people whom I meet through the clubs during the five years in which I conduct research for this book. In addition, many colleagues, friends, and even minor acquaintances also provide opinion, insight, and anecdotes whenever I mention my research topic and often end up functioning as informal interviewees themselves. The majority of people, it turns out, seem to have a stripper story to share.

To conduct these interviews, observe the dancers, and get a sense of the variety of venues within the stripping industry, I visit a total of eight clubs in the U.S. and Canada, and interview dancers from four other clubs. These clubs range from upscale urban establishments, to obscure suburban holes-in-the-wall, to lower-end local hang-outs. Each club operates in a different regulatory environment such that they vary from no-contact establishments to full-grind naked lap-dance clubs. In the book, I change the names of all of the dancers (except for Marie, who chose to use her name) and of Marie's club (Mr. Lucky's Lounge, in this book), in order to protect the confidentiality of the people whom I interview. Through the Capstone Poll (a unit of The University of Alabama that conducts survey research), I also obtain quantitative telephone survey data in 2002 from 484 representatively-chosen respondents on public perceptions about women who work as exotic dancers.

Part I

The Strip Club

Stripping: Demeaning and/or Empowering?

How I Got a Titty Rub, or My Introduction to the World of Stripping

I'm sitting in Mr. Lucky's Lounge in Florida. This is not a high-level "gentleman's club," but it's not a particularly seedy one either. Mr. Lucky's falls in the mid-range and attracts a mixed clientele of regulars, bachelor-party patrons, and tourists and businessmen. It's the end of March, and I'm spending my spring break touring the strip clubs of West Palm Beach and interviewing dancers. I'm in West Palm because this is where Marie now lives and works; it turns out that the area is a better market for dancing than was her small Midwestern college town. Marie is setting up interviews for me this week with a number of her fellow dancers. Various male colleagues at the university back in Tuscaloosa sent me off with good-natured jokes about volunteering to act as research assistants: "Bring back pictures of your trip!" they said, faking dirty-old-man snickers. When I told one of my senior colleagues how I was going to spend my spring break, he sputtered – laughing, charmed, a little shocked, jealous? – "And what would you say if I announced that?" My women colleagues have reacted differently. None has asked for photos. While apparently not interested in seeing naked women, they are interested in seeing into these women's lives. Some immediately focused on the "girl-power" theme of the project, of a woman claiming and using her sexuality for profit. Others are more skeptical. But all – including, to be fair, many of the men – see it as a legitimate women's-studies project that tells a story of contemporary women's lives and experience.

I'm aware that this project lets me get away with something that my male colleagues couldn't, and that's part of what amuses me about the book. My credentials as a feminist professor and a heterosexual woman (married, with two little boys) protect me from public charges of prurience and voyeurism to which they would be more vulnerable, unless my colleagues happened to be out gay males (which they're not). But I do wonder and worry as well: is this fair? Am I betraying feminist ideals by using that credential to legitimize the work of strippers? And am I deluding myself by denying my own vulnerability as a junior, non-tenured public university professor working on a controversial topic in a conservative and religious region of the country? When I started this project, the state's Southern

Baptist majority had just defeated a proposal to allow a lottery in Alabama; what would the good citizens of the state do if they knew that their tax dollars were helping to fund my research trip through West Palm strip clubs? These are the questions that occupied me on the plane out here, but right now, I'm just trying to sort out the gender and power dynamics of the club itself.

This is my first-ever strip club, if you don't count the establishment with male strippers that I went to years ago with a group of semi-inebriated bridesmaids on the eve of my sister-in-law's wedding to my brother (more on that later). Marie is dancing tonight, and I'm here with her boyfriend, Jeff, and Anita, another of our good friends from Canada who has joined me for this trip. Jeff is acting as our required male escort since women generally aren't allowed into most strip clubs unless accompanied by a man. Although this rule is surely illegal, many places claim that they must maintain the restriction for fear that unescorted women might be prostitutes who would pose competition for their dancers and threaten the legal status of the club. Other concerns are that such women might be lesbians whose presence could make the male patrons uncomfortable by changing the club's sexual dynamics, or even that they could be jealous wives hot on the trail of straying mates (indeed, a dancer will later tell me a story about an angry wife smashing a chair across the table where she found her husband on the receiving end of a lap dance).

Tonight is the first time that I watch Marie dance, and I'm a little nervous about being with her at work, as well as about the club itself. How will I feel about seeing her take off her clothes? How will she feel about having me watch? I've certainly seen her naked before. As life-long friends, we've been without clothes in each other's presence in any number of situations, but all of them non-sexual and more or less private, such as in the locker room at gym class or changing into bathing suits at her cottage. This is another matter entirely. I feel somewhat awkward and wonder whether my presence will discomfit her at all, although as she greets us inside the club, she seems happy to see us and very much at ease.

My first impressions of Mr. Lucky's are that it's loud, dark, and cold. The air-conditioning is up high – some say, I'm later told, to encourage nipple-puckering among the dancers. Rock music blares, controlled by the DJ in a raised and screened booth above the back corner of the stage. The lighting is low, with black lights in strategic use around the club so that many of the strippers, in their day-glow costumes, shine like beacons in a cave. Marie is in a mock-1960s flower-child outfit. Her top is a sheer peasant style with frilled cuffs and a low scoop neckline. It is patterned in large neon orange and green daisies that glow under the lights, and I'm a little surprised when I realize that I can see her breasts through it. She wears a bright orange thong and clear plastic platform shoes that lift her heels five inches off the ground. Around her upper thigh is a white garter. There are bills already folded over it.

Despite all that, Marie has a "girl-next-door" look. She's not drop-dead gorgeous with a tiny waist, huge breasts, and masses of blond hair, as in classic

stripper stereotypes. She's five foot seven and has shoulder-length brown hair and deep brown eyes. Her breasts are medium-sized and natural – unlike about half the dancers in the club whose bosoms are surgically enhanced – and she has a sturdy build, with strong shoulders and back. Her make-up is fairly light, just some glittery eye shadow and lipstick. She's pretty, with smooth white skin, even features, and a big, easy smile. As we settle at a table with her, a cocktail waitress comes over to take our drink order (hugely over-priced), and I gaze around.

For the most part, Mr. Lucky's looks like any other mid-range dance bar, except that the dance floor is a raised stage and that smiling semi-naked women are everywhere. The nudity is disconcerting, disorienting. I feel a little embarrassed and even threatened at first, although the place seems perfectly safe with its big bouncers and tame clients. The men aren't running around wild as I half expected in my lurid imaginings about the club and none has approached us or even made eye contact since we entered. (This remains true in all my site visits to the clubs.) I think it's simply the strangeness of the experience that is threatening, its violation of everyday norms and conventions. I've never seen such a display of female flesh, of naked beauty, of women charmingly, indiscriminately, offering their company to men.

In the dance clubs of my (admittedly limited, nerdy, much earlier on) experience, women were often warding men off, or they were at least discriminating in terms of those men to whom they paid attention. Men chased; women chose. Of course I know it's not always like that, that women can be sexually aggressive, but still, in a world where it's the men who hoot out the windows of passing cars, I am much more accustomed to women being wary and saying no. I guess I didn't realize that the dancers were going to be so *nice* to the guys, that they were selling female charm as much as dances. I hadn't thought it through that the women would appear so happy to be naked and accommodating toward the men in the club. It makes sense: guys are a lot less likely to buy dances from a stripper who is intimidating or cold or rude. Here, I could see that pretty much any man with money – no matter how homely or boring or obnoxious – was guaranteed the time and attention of a beautiful woman offering up to him the proximity of her naked young body and the fantasy of her desire, or at least her interest in him. I began to understand the appeal of the experience.

The club's main area consists of a stage and two large seating areas spreading back from the stage's front and right sides. The décor isn't as flashy as I might have expected: the walls are painted a dark blue and the seats are upholstered in a black fabric patterned in blue and purple. Most of these seats are chairs scattered around bar tables, but the wall at the back of the club is lined with a banquette separated by dividers into a series of small alcoves where the dancers perform lap dances. A long bar is situated at the front of the club, along with the "champagne rooms" that Marie shows me later. In these tiny private chambers, smoked-glass doors swing open into a space big enough for only a loveseat, a standing silver champagne

bucket, and a few square feet of dancing room. Frankly, these rooms strike me as a little sinister and seedy – just what goes on here? – although everything looks clean and in good condition.

Tonight – a rather slow Friday – there are around forty or fifty customers in the club. Except for Anita and me, they are all men. I am curious as to who they are and why they're at the club, but no one type predominates. They range in age from their twenties on up to one man who appears to be in his seventies and who is laughing at a table with a blonde dancer in a red bikini. The men are mainly white, although Hispanic customers are also common. While most are casually dressed, some are in blue-collar work clothes and others in collar-loosened suits. Dancers, or "girls" as they are universally called in the industry, are everywhere. Marie says that because it's still early, there's an overlap right now of the early-evening and late shift girls. About thirty dancers roam the club, sitting with men at the tables, doing individual lap dances, taking turns performing three-song sets on the main stage, or hanging out with each other when there is no money to be made.

Almost immediately after our drinks arrive, Marie's turn in the dance rotation comes up. "Next on stage is the very sexy Foxy," booms the DJ, using Marie's stage name. The previous dancer, Maxine, a tall and muscular black woman, puts her silver thong back on and gets ready to collect her tips. Although set-ups vary from club to club depending largely on the legal restrictions of the county, there are generally three ways for a dancer to earn her money: the private champagne or V.I.P. rooms (where something like two hundred dollars buys you a half hour alone with your choice of dancer for conversation and dance; she pockets one hundred and fifty dollars – not that she has a pocket), the table or lap dance (often twenty dollars a song), and the tip rail. At Mr. Lucky's, the tip rail is an actual brass rail that runs all the way around the bottom of the square stage, except for a small break at the back where steps lead down to the floor. This brass rail separates the dancer from the customers who sit five or six to a side at the narrow counter ringing all four sides of the stage, which measures about eight feet along each side. Sitting at the tip rail – also fondly called pervert row or gyno row, the dancers later inform me – allows patrons a close-up view of the women onstage. As each dancer finishes her set, she puts her G-string or thong back on and then steps down into the aisle between the stage and the tip rail to gather her tips, generally a one-dollar bill from each patron sitting at the rail.

"Sorry, I've got to go," says Marie, getting up and adjusting the line of her thong and décolletage. As she mounts the stage steps, the thought pops into my head, "Could I do this? Would I want to? What would it be like?" The prospect doesn't seem to entice me much. I think I don't have enough of the exhibitionist in me to make it appealing. I'm also feeling rather matronly these days and conscious that my breasts, after two years of nursing, just aren't as perky as they used to be. The music begins, a rap number that seems a rather challenging accompaniment to an erotic dance, but Marie swings right into it. She had explained to me earlier that