

DEFINING THE EMOTIONAL CONTOURS OF EXOTIC DANCE

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Recent years have witnessed a surge of investigative and reflective writings about sex work, many by sex workers themselves. Katherine Frank and Elisabeth Eaves' books are recent additions to this growing field of study. In *G-Strings and Sympathy: Strip Club Regulars and Male Desire*, Katherine Frank analyzes the contexts and meanings of strip clubs for heterosexual male clients. In *Bare: On Women, Dancing, Sex, and Power*, Elisabeth Eaves recounts her experiences as a peep show dancer and stripper. Though covering similar territory, their analytic paths diverge widely. As a reader at the crossroads of choosing either book, the choice is a matter of intellectual standards, taste, and purpose.

Since the publication of *Sex Work: Writings by Women in the Sex Industry* (Delecoste & Alexander, 1987), an amazing surge of writings about sex work—most notably by sex workers themselves—have surfaced in many academic and literary arenas. The recent books by Katherine Frank and Elisabeth Eaves are the latest arrivals in this exciting surge of sex worker self-definition and authority. Both authors take on the topic of strip clubs: Katherine Frank (2002) describes and analyzes the perspective of heterosexual male strip club regulars, and Elisabeth Eaves (2002) delves into the motivations of strippers including herself. Both books illustrate a variety of angles, styles, and qualities, all of which contribute to an evolving set of stories being told about the experience of sex work in the United States at the turn of the twenty-first century.

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Katherine Frank's book, *G-Strings and Sympathy*, is a revised version of her dissertation for which she was awarded her Ph.D. in cultural anthropology at Duke University. Over the course of fourteen months Frank worked as a nude entertainer in five strip clubs in a Southeastern city she refers to as Laurelton. (This work is supplemented by Frank's experience as a nude entertainer over the course of six years. Frank selected strip clubs that varied on a continuum of "classiness" but offered comparable services. Namely, each of the five clubs offered nude table dancing, as opposed to offering only nude stage dancing, or offering lap dancing but prohibiting the sale of alcohol. Frank also conducted in-depth interviews with thirty men who regularly patronized one or more of these clubs.

In this book Frank focuses her analytic spotlight on heterosexual men for whom strip club attendance is a regular part of their lives. Frank is particularly interested in understanding "the American male customer who explicitly does not want direct sexual release" (p. xxiii). Frank states that "a significant population of heterosexual American males ... are willing to spend their money on such a public, voyeuristic (although interactive) fantasy" (p. xxiii). While the marketing of sexual voyeurism is not limited to the American marketplace, Frank observes that doing this without the expectation of sexual release is a "particularity of the American male customer" (p. xxiii) and hence worthy of in-depth analysis. Frank proceeds to do so with a great deal of analytic sophistication, including her inclusion of three short fictional stories as means to explore alternative dimensions of her analysis.

In framing the analysis for *G-Strings and Sympathy* Frank utilizes macro level social theories of capitalism, consumerism, leisure, and tourism. Locating her study of strip clubs within the social landscape of "late capitalism" where "more and more forms of entertainment become preoccupied with the commodification of spectacle and experience" (xxv), Frank also suggests that strip club patronage is a form of contemporary leisure, a touristic practice common among privileged "travelers." Once contextualizing contemporary strip clubs are contextualized within this frame, Frank continues her analysis by calling upon an impressive interdiscipli-

nary array of social theory including micro level, psychoanalytic perspectives on the dynamics of marriage, monogamy, and jealousy for strip club regulars. Though sometimes juggling quite disparate (and even contradictory) analytics, Frank succeeds in describing social worlds that are always multiply constituted, always operating within both macro and micro influences.

In addition to these rich theoretical perspectives Frank describes several interesting empirical patterns arising in her interviews with customers. For example, Frank's interviewees consistently referred to their strip club experiences as "relaxing" or as a "release." It appears that this is primarily a social, not a physical, release from social anxieties and expectations, as strip clubs enabled "safe opportunities for interactions with women without the risk of rejection" (p. 110), releasing the men from both social and sexual performance anxiety. Strip clubs also enabled interviewees to feel released from changing gender rules, especially those espousing the end to male privilege. While Frank acknowledges an obvious "backlash" mentality within this sentiment, she cautions against concluding that men go to strip clubs simply to regain a sense of power over women, as men demonstrated a variety of motivations in visiting strip clubs.

Several times throughout the book Frank also provides a fascinating look into the relationship between strip clubs and what she refers to as the practice of marriage. For instance, many of Frank's interviewees see strip clubs as "supportive of heterosexual monogamy (although pushing it at its borders)" (p. 106), since sexual release is (usually) not part of the bargain, and since the relationship between customer and stripper are (usually) confined within the walls of the club. Even so, most of these men had wives/partners who disapproved of their strip club habits, setting up a dynamic of secrecy between themselves and their partners. In an age where emotional honesty is touted as key to a successful relationship such a dynamic is typically considered dysfunctional, but Frank proposes that some marriages may be "successful" (especially in terms of longevity) precisely due to a lack of need for complete emotional honesty.

In light of the men's justifications for secrecy it is ironic that many of them were preoccupied with the *authenticity* of the dancer/customer exchange (an irony that Franks does not mention or pursue). The men interpreted the meaning of these exchanges in a variety of ways, with some seeing the monetary exchange as facilitating an authentic opportunity for connection, others becoming very cynical and gaining satisfaction from their ability to identify men who were being "duped." Given the customer's expectation for an authentic connection, Frank reports, dancers engage in a variety of techniques including giving out their "real" names and phone numbers to customers (knowing that most of the men will never call).

In *some* ways the portrait that emerges of these regular clients harkens back to the subjects of Laud Humphrey's study of "tearoom trade" (the practice of anonymous sex between men in public bathrooms). In his study Humphreys (1975) found that a significant proportion of men who participated in the tearooms were married, socially and politically conservative men, who in their home and work life symbolically adorned themselves with a "Breastplate of Righteousness." Similarly, Frank reports that the regulars she observed and interviewed were by and large conservative men who were secretive about their visits, at least one of whom was explicitly concerned about maintaining an "upstanding" image. This interviewee, for example, "had no desire to end a relationship that he regarded as successful and as a 'model' for his children" (p. 248).

However even if most of Frank's interviewees did not explicitly express concern with public righteousness, many of them did find that the secrecy of their encounters heightened the excitement of going to strip clubs. Frank analyzes this dynamic primarily from a psychoanalytic perspective, specifically drawing upon the concept of "triangulation." The language used here is murky and difficult, but Frank's point is that the stripper can serve as an insecure, defensive Oedipal fantasy for the wife/partner (with the stripper as her imagined rival) and/or as a revengeful, aggressive Oedipal fantasy for the customer (with the man imagining his wife competing with the stripper, thus saving him from having to compete with his own imagined rival).

For me these sections on the meanings and practices of contemporary heterosexual monogamy were possibly the richest and yet most frustrating. I remain unconvinced at the need for such speculative, unqualified psychoanalytic theory; despite her claims to the contrary, Frank does seem to rely here on assumptions of an essential “unconscious,” as well as heterosexist assumptions about what constitutes a “rival.” Instead I would have preferred to see more exploration of social psychological analysis, or at least less socially insulated psychoanalysis, as this could have offered as much, if not more, explanatory power while remaining in closer reach of Frank’s actual empirical data.

In sum, *G-Strings and Sympathy* brings extraordinary empirical and theoretical substance to what is generally a void of speculation over the motivations of strip club customers. Frank’s theoretical treatment allows for some empirical generalizations, yet her rich, in-depth look at a particular type of sex work customer also guards against a replication of existing generalizations/stereotypes. Frank’s broad use of academic literature is also impressive and generally very useful, but I would have also liked to see more of her own analysis, which at times gets buried under the multitude of other theorists. And as mentioned above, I am skeptical of the utility of psychoanalytic theory in this particular form. Despite these weaknesses, *G-Strings and Sympathy* is an outstanding book. The theories of leisure and tourism are a fresh and innovative way of approaching the topic, the fictional segments are entertaining and an inspired way of exploring some of the book’s themes, and perhaps best of all, the reader emerges with a deeper critical understanding of how and why strip clubs are integrated into some men’s everyday erotic practice.

In her book, *Bare: On Women, Dancing, Sex, and Power*, Elisabeth Eaves tells a story of her journey into and out of the sex industry, namely working as a peep show dancer and, later, as a stripper. She traces the start of her journey to her little girl self who preferred to be naked and ends it as a thirty-year-old woman who realizes that she “didn’t have to be the naked girl.” Between these points she describes in great detail her evolving and conflicting consciousness of her own sexual power, her sexual

relationships with men, her work as a peep show worker and stripper, and the lives and sexual relationships of her dancer friends and colleagues.

Bare is written retrospectively from a first person perspective, and the text itself is free of any formal academic citations or analysis. The book is full of intimate and sometimes incriminating stories about a variety of people and organizations, and packed with direct quotes of short verbal exchanges. Curiously, Eaves never explains how these quotes were collected (Was she taking notes all along? Did she carry a tape recorder?). Even more confusing is her in-depth recounting of an evening (filled with quotes) where two of her friends worked a couple of bachelor parties, apparently without Eaves present. While some parts of the book have a wealth of such quotes, in the rest of the book Eaves narrates the stories of her co-workers, friends, lovers, and customers in the third person—keeping her subject position central and confining the other subjects to Eaves’ interpretation. If the subjects of her book signed consent forms for any of this no mention was made of it, although in her acknowledgements Eaves does thank the “women and men” who “opened their lives to me and trusted that I would tell their stories fairly, which I have tried to do.”

While academic writing and research methods are certainly not predictive of a good read (indeed it is often the reverse!), when reporting on real people and places (and in many cases, using real names) the writer’s tone and approach illuminates whether her purpose is to “expose” or to understand; whether her text should be read as “tabloid” or as a fairly accurate, multi-dimensional description and analysis of real world events. While Eaves seems genuine in her attempt to understand the sex industry and her own motivations for participating in it, her attempts often fall closer to an exposé.

For example, a central theme in *Bare* is Eaves’ frustration with the sexual double standard that still relegates sexual stigma and shame upon sexual women. Eaves’ foray into the sex industry is thus one logical way of sidestepping or even challenging sexual injustice. This connection has of course already been well explored by many sex worker-writers; what is sometimes perplexing about Eaves’ account is her tone and purpose. At times defiant, at times

reflective, the book also invokes the sense of a (boastful) confessional. During much of the book I imagined Eaves telling her stories to a therapist, a close girlfriend, or Barbara Walters in a titillating, tell-all session. Likewise, *Bare* provides little in terms of a developed, in-depth analysis but it does provide entertainment and some fuel for further interpretation.

The first four chapters of *Bare* describe Eaves' transition from pretty girl with lots of suitors (and predators) and protective parents, to pretty woman getting a job at the *Lusty Lady*, the well known Seattle/San Francisco peepshow. Chapters five and six provide the first reading of any broader substance, and this is where the book finally started to catch my interest. Here Eaves contextualizes the *Lusty Lady* within Seattle strip club politics, and also describes the formal and informal organization of the *Lusty Lady* (e.g. code words used by dancers, the management's system of typologizing dancers). The book then returns to Eaves' feelings, experiences, and personal observations, but also (fortunately) begins to dedicate larger sections of the book to describing the lives and loves of a few of her co-workers/friends.

After a year of employment at the *LL*, Eaves moves to New York to attend graduate school, and then to London to work as a reporter, where she becomes involved with a man who admits having previously paid for the services of strippers and prostitutes. When this man is unwilling to swear off any future strip club visits Eaves becomes "disconsolate" (p. 209). The relationship ends and she realizes that she is more confused than ever about the sex industry: "I began to see that stripping was going to chase me. It was going to affect my relationships, as it had with Paul. And it frustrated me that, after all this time, I still didn't know what I thought about it. I couldn't answer simple questions about whether I thought it was right or wrong" (p. 210). As a result of these haunting questions, Eaves decides that she has to return to Seattle to become not just a peep show worker, but a full-fledged, lap-dancing stripper. However her experiences as an in-the-flesh stripper are very brief, and she concludes that she is not willing to have any physical contact with customers, nor is she willing to have to sell "false kindness" in

exchange for money. In the end she decides that “all sexuality for profit [is] insidious” (p. 292).

While the stories in *Bare* did eventually sustain my interest, the book never manages to sustain an analytic framework beyond the level of particular individuals and their particular choices. Eaves does articulate a general, cursory cultural critique of patriarchy and sexual commodification, but throughout the book she passes up many opportunities to think critically about the various organizational, class, and race contexts of her observations. In fact the book as a whole is nearly completely devoid of any such thinking, including any reflexive consciousness of Eaves’ own privileged background and the ways that this may have differentiated herself from some or many of her co-workers (after all, she joined the *LL* after receiving her B.A. and becoming a homeowner). Furthermore, Eaves seems intent on finding and exposing the “truth” of the sex industry (is it right or wrong?); a penchant she may have learned as a young journalist. However, in this search she seems to have precluded her ability to see the many paradoxes of the sex industry.

From beginning to end, *Bare* is essentially the text version of a peep show – Eaves’ audience is exposed to seemingly endless intimate details about herself, her relationships, her friends, and their relationships, but we are ultimately denied a broader understanding of how these people fit into larger social contexts (even as we may come to “know” and care about the characters). Overall *Bare* is a fairly sensationalist, though entertaining read, ending with a fairly simple, conservative conclusion. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, when I finished *Bare* I was surprised to find myself—as a peep show reader—craving a bit more.

In some ways it is unfair to compare *G-Strings and Sympathy* to *Bare*, as the former was produced with substantial academic and financial support while the latter is primarily the product of personal introspection. As these are very different projects it is no surprise that they would produce very different texts. And yet it is striking how two books coming from similar starting points can diverge so widely: Frank problematizes the customer; Eaves problematizes herself. Frank analyzes the practice of voyeurism; Eaves practices it. Frank explicitly maintains a distinction between

empirical “fact” and fiction; Eaves implicitly blurs the distinction. Each path comes with significantly different political implications. Yet in the end both books took courage to write, as Katherine Frank and Elisabeth Eaves both report being subjected to social (and moral) scrutiny, and both contribute to an evolving set of stories about sex work. As a reader at the crossroads of choosing either book, the choice is thus a matter of intellectual standards, taste, and purpose.

References

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