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Negotiating Myself

The Impact of Studying Female Exotic Dancers on a Feminist Researcher

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This article grows from research in the form of in-depth interviews with female exotic dancers but foregrounds the ways that the author's lived experiences were informed by the interviewees and other aspects of the project. While engaging and then complicating feminist theory and methodology, this article focuses on how the author was drawn into this research in various ways, including conversations, observations, and confrontations. Narratives outline the process of her disillusionment about her own safety as a woman. Overall, this piece challenges the notion of any one, fixed identity as the author negotiates meanings of herself related to objectification and privilege.

Keywords: *feminist methods; exotic dancers; objectification; identity; lived experiences; qualitative*

I follow Cory's directions and find myself in an unfamiliar part of town. But here it is, the Gentleman's Club, sign lit by neon, with ample parking hidden around the side. I drive in, already sensing that the air has shifted. This is unfamiliar territory, and it feels cold. I pull into a space that I determine is a good vantage point—not too close to the club's entrance but still providing me with a view of arriving vehicles. Cory and I are supposed to meet in the parking lot at 5:00 p.m. After straining for any sign of Cory's beat-up Nissan, I get settled in my car and recline my seat as far back as it goes in an attempt to avoid being observed by patrons walking past. I pop up periodically to look

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for Cory. Watching the light slowly fade from the sky, I hope that the passing time does not mean Cory is standing me up. I am desperate to get this research project done.

6:00 passes, then 7:00. My stomach begins to ache about the same time my head starts pounding. Darkness has fallen, and evidently Cory is a no-show. As I scan the parking lot a final time, I observe a group of three men approaching in high spirits, preoccupied with each other and their own alcohol-induced jocularity. As of yet, they have not seen me. My sense of dread builds as I shrink back in my seat, trying to make myself invisible.

Entering into this endeavor, my backpack was full of the familiar tools of any diligent researcher: a strong theoretical and methodological approach (feminist, later evolving into postmodern feminist), a qualitative research plan (in-depth interviews with female exotic dancers), a way to contact participants (snowball sampling), some goals and guiding questions (examining lived experiences in terms of the body, gender, violence), and a timeframe. My theoretic thinking began with the modern feminist suggestion that the sexual objectification of women becomes a large component of female identity as well as a facet of women's oppression (Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Chapkis, 1986; Griffin, 1981; Martin, 1992). Reducing a woman to the status of sex object creates a culture in which women consistently perceive themselves as devalued and lacking, and treating a woman as an object facilitates her dehumanization and fragmentation, that is, reducing the individual to her parts. Paradoxically, it is this sexually objectified view of female bodies that garners women the most attention (Bartky, 1990; Chapkis, 1986). This is certainly true in the strip joint.

Feminist methodology, too, seemed a good way to go. Feminist methodology emphasizes women's experiences as unique unto themselves, rather than subsuming them under a falsely universalized rubric. Part of the exclusion of women's lived experiences from traditional methods includes the lack of attention to the relationships between women's bodies and identities. Feminism has explicated this relationship; its salience makes it a vital part of investigating women's lived experiences. In addition to the focus on women's lived experiences and bodies, feminist methodology encourages reflexivity. As part of reflexivity, some argue that researchers should interrogate their own position, biases, privilege, and identity as much as they do their study participants (DeVault, 1995; Fonow & Cook, 1991; Hertz, 1997). And so, it is suggested that research conducted with a feminist approach should acknowledge the "centrality of the researchers' own experience: their own

tellings, livings, relivings, and retellings" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 418).

Feminist theory and methodology were good starting points for this research. But just as I found that the lived body experiences of the dancers were ones of constant negotiation rather than of one-dimensional sexual objectification (see Wesely, 2002, 2003a, 2003b), my own involvement in the research process was too multidimensional and messy to simply be articulated as reflexivity. In fact, through my identity as a woman, my lived experiences as a researcher became conflated with the lived experiences of the dancers I was interviewing. My sense of the boundaries separating me from them became so fluid that, at times during this research, my identity and even physical safety were at risk.

Rambo Ronai (1999) notes in her ethnographic work that identity is at times being "erased, adjusted, and readjusted, to fit the emerging picture of social life that one constructs for oneself" (p. 126). This article discusses this "I" that I must grapple with in a more intense, more dissonant way than I did before I conducted this research. My protections, feeble as though they were, have been tested. Like many women, I have had degrading and abusive experiences of objectification. But my privilege as an academic has afforded me the possibility of, at times, backgrounding my awareness of the fragmented meanings of my body (as I focus on my professional identity, for instance). Sometimes, aspects of my privilege have also allowed me to *feel* as though I am making choices about or control my objectification. This research encumbered me to examine further these issues as it incorporates my process of disillusionment about myself and my corresponding sense of safety in this world. By *safety*, I mean feeling safe to ignore or deny that I am often seen as an object. Safe to decide to be an object at times, without overtly negative consequences. Safe from the reminders that I am the women I interview, they are me, and the barriers are so thin they are nearly translucent. And, safe from being judged for my naïvete, my vulnerability, my inconsistencies, and my inability to objectively discern the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Safe from the implication of the words of a mentor, "Be careful what you reveal of yourself in your writing." Safe.

"I'm sorry, but if you want to do that, you're not a feminist!" He was yelling at me in the parking lot outside our offices. My male colleague Z was calling me out. A year or 2 before, we had gone out dancing together a few times at clubs downtown. Oh, but I love to dance. Sitting at a bar gets boring—I want to move. And what I like to do even more is dance on a platform or

stage, above the crowd. I imagine I inspire respect, dancing with skill rather than the technique of the younger girls I see, who hump each other for male approval. Last year, when I won a dance contest, I fancied that it was because all the other (female) contestants sidled up to the judge to play sex kitten while I danced, alone, doing nothing more friendly than waving.

I had watched the women hired to dance at the clubs downtown, dressed in their funky outfits, incorporating hip-hop and high energy moves to inspire the crowd to feel the music and get out on the dance floor. My fantasy: I wanted to do this job too. I wanted to look out over the crowd and have enough space to move, put my energy out there, get people psyched up, bend and twist and sweat, feeling the crescendo of the beat right before it breaks. I can lose myself in it, and it's the only time that happens—my escape. I made the mistake of telling Z about my fantasy, and he was questioning my motives.

"Do you want to do this because you want people to watch you?"

"Yes, but not necessarily sexually!" I knew where he was going with this.

"Is it because you want men to watch you?"

"Men, women, whoever! It's just a rush to get out there and be performing, be dancing in front of people and kicking up the energy level in the place. And I enjoy getting compliments on my dancing, too."

"Then you're not really a feminist. If you are worried about objectification and that kind of thing, then you'd basically be just reinforcing that." Z paused to wave to a female colleague walking out to her car and I looked away, feeling vaguely shamed.

When I began interviewing exotic dancers, I saw their objectification only in terms of their degradation. This was both challenged and reinforced by what the women told me. I listened to them describe initial feelings of power as they got attention for their bodies, and how this shifted to a more complex interplay between power and powerlessness as they became more entrenched in the industry.

You know what happens? It's so funny. I started dancing, I felt like I was just Shee-ra. You know, I was the wanted goddess. And honestly, I felt like in my wages and everything, that I was making a lot of money. And then as I became less naïve, less fresh, that was affected. If you're between 18 and 21 and a hard body, you are so desirable [sic]. But then, once you step out of that, into the adult threshold, of less naïvete, you become less desirable. As I became aware of the power I had, I became less powerful. "No, she's the fresh meat this

week." It was my age, and my body. So even though I thought I was the beat-all, end-all, I wasn't the beat-all, end-all to everybody. (Julie)

Similarly, Samantha described,

I hate my job sometimes, if that day I didn't really make that much money, and every client wants sex. Then you feel, like . . . sometime last week I had this client, he gave me \$150. I said, "If you want to see anything, you have to pay more." And he's like, "Oh, \$150 is a lot." It's like, you're telling me, I'm not worth what I want??? And he's trying to touch me. He's pushing it. He was trying to check to look at my breasts. And he said, "If I give you \$100 more can you do oral sex or something?" And I think, ok, if he asks me one more thing, I'm going to slap him. I said to him, "If you give me \$100 more I'll let you see my breasts." Look, you stupid old man, this is not 1960!

Many described being deeply and personally affected by the feelings of worthlessness derived from rejection of their bodies. Rita stated,

It's hard, everyone takes it personally. You can't say you don't. I'm happy to work tonight, and no one wants a dance. Sometimes you're like, you should be thankful we're taking off our clothes. There is no amount of money that makes it worth it, you're lucky that's all we're charging you. It's hard, you take it personally, how come they don't think I'm pretty, or like, I see skanky nasty girls, some girl that's overweight, or weighs more than I do, with an ugly outfit on, can't dance, no rhythm, and I'll see her get a dance. And she's making money and I'm not?

These messages solidified certain perceptions for the women. As Tanya says, "You have to harden your heart to a lot of things. The guys just looking at you like you're a piece of meat." Sheila stated, "I didn't hate men until I started dancing. Like, all they want is sex, and they're so disgusting . . . they'll cheat on their wives, sex is what drives them, that's what's important to them. Sex."

Later, I was able to realize and write about the multiplicity of experiences for the women I interviewed, their fluidity of identity and their inconsistencies. I saw how the dancers derived pleasure and rewards from their objectified, sexualized performances, while also experiencing this objectification as increasingly destructive. At the same time, I fell more deeply into a type of dissonance related to my own appearance and objectification. This deeper dissonance was exacerbated when the women

made their narratives personal to me. For instance, Angel described feeling that her physical attractiveness was the cause of many of her problems in life, specifically being taken advantage of, raped and abused by men she met through dancing. During our interview, she recounted a horrific story in which during a gang rape she was a witness to the murder of her friend, who was also being raped. She now directly associates her physical attractiveness with her victimization. By including me in her assessment as someone who is attractive, she constructs her lived experiences as ones that I could potentially experience as well.

I always felt like if I hadn't looked pretty, none of this [rape and abuse] would have happened. If I had an ear missing or something. That nobody would have tried to do that. I think that women that are pretty, like you—I think you're very beautiful, by the way—we have to be careful. We have to watch out. I wish that sometimes I was ugly. I wished that I was fat. I used to wish that a lot. That I wouldn't have to be this person. (Angel)

Why did she associate her victimization with her attractiveness? Perhaps this is the only “story” she can tell herself to make sense of the abuse (C. Rambo, personal communication, May 17, 2004). While associating her victimization with her physical appearance, she draws me into this, warning me that my appearance will put me more at risk for abuses like those she experienced.

The night after Z's attack on my feminist integrity, I tossed and turned. I was indignant. How dare he? He doesn't know anything about feminism, I grumbled to myself. What bothered me most was his point about objectification. This cued a discomfort in me I usually tried to ignore, mostly because I had no good explanation for my inconsistencies. Was I kidding myself to argue that the pleasure from being admired for my appearance was not a reason I wanted to be a hired platform dancer? This toed the hard feminist line I drew in the sand, particularly when it came to objectification. I knew the continuum: When we overemphasize the importance of women's appearance at the exclusion of other aspects of identity, this can bleed into the fragmentation of our bodies, our objectification, and this is but a jog to dehumanization, which facilitates our devaluation, degradation, and victimization. An oversimplification, but still: How could I ever experience guilt-free pleasure from any attention to my appearance when I know this? How could I admit this pleasure at all, drawing the line as I have? So. Perhaps admitting the pleasure was only as difficult as erasing the line.

Valerie also brought me into her lived experiences. She described a situation where she was victimized through a date-rape drug. She does not use *rape* to describe the sex that occurred, but she does say “He took my tampon out of my body and had sex with me. It was sort of consensual, but that was something I wasn’t into. I remember thinking to myself, he is gross, and being really out of it, but remembering everything.” Valerie believed that the reason this occurred was because she worked as an exotic dancer. She said,

Once they find out you’re a dancer, their motives change even more. . . . It was an excuse to be extra aggressive. . . . Women get no respect anyways, but when you’re a tittie dancer, it makes it that much more ok to disrespect you.

This was interesting, as Angel said her attractiveness caused her victimization, while Valerie pinpoints the stripper role itself. To illustrate, Valerie challenged me to do the following:

You should do a little test. Meet a guy in a club, and just tell him, “Oh, you want nothing to do with me!” “Why not?” “Well, ’cause I’m a topless dancer.” Just watch his face change! Just say, “Oh, I’m Jennifer, bla bla bla, what do you do? Well, I don’t want to tell you what I do, you’ll think different of me.” “No, I swear I won’t!” . . . they say stuff like that. And say, “I’m a topless dancer.” Just watch his face light up, and change. Just watch him change into a totally different person. Just go to a club and do that a couple times. Find someone you know is attracted to you, and watch his eyes light up. What that guy that the [sex] happened with, I knew him for years, in high school. But once he knew I was a dancer, he changed. He changed. There was this element in him, he had to have me. He felt like he had the right.

An exotic dancer engages in a sexualized performance that highlights her value as an object for the visual (and sometimes physical or emotional) consumption of customers. There is an element of possession and ownership, (especially when paying) for the object consumed, an element that Valerie addresses when she says “He felt like he had the right”—the right to her body, sexually. Still, as with Angel’s attractiveness, the fact that Valerie is or is not a dancer seems not to be the real issue. I think, like Angel’s warning, what Valerie’s “test” suggests is that I am no safer than she. By Angel’s reasoning, our attractiveness makes us equally likely to be victimized. By Valerie’s estimation, all that separates us and our respective safety is an outsider’s perception of each of us as a dancer (or not). As I would later discover, this is really no separation at all.

Six years ago. The sun is still up, but setting. I have been studying for comps all day, all month, all year it seems, and what I really need right now is a walk outside. It's Arizona, it's beautiful, and I want to breathe the air and see some cacti, even if it's just in someone's front yard. I have been strolling in my neighborhood for 10 minutes or so when I see a short, skinny person with long hair approaching me from the opposite direction. It feels so good to be free from the books for a few moments that I remain lost in my thoughts, enjoying the twilight. When this person is about a foot away, I realize it is a man. I have a brief bump in awareness as I sense him pause slightly before we pass each other. In that moment, I feel a swift and sure hand clutch my left buttock, giving it a solid and measured squeeze before the young man runs away, only to hide behind a car across the street. I am stunned. There was no time to react, to yell, to swing, or kick him. And I am humiliated. The grab didn't hurt, but the reminder did. I am a woman. On the street. With nothing but my apparent womanhood to identify me, I am reduced to an object. And I am not safe.

As I arrive at the realization that the man is still hiding behind the car and that this is odd behavior, I decide my best option is to return home and call the police. Put in my place, I can only think to yell at him as I jog home in my flip-flops, "I'm calling the police right now! You're gross!" Back at my place an hour later, the male officer arrives and dutifully writes down the relevant information. As he brusquely snaps shut his notepad, poised to exit, he chides me: "Next time you are going for a walk outside, you should take a dog."

Modern feminist thought has an explanation for me. In an eerily similar scenario (because it is all too common), Bartky (1990) discusses the sexual objectification of women:

It is a fine spring day, and with an utter lack of self-consciousness, I am bouncing down the street. Suddenly I hear men's voices. Catcalls and whistles fill the air. These noises are clearly sexual in intent and they are meant for me; they come from across the street. I freeze . . . I have been made into an object. While it is true that for these men I am nothing but, let us say, a "nice piece of ass," there is more involved in this encounter than their mere fragmented perception of me. They could, after all, have enjoyed me in silence. Blissfully unaware, breasts bouncing, eyes on the birds in the trees, I could have passed by without

having been turned to stone. But I must be made to know that I am a “nice piece of ass”: I must be made to see myself as they see me. (p. 27)

This is the root of my shame and humiliation, objectification at its purest, “being made to see myself as they see me.” But what about objectification that has multiple, more complex meanings for me, that I allow, or deem acceptable? What is the feminist explanation here, for perhaps an unspoken motive in wanting to dance on a platform, high above the crowd? Bartky (1990) notes that the observer and the observed can be the same person, and that “it would be naïve not to notice that there are delights of a narcissistic kind that go along with the status ‘sex object’” (p. 28). For women, she argues, this is not just narcissism. This is an estrangement from ourselves, a preoccupation with something that is set up for failure; feminine narcissism is an “infatuation with an inferiorized body” (p. 40). This modern feminist explanation is the one I articulate much more easily than trying to somehow explain what I see as my inconsistencies. Yet although it has helped me understand objectification, I do not believe—cannot believe—that meanings of identity and objectification are limited to Bartky’s interpretation. Where is the space for multiplicity and fluidity? Inconsistencies? If I try to fit my lived experiences into this theoretical box, it only perpetuates the self-estrangement Bartky warns against.

“So what did you do today? How did class go? When are you leaving for the conference?” My friend and colleague Emily is keeping up a steady stream of light-hearted conversation that soothes me and diverts us from where we sit, at a bar in a nude “girls” strip club, where we only look at each other because we haven’t yet figured out how to watch naked women performing on a stage. In addition, I am preoccupied with worry that my contact, Rita, is not going to show up, I won’t get any interviews, and that I will never, ever, finish this research. I feel unduly prim in my street attire, Emily and I being the only two clothed women in the bar. Finally glancing at the stage, I see the dancers on stage shimmy up poles, stare at themselves in the mirror. Some look really bored. They walk around the club in their g-strings, breasts bare but seemingly ignored appendages, and talk to the bartender.

“So, why you two here? You lookin’ for a job or something?” The bartender turns to us and looks doubtful as he eyes our baggy t-shirts, jeans, and lack of makeup.

“Actually, I’m doing a research project on male and female exotic dancers, and I’m hoping to interview a few of them today. I’m waiting for Rita to

arrive, she's a dancer here, and she was supposed to meet me at 8." These words pour out in a rush as I try to justify our presence in this club. As women who are not so easily objectified amid the sexy, naked dancers, there is no justification. We do not fit. I notice one of the male customers looking at me hard, almost as if he was trying to find a way to contextualize me as a dancer and was failing (The naughty schoolgirl? The strict librarian? Nope, not quite pulling either of those off). It feels as if my mere presence here is ruining the fantasy world that exists within the confines of these walls.

"Uh." The bartender has a nonreaction to my reply about my purpose and his attention drifts away. I decide the only way men pay attention to you here is if you are in a g-string.

"Hey guys." Rita slides onto the bar stool next to me, and I feel a disproportionate amount of relief. She is sweet and starts introducing me to the dancers. I pretend to be comfortable talking to these nearly naked women, like this is something I do every day. I wonder: Do I look like that? Could I look like that?

Rita goes to perform her first "stage." I have started to feel protective toward her and can't watch. Emily and I talk about the way the dancers shave, crotches infantilized, little nubs of flesh. I am starting to feel more comfortable here since Rita has been hanging out with us. This aligns me with the dancers and rights the dynamics of the fantasy world. The customers can settle back into their flesh gazing. I watch the women dance now, but I am confused. Should I be watching? Should I not be? Rita returns and convinces Emily and I to emerge from our hiding place.

"C'mon, I won't make you guys sit too close to the front. I just want you to watch the dancing better." Led by Rita, Emily and I move, and I feel eyes on us, again trying to fit our presence into some acceptable script. For entertainment, I suppose, Rita starts to point out dancers who have kids, and one young dancer who is 4 months pregnant.

"None of the women who dance here have any cellulite!" I blurt out to Rita and Emily. I can't help but compare my body to theirs; buttocks are everywhere I look. But I am disappointed in myself. This is not about me, right? In any case, Rita assures me that the red lighting disguises many flaws.

Rita gets up to dance again, and I watch her face closely. She looks at us once or twice while on stage, and I wonder if she is showing off. The smile is not real. It looks like a grimace, actually. Her smile is very different from when she was talking to us. It's a void, an emptiness. When Rita dances, she uses a trick where she stands on her head. Arching her back, she takes her legs, with spiked heels, and wraps them around the customer's neck. With her legs like this, she gyrates, simulating the sex act. I remember something

Rita said during her interview: that she started doing nude dancing before she actually had sex.

The whole club feels like an alien, dark planet characterized by pulsing lights, music, and naked women (except for Emily and me). There's one guy smoking a cigar, and several girls keep coming over to him, including the pregnant one. He sits there like a king and lets each girl whisper in his ear.

"God, don't you hate that man over there?" I ask Emily over the music.

"Yeah, wouldn't you want to just shove a spiked heel into his eye if you were her?" Emily refers to the most recent dancer talking to cigar man.

"Maybe we should slash some tires when we leave," I say, and we giggle crazily. The customers are the most obvious outlet for our anger about how this place makes us feel, equal parts outcast and degraded. I space out, staring over the man's head, mesmerized by the rhythmic lights and music. What if this was my world, every day? If, like these women, I reported to work and got naked, in a space where darkness was pierced by the laser stares on my skin, zeroing in on my breasts, ass, and crotch? Where I *was* my breasts, ass, and crotch, for the length of my shift at least? How far removed was I from this world, really? At the moment, it felt the only difference was a layer of clothing. Otherwise, didn't I exist in this world every day?

"Hey Em, do you think we are objectifying Rita by watching her?"

"I don't know, why don't you ask her?" Emily says as Rita makes her way back to us from the stage.

"Rita, I know this is a weird question," I begin as she joins us. "But do you think we are objectifying you when we watch you dance?"

Rita looks at me strangely. "Well, I am sorta insulted when the guys don't watch. They paid cover to come in here, the least they can do is watch. And applaud. The least they can do is applaud."

"Yeah, but." I try again. "Do you see us like the customers, or . . ." I stop, realizing that if she does, I don't really want to know. Am I one of them, or am I not? Am I an object, or do I watch and perpetuate their (and thus my) objectification? How was it possible to watch without objectifying and being objectified? I was invested in the lived experiences of these women; I was feeling a part of myself in Rita's blank stage stare and voided smile. To objectify them was to objectify myself, to see myself as I saw them, or as I imagined they were seen by observers (also like me). This is not unlike Bartky's (1990) analysis that the observer and the observed can be one and the same.

Emily and I pass a group of men coming in as we leave. They make hooting and hollering noises at us. As we walk toward my car, I notice a bird has shit all over it.

A few months later, I convince Emily to accompany me to a different club, which this time is topless but not nude. She hates going but is a good friend. I have a contact with the manager, Vinnie, who agreed to introduce me to some of the dancers who work there. I am intimidated when I enter—this club is much bigger than the first one, with an elevated catwalk and the obligatory pole, and lots more customers are sitting in the semidark, white socks illuminated by the black light. Unlike the nude club, here, alcohol is served. I feel a pang of alarm. I do not feel confident among this crowd of men.

“Do you want me to get some girls for you?” After inviting us into his office, Vinnie asks this as if the dancers are so many cattle to be herded for my attention. I balk, thinking in a rush how this seems to align me with Vinnie in some sort of elevated status above the “girls.” What protects me here? My status as researcher? He and I seem to know this is false—I’m really just a “girl” as well. Regardless, I ignore this and say yes.

“Star” comes in. We talk, and she is very nice, but she won’t give me her number to set up an interview. I feel paralyzed by the situation—sitting in Vinnie’s office, how can Star not be suspicious of me? I am a sellout at best, a sheep in wolf’s clothing. Star has glitter on her lips and gems of some sort glued to her eyelids. She blinks heavily at me and hitches her tube top up over her breasts. She leaves the office, and Emily and I venture back out onto the main floor, realizing a connection with Vinnie is not going to facilitate this research.

In the central room of the club, Emily and I stand by the bar and wait for our eyes to adjust to the dark. I can begin to make out couplings of dancer and customer. Seating flanks the walls all the way around, and an undulating line is formed by the women giving dances. Suddenly I can see rows of g-strings glowing in the dark, working slowly over male customers.

“Are they allowed to touch the women?” Emily whispers to me.

“I don’t know.” I try to discern what type of body contact is going on without staring too long at anyone.

The simulated sex movements are obvious, but the dancers are so close to the customers it is nearly impossible to tell what is really occurring.

“Why do these men even need to pay for a dance? They can pretty much get off on watching all the other ones go on around them,” Emily points out.

“Yeah.” One woman’s customer is not watching her, although her ass is rubbing up and down on his lower abdomen. She turns around to see if he’s looking, flinging her head back in an impossible gesture. He doesn’t care. On stage, one dancer fondles her breasts and swings them around wildly in a way that looks incredibly painful. She is rewarded as a customer approaches to

purchase a dance. One lone overweight man sits close to the stage, away from the other customers. Suddenly, I want to leave.

“Ready to go?” I ask Emily.

“Yup.” And we are gone, out the door, before the next dancer takes the stage.

I am demoralized. This visit to the topless club was the most difficult. Part of it, I think, was because I was aligned with Vinnie. My friendship with Rita did not take away my anger or discomfort at the first club, but it did provide me with something of a visible identity in the face of all my other identifiers (i.e., privilege as protection) being nullified. Vinnie’s power position over the dancers and my connection with him actually severed me from any alliance—still only a woman, I could never hold the power he does while in the strip club. Aligning myself with him set me even more completely adrift. Regardless, nowhere I went could I fall back on my usual ways of identifying myself. In this world, they didn’t matter. They did not protect me, and I was not safe.

6:00 passes, then 7:00. My stomach begins to ache about the same time my head starts pounding. Darkness has fallen and evidently Cory is a no-show. As I scan the parking lot a final time, I observe a group of three men approaching in high spirits, preoccupied with each other and their own alcohol-induced jocularity. As of yet, they have not seen me. My sense of dread builds as I shrink back in my seat, trying to make myself invisible.

No such luck. As they head in my direction, I realize that my vehicle is parked right next to theirs, and sure enough, they just now have gotten me in their sights. One of them unzips his fly as he walks toward me. As he stares into my eyes, I watch him take out his penis, hold it in his hand, and urinate on the asphalt directly in front of my car. One of the other men appears next to my closed window, his face inches from my own, as he asks repeatedly, “Can you see his dick? Can you see his dick?” I pay little attention to him as he laughs with their third friend. I am focused on the man in front of me, urinating. I attempt to affect a look of disgust rather than the shock or intimidation I believe he is trying to elicit. This is all I can think to do. Finally he zips up his pants and they get into their car, start the engine, and wave at me as they pull out of their parking spot. I watch them drive away, taillights disappearing around the corner of the strip bar. Still, I do not leave. I sit in my car, staring

into the darkness. My heart beats, I breathe in and out. I tell myself I am waiting for Cory. An hour later, I slowly turn the key in the ignition, put the car in gear and leave. I drive carefully, cautiously home, conscious of a feeling that I must nurture and protect myself, be tender. I am tired, so tired.

At the time, I remember thinking that these men must have assumed I was an exotic dancer. In fact, my field notes from the night ended with this sentence: “[He] probably thinks I’m a stripper, which opens it up for even more sexual assault.” Written the morning after, my notes demonstrate my raw reactions to what happened. I had directly connected the stripper identity to assault, suggesting that if these men had known me, known I was a nonstripper—I would never have experienced this. I think about Angel, warning me, associating victimization with attractiveness. And Valerie’s challenge to call myself a stripper and see how men’s reactions to me change, how they act entitled, and how she makes sense of her rape in this way. Surely we all need ways to make sense of the senselessness, to arrive at something that helps us understand random violence or terror against us. There is only one thing I know for sure about that evening: fresh from their drinking and strip club high, these guys had been paying to look at women as objects, as bodies, all night long. Then they saw me, and that’s what I was.

And so, at this point, I am left with more realizations but less clarity. When I look at how this research has affected my lived experiences, I find threads of uncertainty, inconsistency, and confusion. Feminism has helped me understand objectification during this project while doing little to resolve my rejection or engagement of it. Aspects of my privilege enable me, at times, to feel as though I contain and define my objectification while still allowing myself the measured bit of ego and/or pleasure derived from it. If attention is paid to my appearance, I am sometimes in a power position to censor it (as a professor to a student, for instance) or a comfort zone to welcome it (as a friend or lover). I am privileged by class and education and so am in a position to fantasize about being a hired platform dancer at a bar without having to imagine a more compromising scenario where I would rely on my body to make a living. At these times, do I avoid consequences? Do I avoid the degradation of myself, and thus all women, related to my objectification? Protected by a mantle of privileged identifiers, do I slough these consequences off onto those who engage their objectification more directly?

In her book *Listening to Olivia: Violence, Poverty and Prostitution*, Jody Raphael (2004) quotes Olivia, a survivor of many years of street prostitution, as she talks about the men who paid her for sex:

I don't believe it was the acts of sex that their wives wouldn't do. I believe it was whatever in life [the men] have been through, they wanted some way to act out or give it back. These are women who are vulnerable or put themselves in compromising positions to be abused. It is total abuse, and they are willing to pay to abuse. The guys come in and pay \$200 or \$300 just to call you a bunch of bitches, or a black whore, or a black bitch. They figure that because they pay for it, they are entitled to talk to you that way. . . . They are caught up in that cycle of whatever anger or hatred they are feeling. . . . And they feel justified because they give you money. (p. 78)

Raphael cites a range of statistics about stripping, escorting, and prostitution services where men degraded, abused, or raped the women in staggering numbers. These numbers include my research where the dancers were often victimized by customers and made to feel powerless. And so the sex work industry is a space in which objectification is amplified, its dirty, violent underside exposed again and again. The women I interviewed experience on a regular basis what I only experience sometimes.

But again, the inconsistencies. The women I interviewed also described feeling powerful. This is a magnification of the ego gratification or pleasure I have experienced, which translates into cold hard cash for the dancers—pleasure and power become tangible and have an exchange value. So I see my own lived experiences of objectification magnified on both ends of the spectrum in the lives of the women I interviewed—the power and the powerlessness, the pleasure and the pain. This is perhaps why I am drawn to the women I interview, to their lived experiences and what these experiences tell me about my own. Their lives so overtly engage that which I pretend to control, maintaining my boundaries and parsing out my pain. There is still, however, another factor here—a wild card that interrupts the tidiness of my analysis thus far. And that is the randomness of women's victimization. Women's objectification is not without consequence in our patriarchal society, but sometimes pretending it is a luxury born of privilege. My privilege allows me more illusions but not more safety. Just like the dancers, I am not safe because I am a woman. Period. The nature of the word *privilege*—an advantage, favor, or immunity specially granted to one, a right held by some and withheld from others—this tells me that every privilege to one disenfranchises another. But in the language of objectification, as the observer and the observed, my privilege doubles back on me. It is also, then, my pain.

Feminist methodology has been criticized for ignoring more fluid and partial aspects of identity and experience. It is difficult to specify the complexity of identities in qualitative research (Haney, 1996; McCorkel & Myers, 2003), but in this work, I incorporate various realities into my own sense of self. "Rendering fluid, and not fixed, our construction of Selves and Others, and the narratives produced as qualitative research, can reveal our partialities and pluralities" (Fine, 1994, p. 79). As part of the partial and plural aspects of identities is a recognition that *I* signifies "infinite layers" (Minh-ha, 1989). As such, I will continue to grapple with what I have learned here on multiple and fluid levels. We all must find a way to live. Just like the women I interviewed, I must find a way to negotiate my willingness and my shame; my privilege, my objectification, my victimization, my illusions of safety, and all aspects in between. I can cope through a myriad of avoidance strategies (which I probably always will, to some extent) and continue to face and engage the inconsistencies. In essence, I can continue to do the work. I interview women who do what I do not, who experience what I have not, but yet reflect back so much about myself.

I suggest that it is of the utmost importance to pay attention to the effects of a study like this on the feminist researcher because these effects are difficult, and they directly affect the willingness, desire, and ability to continue the work. We need to continue to investigate issues that recall us to our own bodies and our objectification, our privilege and our disadvantage, and consequent identity negotiations because this can reveal much in the study of gender, identity, and oppression. If feminist researchers are not permitted the space to talk about our lived experiences in this regard, we too are silenced; just as we give voice to those without the privilege to speak of their experiences, we need to be able to identify how we are vulnerable to these voices. And there is a vulnerability in not just the listening but also the telling—risks, professional and personal, that come from such unconventional research paradigms. But it is a risk I must take, and in doing so, I now make myself vulnerable to you.

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