

Taking It Off, Putting It On: Women in the Strip Trade

By *Chris Bruckert* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2002)

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Dans cet ouvrage, la criminologue Chris Bruckert se fonde sur ses propres observations comme participante, sur des entrevues en profondeur et sur l'analyse de sources primaires pour examiner l'industrie du strip-tease féminin commercial dans les années 1990. Fondé sur un cadre théorique marxiste-féministe et une approche interactionniste, l'argument principal de Bruckert porte sur le déplacement, qui s'est manifesté au début des années 1980, du strip-tease comme spectacle au strip-tease comme travail de service déprofessionnalisé, dépendant des efforts émotionnels et interpersonnels des danseuses vis-à-vis d'une clientèle en grande majorité masculine. L'ouvrage fait des liens importants entre ce travail et d'autres métiers non syndiqués dans l'industrie des services—qui est en plein essor—où les femmes cuisinent dans les fast-foods, font les lits dans les hôtels, servent des cocktails et nettoient les toilettes. Bruckert aborde avec succès des sujets épineux comme l'obtention des permis, la nouveauté des «frais de bar», les règlements municipaux dans le domaine de la santé, les débats quant à la danse-contact, les pratiques policières, les amendes ainsi que les règlements municipaux, provinciaux et fédéraux qui sont souvent contradictoires. L'auteure réussit à exposer, de façon remarquable, l'unique vulnérabilité du strip-tease—comme divertissement conventionnel—aux actions visant à réglementer les mœurs tant de la part de la police que des femmes et des hommes qui font de la politique ou qui militent dans les organisations communautaires. Alors que la dialectique compliquée entre la subordination et la résistance des danseuses fait l'objet d'une analyse méticuleuse, un seul paragraphe est consacré expressément aux réflexions des danseuses sur les joies et les avantages de leur emploi—une estime de soi accrue, une image valorisante de son propre corps et l'affirmation de soi. D'autres avantages de la danse, comme l'indépendance, la possibilité de voyager, l'autonomie, les amitiés et la valorisation de l'ego sont mentionnés brièvement. En bref, l'analyse de Bruckert est bien documentée, réfléchie et originale. De façon astucieuse, elle invite d'autres féministes qui s'intéressent au processus judiciaire à axer leurs recherches sur le domaine complexe et stimulant du travail du sexe en qualité de travail, tant dans le passé qu'au présent.

In this book, criminologist Chris Bruckert uses participant observation, in-depth interviewing, and the analysis of primary documents to explore the industry of commercial female striptease in the 1990s. Bruckert's major argument, aided by her Marxist feminist, symbolic interactionist theoretical framework, concerns the

shift, initiated in the early 1980s, from stripping as entertainment to stripping as de-professionalized service work dependent on the emotional and interpersonal labour of dancers vis-à-vis predominantly male patrons. Important links are made to other non-unionized work in the burgeoning service industry where women flip burgers, make hotel beds, serve cocktails, and clean toilets. Bruckert successfully navigates the thorny matters of licensing, the advent of "bar fees," municipal health-related by-laws, lap-dancing debates, policing and fining practices, and often-contradictory municipal, provincial, and federal regulations. A genuine strength of the book is her exposition of the unique vulnerability of striptease—as mainstream entertainment—to the moral regulatory actions of police, politicians, and community activists. The messy dialectic of dancers' subordination and resistance is carefully explored, yet only one paragraph is devoted expressly to dancers' reflections of the joys and benefits of the job—enhanced self-esteem, good body-image, and assertiveness. And very brief mention is made of other advantages to dancing such as independence, travel, autonomy, friendship, and ego affirmation. In the end, Bruckert's analysis is informed, thoughtful, and original. It astutely invites other feminist legal scholars to mine the complex, challenging field of sex work as work, past and present.

A self-identified former stripper, Chris Bruckert worked in Ontario nightclubs in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Now a criminology professor at the University of Ottawa, Bruckert positions herself and her inquiry in contest with feminists and criminologists who have constructed female sex workers as voiceless, pitiable victims. Refusing the meta-narrative of victimization, Bruckert does not politely lob the tennis ball back into her opponents' court. Rather, she unleashes blistering, exceedingly well-placed forehands that score many thoughtful points, both sociological and political. A genuine treat to read, this book is singularly brave—the first of its kind to put the ordinary, everyday experiences of contemporary female erotic dancers at the centre of inquiry. Written by a self-consciously feminist "outsider within," *Taking It Off; Putting It On* charts the structuring of personal and professional relations inside the world of commercial striptease in the late 1990s.¹ For twelve months from 1997 to 1998, Bruckert engaged in participant observation at a strip club in a mid-sized Ontario city as a full-time bartender and part-time waitress. Semi-structured interviews with support staff—disc jockeys, waitresses, doormen, and managers—combined with fifteen in-depth interviews with employed female strippers, aged twenty-one to fifty-six, constitute Bruckert's empirical core. The fact that she changed the names of the dancers, friends, co-workers, and the club itself in order to protect her narrators from moralizing judgment is a sobering measure of the persisting grip of the whore stigma.

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1. Chris Bruckert, *Taking It Off; Putting It On: Women in the Strip Trade* (Toronto: Women's Press, 2002).

early 1980s, from stripping as entertainment to stripping as a de-professionalized service industry dependent on the emotional and interpersonal work of dancers *vis-à-vis* predominantly male patrons. Indeed, the performance stage has receded as the primary site of labour in a strip club. In its place, the floor has become central—dancers sell private dances, massages, and lap dances in the champagne room. In other words, unlike the guarantee of an hourly wage and the security of a weekly pay cheque thirty years ago, dancers today work for access to a setting where they can “make their money.”² This shift results in considerable variation—“a dancer might work eight hours and make no money, even losing bar and driver fees, or she might earn \$300 during a four-hour period.”³ Most of a dancer’s income is directly paid by customers in a fee-for-service arrangement—the primary service is private dances—and requires an entrepreneurial sales approach and boundary-maintenance skills with little possibility for advancement and limited job security. A significant strength of Bruckert’s approach is her effort to show how the shift from entertainment to service industry mirrors broader shifts to de-skilling in the Canadian economy and how the skin trade is linked to other non-unionized work in the burgeoning service industry where women flip burgers, make hotel beds, serve cocktails, and clean toilets.

Stripping is work, Bruckert persuasively argues, albeit culturally stigmatized “immoral work” that blurs the boundaries between private and public, presentation and identity, work and leisure.⁴ In my view, Bruckert successfully navigates the thorny matters of licensing, the advent of “bar fees,” municipal health-related by-laws, lap-dancing debates, policing and fining practices, and often contradictory municipal, provincial, and federal regulations. A genuine strength of the book is her exposition of the unique vulnerability of striptease—as mainstream entertainment—to moral regulatory actions of police, politicians, and community activists.

The strip trade is a dangerous occupation, and dancers get little protection from bosses, the potential for verbal and physical aggression is ever-present, and relations between dancers are frequently conflict-ridden. There is the tendency for managers to see dancers as unreliable, juvenile, and unprofessional. Bruckert concludes that a dancer today is required to employ more skill (at the same time that her work is being redefined as “unskilled”), face more danger, and experience more stress than her counterpart twenty-five years ago. According to Bruckert’s interviews, many dancers manage relations with their customers—the regulars, boys, and loners—by constructing them as desperate addicts of dubious, sometimes child-like, intelligence.⁵ Practising a crafty reversal, dancers commonly project immorality onto male customers. Yet the negative effects of the stigma on dancers’ access to housing, intimate relationships, and credit at banks,

2. *Ibid.* at 112. For more on the history of dancers’ wages, see Becki Ross, “Bumping and Grinding on the Line: Making Nudity Pay” (Fall 2000) 46 *Labour/le travail* 221-50.

3. Bruckert, *supra* note 1 at 93.

4. *Ibid.* at 16.

5. *Ibid.* at 126.

stubbornly endure.⁶ However, in the eyes of many of the women, the whore stigma is less oppressive than the stigma of unemployment or welfare.⁷

Bruckert acknowledges that erotic dancers employed at the Lusty Lady theatre in San Francisco unionized in the late 1990s, but she points out that this event was an exception. She accounts for the overwhelming absence of unionization in the strip trade by explicating the stratification of workers in the business, market competition among freelancers, the ethos of individualism, the fear of being blacklisted by club owners, and the ambivalence of some dancers for whom the business is temporary. Some dancers' acts of resistance are described, for example, as gossiping, exchanging stories, mass walk-outs, the collective refusal to adhere to licensing demands, the collective failure to show up at work, and, more often, individual efforts to challenge the management's authority. Nevertheless, as Bruckert contends, the dancers remain firmly embedded within stigmatizing class and gender discourses, and they sometimes, through projection and manipulation, also legitimate stereotypes that erode solidarity.⁸

For the last century, female striptease has meant physically hazardous, stigmatized, insecure work. However, while persuaded by Bruckert (and others) that the vast majority of female strippers are (and have been) working-class women, I am not convinced that stripping, in every instance, constitutes economically marginal work. In general terms, relative to other "pink collar" jobs, stripping is much better paid. As Bruckert herself notes, "feature" dancers can earn up to \$15,000 a week, with second-tier Canadian dancers earning \$1,000 to \$2,000 per week (though as noted earlier, some dancers pocket forty dollars for an eight-hour shift). Indeed, the recent expansion of upscale "gentlemen's clubs" unsettles Bruckert's claim that all strip clubs are working-class (male) venues. And while I sincerely applaud Bruckert's effort to tease out the messy dialectic of subordination and resistance, most chapters end with pessimistic volleys, such as: "Though dancers resist and subvert, they often reproduce their own marginalization."⁹ Only one paragraph is devoted expressly to dancers' reflections of the joys and benefits of the job—enhanced self-esteem, good body image, and assertiveness. Very brief mention is made of other advantages to dancing such as independence, travel, autonomy, friendship, and ego-affirmation, and none of these assets is afforded the same depth and sensitivity of treatment accorded the occupational hazards. I wanted to hear more.

Though Bruckert gestures to ethnic/racial hierarchies in an early paragraph, her study does not illuminate how the madonna/whore or pure/fallen dichotomy is not only gendered and class-specific, but racialized. My research (with Kim Greenwell) on commercial striptease in Vancouver from 1945 to 1975 reveals that dancers of colour in this era made less money, were constrained by racist, eurocentric stereotypes of idealized female sexiness, and had more difficulty

6. *Ibid.* at 128.

7. *Ibid.* at 139.

8. *Ibid.* at 147.

9. *Ibid.* at 149.

achieving marquee status and bookings in "A-List" clubs than white dancers.¹⁰ Bruckert also neglects to unearth the complexities of sexual and gender differences among strippers—her strictly heterosexual and non-transgender sample precludes the inclusion of lesbian/bi/queer as well as transsexual/transgender dancers and club-goers who do not exhibit a "(hetero)male gaze."

In the end, I have questions about aging in the business (how does a forty-six-year-old woman compete with a twenty-year-old?), and I am curious about why women stay in the game for ten years or more, what they do upon exiting, what it means to dance in Japan, Hawaii, Guam, or Thailand, and how we make sense of the cross-national labour migrancy of non-Anglo dancers licensed as "burlesque entertainers." Happily, new work extends and deepens the ground that Bruckert has so passionately tilled. I am thinking of Katherine Liepe-Levinson's *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (2002), the anthology *Sex for Sale: Prostitution, Pornography and the Sex Industry* (2000) as well as richly drawn autobiographies by Lily Burana, *Strip City: A Stripper's Farewell Journey across America* (2001), Elizabeth Eves, *Bare* (2002), and the famed lesbian historian, Lillian Faderman, *Naked in the Promised Land* (2003). Emerging trends within the business include the promise by strip-club owners in Windsor, Ontario, to pay the tuition of female university students considered to be "highly intelligent people" with "good communication skills" who "need a break."¹¹ In addition, neoburlesque troupes across North America endeavour to recuperate and re-stage the "tease factor," the gimmicks, the glamour, and the mystery of female bump and grind in the 1940s and 1950s.¹²

Chris Bruckert has made an impressive, accessible contribution to feminist legal studies. I hope she continues to turn her careful, informed attention to the local, national, and transnational particulars of commercial sex work. From where I stand, age-old knotty conundrums have not been sufficiently unraveled: (1) commercial striptease generates thousands and thousands of jobs, and it has oiled, and continues to oil, the economic engines of urban centres globally, yet it remains the abject target of campaigns to regulate it, if not to eliminate it altogether. And similarly, (2) female striptease dancers are rendered the object of both adulation and contempt. Excavations of both intertwined contradictions will have much to reveal still about sexed, gendered, and racialized pleasures and dangers in the twenty-first century.

10. See Becki Ross and Kim Greenwell, "Spectacular Striptease: Performing the Sexual and Racial Other in Postwar Vancouver, 1945-1975" (forthcoming in the *Journal of Women's History*, 2004).

11. See Jonathan Fowlie, "Strip Clubs Aiming Recruitment Drive at Student Bodies," *Globe and Mail* (4 September 2003) A16.

12. See Adam Gopnick, "The Naked City," *New Yorker* (23 July 2001) 30-4, Kim Izzo, "Rattle, Shake and Roll," *Fashion*, Vancouver Edition (May 2000) 86-90, Ken MacQueen, "Undressing Up," *Maclean's* (18 February 2002) 52-3, and Daphne Bramham, "Long-Stemmed Lovelies Play On," *Vancouver Sun* (10 February 2001) A16.

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