

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Mindy S. Bradley-Engen, *Naked Lives: Inside the Worlds of Exotic Dance*. Excelsior Editions. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2009, 146 pp. \$US 14.95 paper (978-1-4384-2606-8), \$US 45.00 hardcover (978-1-4384-2605-1)

In this slim, 146-page volume, Mindy Bradley-Engen contributes insights to a field that has expanded swiftly over the past ten years. Now a sub-genre of sexuality studies, “exotic dance” has stirred the imagination and desire of feminist sociologists, many of whom draw on personal experiences in the strip trade. Bradley-Engen adds to recent historical works and a flurry of contemporary case studies a unique focus on interaction processes and structural features of three distinct venues for professional stripping by women — “hustle,” “show,” and “social” clubs. Rather than rehearse other researchers’ attention to dress codes, choices of music, tipping policies, or dancers’ complex relationships with male “regulars,” Bradley-Engen adapts symbolic interactionist Anselm Strauss to argue that exotic dance venues are distinct types of “social worlds” that offer dancers varied occupational environments. From field observations at clubs throughout the United States, fifty formal interviews with dancers, and eight years of her own experience in strip clubs (as a dancer, bar maid, and dressing room attendant), she examines how dancers negotiate their identities and career paths in the structural contexts of the clubs. Rather than adopt the terms of the (now tired) “victims vs. agents” debate, she discovers dancers’ contradictory accounts of negative affect, limitation, and obligation, as well as satisfaction and empowerment in the striptease industry.

To elucidate what she discovers as substantial variation in dancers’ working conditions, Bradley-Engen fashions a three-club typology. The first, the hustle club, is one where dancers earn tips on stage and in “private” lap-dance and champagne rooms; as well, they pay out stage fees to managers and tips to bouncers, deejays, doormen, and room attendants. With up to seventy dancers a night on weekends, the hustle club specializes in high turnover, no scheduling, and heavy competition between dancers who spend most evenings soliciting customers on the floor, and almost no time on stage. Bradley-Engen shows how management does not enforce no-touch rules; moreover, she explains how dancers are en-

couraged to lie to patrons, mislead them, or entice them to empty their wallets. She also reports on how dancers openly use marijuana, cocaine, ecstasy, and alcohol as coping mechanisms. The assembly-line character of the "meat market" at the hustle club prevails, as does the difficulty dancers face in maintaining their physical boundaries. Bradley-Engen posits that the environment encountered by dancers inside the hustle club is hostile, isolating, and competitive.

By contrast to the hustle club, the show club sports a classy design with management that enforces strict policies concerning dancers' physical appearance, mandatory aerobic and dance training, professional costuming, and accessories. And while dancers pay out tips to bouncers, deejays, and doormen, they experience less aggressive competition with other dancers in a highly charged atmosphere where "each dancer must make herself thinner, prettier, more skilled," resulting in dancing that is "highly self-oriented." Encouraged to see themselves as entertainers in a "beauty pageant," not hustlers reduced to dog-eat-dog behaviour, dancers are rewarded for acute self-scrutiny and commitment to self-improvement. In show clubs, Bradley-Engen argues, dancers focus on manipulating themselves rather than manipulating customers or management. Encouraged to orient their performance to standardized norms of beauty and glamour, they make heavy investments in time, money, skills, and athleticism in order to maximize their "validation returns." The glamour factor fosters dancers' personal and structural commitment in ways that encourage "career persistence."

Finally, the social club is noteworthy for its small size, limited stage area, working-class regulars, and stable of dancers. Without the prospect of lap dances or champagne rooms, dancers depend on tips from their on-stage acts; they perform in street clothes and affordable lingerie, rather than the fancy, glittery gowns expected at show clubs. While dancers experience the lowest potential for money-making in comparison to dancers at hustle and show clubs, they exercise the greatest amount of influence on club dynamics, in part because of their long-term employment and "deep sense of loyalty" to the club. Bradley-Engen reveals how dancers are rewarded for being congenial team members, not, as in the case of hustle clubs, good con artists. The organizational features of the social club include "symmetrical power relationships, lack of competition, network recruitment, and positive initiation." Older dancers are known to mentor younger dancers through support and instruction. Socialized into a culture of cooperation, a "house dancer" tends to enjoy her career at a social club, in part enabled by her personal and moral obligation to other dancers and to the establishment more broadly.

Naked Lives offers highly readable shifts between Bradley-Engen's reflections on her own experiences as a dancer and the experiences of other business-insiders, such as Brianna, Rachel, and Nadia. First-person narratives convincingly convey exotic dancers' feelings of anger, frustration, and affirmation, while the author's application of a "social worlds" template is original and innovative. In particular, her spotlight on dancers' experiences of working conditions along a continuum of agency versus constraint exposes illuminating facets of contextual variation. I immediately found myself considering anew the work of strippers in the 1970s that danced "strong" (and permitted oral sex by men ringside) at touring carnivals across the United States. And yet Bradley-Engen's three-club taxonomy sparked my curiosity: What else is going on for dancers at the hustle clubs? Why are these dancers able to make the most money in locations characterized by management apathy, hostility, and "dancer disposability"? Are dancers at hustle clubs who experience "corrupt" management more likely to face barriers to unionization than dancers at other clubs, or is management's opposition to collective organizing and bargaining a socio-political phenomenon that cuts across the sector? Are the intimate lives of dancers (with lovers, family members, and friends) less vulnerable to the cruel stripper stigma at show clubs because of the premium on a "culture of perfection" than at social or hustle clubs? I appreciate Bradley-Engen's provocative contention that a club's environment defines the nature of a dancer's work, yet her three-pronged classification schema forecloses attention to overlap, contradiction, and complexity across putatively discrete occupational milieux.

Ranging in age from eighteen to forty, the majority of Bradley-Engen's participants are white women, with 11% identifying as African American, and one dancer as Asian American. Yet little is revealed about the social organization of racism in the clubs, or the specificities of racialized spaces, or geographies, of strip clubs. For example, what might we learn about the racial and class politics of performance and place in clubs located in the inner cities of Oakland or Detroit, as opposed to those in the white, middle-class suburbs of Houston or Seattle? Are the women who dance at the shame-inducing hustle clubs more likely to be poor, with less cultural capital, and fewer job options than dancers at the show or social clubs? Doesn't "becoming a client's fantasy" — emphasized in show clubs — cut across all three types of clubs? Are brass poles and pole-work unique to the show clubs, or do they also grace the stages of hustle and/or social clubs? Do strippers at hustle clubs visit tanning shops, nail salons, and plastic surgeons, or are these "beauty-conscious" moves exclusive to dancers at show clubs? What roles are played by booking agents, who, historically, have exerted enormous in-

fluence on where and when a dancer works, what she is paid, and how she is promoted? In terms of change and continuity over time, did strip clubs in the United States sort into these three distinct types fifty years ago? Ten years ago? In addition, I question Bradley-Engen's empirically unsupported claim that dancers in show clubs compete more for affirmation than they do for money.

Given dancers' routine transgressions of local and state obscenity laws, which strip clubs have been, and are, vulnerable to police raids, and to what end? What about charges of prostitution leveled against club owners, dancers, and customers? What about the use of zoning bylaws by municipal politicians to deny entrepreneurs access to strip club licenses? In Vancouver, British Columbia, the number of strip clubs has plunged from thirty to three in the past twenty years. In her conclusion, Bradley-Engen asserts that the growth of "gentlemen's" establishments and the demise of "lower tier" clubs are changing the landscape of exotic dancing across the United States. But has the actual number of strip clubs remained stable? Is the business of "live, nude girls" recession-proof and robust even in the face of all things triple-X-rated in the virtual world? And what sociological sense might we make of the revival of "the tease factor" through the glamour and moxie of "neo-burlesque," as well as the mainstreaming of "stripper chic" by pop performers in the West such as Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Christina Aguilera?

In March 2010, state officials in Iceland banned strip clubs (no votes against, two abstentions) under the terms of a new law that makes it illegal for any business to profit from the nudity of its employees. In a move championed by reporter Julie Bindel of the *Guardian* (25 March 2010) as both feminist and impressive, the ban was overseen by the first lesbian Prime Minister, Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir. The politician who first proposed the ban, Kolbrún Halldórsdóttir, championed the feminist groups who put pressure on parliamentarians: "These women worked 24 hours a day, seven days a week with their campaigns and it eventually filters down to all of society." American Janice Raymond weighed in: "What a victory, not only for the Icelanders but for everyone worldwide who repudiates the sexual exploitation of women."

Almost immediately following the ban, a ferocious volcano in Iceland (dubbed E-15 in the mainstream press) erupted and precipitated a series of internationally inconveniencing suspensions of flights, closures of airports, and spikes in respiratory illness across Europe. I attribute the initial explosion, and the series of spectacular eruptions that ensued, to the wrath and vengeance of Tempest — the Global Goddess of Exotic Dance. I suspect that Mindy Bradley-Engen and the dancers she interviewed would vigorously dispute claims that Iceland is now the "most

female-friendly country” on the planet. Had policy-makers in Iceland read the thoughtful, inspiring, and plucky stories told by exotic dancers in *Naked Lives*, or listened to dancers at strip clubs in Iceland, they might have paused before authoritatively advancing their misguided brand of sex-pessimistic feminism in the interest of “saving women” from degradation. Indeed, why not ban the labour of modern-day domestic servants, chicken gutters in factories, and sewage treatment workers as inherently exploitative? Instead, the eradication of stripping holus-bolus under the guise of feminism perpetuates, once again, a division between morally minded madonnas and falsely conscious whores — a short-sighted polarization that Bradley-Engen detonates on personal and sociological grounds. Resoundingly.

University of British Columbia

Becki Ross

Becki Ross is the Chair of Women’s and Gender Studies, and an Associate Professor in Sociology at the University of British Columbia. Her recent book, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex, and Sin in Postwar Vancouver*, won the Clio Prize (BC) for excellence in Canadian historical research and writing in May 2010. An article from her current research into the expulsion of sex workers from Vancouver’s West End, 1975–1985, appears in the April issue of the journal *Sexualities*. becki@interchange.ubc.ca