Danielle Egan.
Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love: The Relationships between Exotic Dancers and Their Regulars.
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In Danielle Egan's *Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love*, we learn that Egan – from a working class, Catholic background – wrestled for years with her moral judgment of stripping as a practice degrading to women. Only after witnessing a friend's entrée into the business did she shift her abolitionist standpoint to a place of curiosity about the complex operations of fantasy, desire, and power in an exotic dance club. Pushing her curiosity one step further, Egan herself took to the stage, dancing at a club called Flame long enough to afford her "a new level of interpretation, insight, and bodily experience" (xvii). Given the recent outpouring of scholarly fascination with the cultural phenomenon of striptease (see Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Frank, 2002; Lewis, 2006; Shteir, 2004; Bruckert, 2002; Ross and Greenwell, 2005; Ross, 2006), Egan's fear of damaged academic credibility seems unwarranted, though her first-person musings about dancing set her academic account apart. Indeed, her dissertation research (much of it published earlier in top-drawer journals) offers a compelling journey into the commercial subculture of nude and semi-nude dancing. A political objective that runs through 150 pages is Egan's commitment to destigmatize this facet of sex work. At the same time, she is highly conscious of neither wholly glorifying nor damning a business that is arguably more messy and complicated than that captured by the tired, worn-out binary of empowerment vs. victimization.

What makes Egan's feminist sociological inquiry unique is her explicit focus on the relationships established between female exotic dancers and their heterosexual male "regulars." Eschewing the dreadful, pathologizing sociology of "deviance" popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Egan strives to listen to the voices of both women – the producers, and men – the consumers, of exotic dance. Between 1996 and 2000, she conducted interviews and participant observation at two clubs, Flame and Glitters, in the New England area. Glitters is a small, "low-tier" downtown club that prohibits physical contact between dancers and customers, and caters to white working-class and some middle-class men. By contrast, Flame attracts largely middle- to upper-middle-class white men to its suburban location featuring lap-dancing, all-nude stage dancing, and a Champagne room. While dancers at both clubs paid a stage fee per shift, those employed at Glitters earned an average of $100 to $350 a shift, compared to the average of $250 to $600 at Flame.

In five substantive chapters, Egan deftly interweaves autobiographical, ethnographic, and theoretical frameworks to probe the intersections of gender, sexuality, class, and capitalism. Her theoretical tool-kit bulges with insights from Foucauldian analysts, feminist post-structuralists, and cultural geographers. Each chapter begins with a brief excursion into a theoretical literature followed by application of concepts to "talk" by narrators and Egan's own observations. In Chapter One, Egan describes the "social cartography" of the clubs as space constructed to enhance both men's unencumbered pleasure and their willingness to spend money. Here, she expertly navigates the dynamics of surveillance, especially the club owner's panoptic gaze (enabled by mounted cameras) which is fixed on protecting his investment, legally and economically. Inside the clubs, a fundamental gendered tension is rooted in patriarchal entitlement: male clients are at leisure in a "safe, special place," while female dancers are at work, performing erotic and emotional labour.

In Chapter Two, we learn about strategies dancers enact to juggle their “dancer selves” alongside their “other selves” as lovers, mothers, students, etc. Here, Egan also captures the struggles of regular customers to transform desire for a dancer from the realm of fantasy into a “lover modality.” When turned down by dancers who must feign authenticity to keep them spending, regulars (having showered dancers with expensive gifts) typically transfer their affections to another dancer or leave the club, frustrated, demoralized, and angry.

In Chapter Three, Egan rehearses the feminist “sex wars,” adapting the illuminating construct of liminality to depict how dancers “live the hyphen” between being exploited pawns of the patriarchal order and self-determining sexual agents, all the while defying the flatness of either category. Telling stories of “good nights” and (fewer) “bad nights,” dancers render the highs and lows of their craft in technicolor, though I found myself yearning for more knowledge of their travails with demeaning, sometimes violent club owners, pimps, and police.

Egan’s most conceptually sophisticated contribution lies in Chapters Four and Five. Drawing from the well of Lacanian and Deleuzian psychoanalysis, she brilliantly exposes how the longing of men as desiring subjects projected onto dancers as desired objects is premised on a hierarchical, non-reciprocal commodified exchange, and ultimately, an unobtainable fantasy. Yet rather than occupy the static stance of object – the “whorish wife” - dancers employ tactics of “covert mimesis” (p. 105) to manipulate and subvert regulars’ fantasies to their own (lucrative) ends. Keenly flexing new theories of affect, Egan shows regulars engaging in “emotional consumption” (p. 125) of exotic dance, fetishistically occluding both the dancer’s labour and the dancer herself. Bound up in narcissistic desire to be loved by dancers, masochistically hoping for the impossible, regulars are doomed to rejection. As Egan adroitly points out, if a dancer were to see a regular outside the club she would fail him as someone who makes demands and rejects his narcissistic desires. Insights such as these make Dancing for Dollars a refreshing, invigorating read. Still, I could not shake a niggling concern: by limiting her focus to (a small number of) regulars, Egan unwittingly paints a stock, caricatured portrait of these men as pathetic, lonely, paranoid, deluded, cheating, and unattractive stalkers – a new “type” to add to the medley of greasy mobsters, bikers, pimps, perverts, and alcoholics long assumed to exemplify “the customer.”

Admittedly, Egan is not selling readers a conventional ethnography. However, disappointingly, she does not tell us how many interviews she did, nor does she elaborate on who she did (and did not) interview, how long women were in the business, or what measures (if any) she adopted to solicit feedback from narrators. Early in the book Egan promises to compare and contrast two clubs, Flame and Glitters, but general statements throughout about (all) exotic dancers and (all) regulars hide the particularities of each locale. Informed by feminist critiques of positionality, Egan acknowledges the privilege she possessed to distance herself from dancing as a researcher, but she does not stretch her reflexivity to explore how her stint at Flame must have been greased by her approximation of the “ideal” stripper-body: white, able-bodied, pretty, young, thin, large-breasted, non-tattooed, and heterosexual. She does not reveal to what extent she was “out” to club “insiders” as a doctoral student and university instructor, nor does she reflect on whether this disclosure might have made a difference. Egan reveals that the only collective action engineered by dancers at Flame involved a successful fight for the right to dance to rebellious rap or hip-hop music. But did Egan consider initiating a union drive for improved working conditions in ways that other dancers have in a variety of national contexts (see Gall, 2006)? In several places, she posits the power of feminist theory to create safer work environments for erotic laborers, though the relationship between theory and the achievement of greater workplace security and safety is undeveloped.

Egan is clear that when discussing male regulars, her focus is on white, heteronormative masculinity. Absent is sustained interrogation of how dynamics of racialization work for non-white customers, as well as non-white dancers in the industry. Are dancers of colour perceived by club owners and managers as "less marketable?" Do they make less money, on average, than white dancers, or dancers that pass as white? Are dancers of colour increasingly likely to be migrant workers without citizenship in North America? Egan borrows from the theorizing of bell hooks and Patricia Hill Collins, but what might we learn about the multiply constituted subject positions of black dancers on and off the stage?

In the end, I am left wondering what the future holds for the skin trade. The recent mainstreaming of nudity is evident in the spate of fund-raising calendars marketed by near-naked skiers, environmentalists, and water polo players, as well as crotch- and nipple-flashing by celebrities such as Britney Spears and Janet Jackson. The role of "stripper" pops up regularly in Hollywood films (*Night at the Blue Iguana*, *Mrs. Henderson Presents*), on TV talk-shows and cable shows (*L-Word*), in autobiographies (*Strip City* by Lily Burana, *Bare* by Elisabeth Eaves), on dancers' websites, and during pole-dancing lessons at fitness centres and on the campus of the University of British Columbia. At the same time, with live nude shows available on the Internet, the revival of neo-burlesque in dance halls by never-naked "performance artists" for mixed-gender audiences, and the demise of strip clubs in cities across Canada and the U.S., the demand for "live nude girls" appears to be diminishing. In a culture already awash in representations and transgressions of nudity, will dancers dance for dollars at clubs, while regulars pay for love, in twenty years' time?

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