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Between the Sex Industry and Academia: Navigating Stigma and Disgust

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This personal narrative essay will act as a non-linear reflection of being both a former lap-dancer, and working in academia. The exploration will examine how the author is pulled between various identities in an attempt to make sense of inhabiting a fragmented identity in the workplace. In this piece I explore the embodiment of stigma as a layered process; from Goffman's (1963) notion of a spoiled identity, to the idea of performing appropriate femininity, and the subsequent layering of stigma, disgust and sticky emotions. Namely, that negative emotions provoked by popular debates of the sex industry produce a sticking of disgust to the body. The former lap-dancer-come-academic is stranded in an unfamiliar place, where she is aligned with the Other, contagion, dirt and pollution. She will never be just a former lap-dancer again, nor just an academic, but instead takes on a haunting presence, an ambiguous figure, trapped and pacing the boundaries of acceptable academic and inappropriately performed femininity in the shape of the stripper.

Dr Jude Roberts offers the perfect example of how a woman's identity may be fragmented and spoiled by association with the sex industry (Ahearne, 2014). Roberts is a young female academic who reveals she consumes porn in a BBC News Night debate. Within seconds her title on screen had changed from 'Dr Jude Roberts' to 'Jude Roberts Porn User'. Roberts argues:

'Replacing my academic title with 'porn user' at just that moment feeds into the narrative that says that we can either be intellectual or we can be sexual, but we cannot be both'.

I find the quote particularly pertinent and it resonates clearly with my own experi-



ences as an early career researcher. There is still a great societal discomfort and unease with accepting that a woman can be both a serious professional and a sexual being. It is deemed that one must overshadow or erode the other. A woman can 'better' herself by moving away from stripping, but to admit that one still engages in stripping, or enjoyed it, troubles onlookers. The virgin/whore dichotomy dictates the distress at being presented with a woman who is both academic and porn user, or academic and lap-dancer, or academic and sex worker. Whilst the 'former' lap dancer means the deviance has desisted, and can help to alleviate fears, (because it is in the past, it is contained) it does little to halt the haunting presence of the deviant identity, that the pollutant could spill out and infect others. 'What about the children' translates to 'what about the students!?' How can the students possibly take this woman seriously? Why should colleagues take this woman seriously?

Comments left underneath an article on Dr Rachela Colosi, a former dancer and academic who conducted ethnographic research in the lap-dancing club where she worked, are typical of what a woman risks facing once she 'outs' herself as a former dancer (Liverpool Echo, 2013). 'Will she be dancing as part of the seminar' and mocking of the topic of her Ph.D in order to reduce her credibility. Her identity here is spoiled; she is discredited due to this mark. I have experienced this personally whilst at a conference delivering a paper, where a male delegate openly mocked my research area. And could not see past my former stripper status; this tainted his view of my work and possible credibility. My identity was completely spoiled in his eyes (Goffman, 1963) and spilled into my paper, blocking my identity as authentic academic and discrediting me. This also has an internal affect, whereby the outsider is made to feel like an imposter. One can be treated like a novelty, an object of curiosity, but rarely as an active intellectual subject. The insider status of former lap-dancer rarely translates to a widespread concept of expertise. And the fact I could be blamed for my own stigma (Allport, 1954) compounds the legitimacy of such treatment.

To admit to being part of the sex industry is in some academic circles, paramount to tyranny. The influence of radical feminism looks large both in policy and the academy. The affective role of fear is theorized by Dr Clarissa Smith (Ahearne, 2013) where the roaming ambient sex panics send the message that 'we are all at risk'. The danger hangs like a phantom in the air, and the media deliver a relentless

siege of bullets in the forms of ‘sexualization’ ‘objectification’ and ‘pornification,’ often used uncritically, both in the press and the academy, they set the context of fear, anxiety and a strong drive to protect women, and children, from the predatory danger ‘out there’. Lap dancing, porn, sex work, pop videos and clothing are all sewn together under the ‘sexualization’ banner. Certain sections of academia are often as guilty of this panic as the mainstream media, with all commercialized sexual services conceptualized as violence against women, inherently harmful and something to eradicate. The moral values spill out and construct moral geographies of working space. Hammond recalls a friend informing others at an event that she was ‘doing a Ph.D on prostitution’ and inferring she herself was involved in selling sex (Hammond and Kingston, 2014: 23). Diminishing a woman’s academic identity (Ibid) is a way of casting out, and a way of upholding boundaries and attempting to avoid stigma by association.

Along with the emotional strain and emotional labour of lap-dancing that Colosi mentions (2010) there is also the under-documented emotional toil of being a former lap-dancer; of deciding when to reveal, when to ‘pass’, and how to navigate different terrains such as work, home, friendships with the information. When a male professor from a different institution sent me inappropriate direct messages on twitter relating to lap-dancing, I blamed myself for revealing my former status. Having a history of working in the sex industry in any form gives you a deviant identity. If you have ever lap-danced, performed in pornography, or worked in glamour modelling, that self stands still in time, a photographed permanent self who can be recalled and held accountable. Even if you choose to hide your former identity, it remains beneath the service; stigma operates on a layered basis. Aggressive comments particularly originating from a radical feminist discourse can be directly thrown at you; the former lap-dancer must be prepared to be asked personal questions in public. A loud and aggressive conference delegate demanded I answered her questions at an event, ‘So have you ever been paid for sex?’ ‘Don’t you think it’s a bit seedy?’ ‘Why did you do it?’ ‘Don’t you think it negatively affects all women’. Involvement in the sex industry means you are viewed as a harmful pollutant that risks harming others by your very presence and fails to adhere to and uphold conventional value systems.

These (often unwelcome) questions can be fired at any time, often relating to the ‘violence against all women’ discourse, claims of gendered exploitation and

the implication that one must be damaged in some way. How can I possibly call myself a feminist? Colosi's work is important here as she makes the valid point that dancers often feel they must cite money as the reason for their occupation, because to admit to enjoying a deviant occupation is too stigmatizing. To admit to enjoying one's work as an exotic dancer, to not feel shame or to even feel pleasure is a reason to be cast out and marginalized. Sibley draws upon the works of Julia Kristeva and Elizabeth Gross when he argues that maintaining borders involve casting out (Sibley, 1995: 8; McClintock, 1995: 2). I would argue that when the other cannot be cast out, in a work setting for example, the other is constantly made aware of the stigmatizing condition through mockery or questioning, and spatial exclusion is also reinforced. Colleagues and friends can both simultaneously include you and exclude you from the perceived deviant group: 'A lot of them are slags though aren't they ... I don't mean you', 'You're different', 'You don't look like one' 'You don't look the type'. They recognize you might fit into that category, but make attempts to distance both you, and by association themselves, from being too close. These are attempts to clean the association, to distance the proximity between them and 'other'. They are also attempts to make sense of and maintain neat categories. The idea of fluid or multiple identities produces a lot of angst, anxiety and uncertainty. After all, if I know what I am in relation to another, and their identity is in flux, that uncertainly paralyses my claim to a solid identity. By distancing the subject from a category which they might fit, the colleague is trying to maintain purity, and to help manage both associated stigma and the source. It is an attempt to resist sexualizing space (Longhurst, 2001: 22) and to contain pollution from seeping into this respectable place

The lap dancer serves as the abject 'other' to fix wider cultural anxieties surrounding sexual behaviour to the source of what Papastergiadis (2006: 429) refers to as an ambivalent anxiety. Through her body we read cultural decline and decay, the disease of excess and hyper-consumption of sexual services and imagery. Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben, Nikos Papastergiadis talks of the Invasion Complex:

'The fantasy of the anxious self relies of strong boundaries and heightened vigilance against any sign of violation. This boundary becomes invested with the need for security against decline and contamination' (2006: 433).

The lap-dancer, or former dancer now working in academia produces a plethora of uncomfortable emotions from fear, disgust, anxiety, hate and pity, for her body represents an unsure danger, one that roams and returns at different times in different forms. From the pole dancing society at university to the pole dancer in a Rihanna video, the stripper loiters as a cultural harm, a reminder of a murky underworld, a seedy figure who poses a threat to 'impressionable young girls'. Ironically the highly-marketable pole fitness world also does not want association with 'real' lap-dancers (Lister, 2012: 53) angry of the secondary stigma to the sex industry. Pilcher observes that strong social norms continue to regulate sexual behaviour (1990: 80 cited in Lister, 2012: 53) the 'actual' stripper is still a problem; she violates social and gendered sexual norms. Due to these sex panics and fear the lap dancer is only seen through one dimension of her being (Sanders & Hardy, 2014: 38).

Being an academic with a past in the sex industry, or indeed an academic researching the sex industry, brings with it the societal pressure of managing (or rather containing) femininity so as to not take up too much space, not provoke unwanted attention. Hammond and Kingston discuss this phenomenon in their paper 'Experiencing Stigma as Sex Work Researchers in Professional and Personal Lives' (2014). It is the female researcher's responsibility to contain her femininity and guard against excess. It is her responsibility to manage a good character. We know who we are by what we are not, therefore boundary marking and reinforcing is imperative for keeping the 'other' out, and for those who blur these boundaries such as sex work researchers, they become part of the danger. The dirt, deviance, stigma and disgust from the topic of sex work sticks and infiltrates the researchers who experience associated stigma (Goffman, 1963). Ahmed's (2004: 79) work on the cultural politics of emotion accounts for such anxiety as a 'not-yet-ness' which 'means the work of defense is never over'. Those who permeate the boundaries between respectable academic and fallen-woman pose the same threat to normative values. 'Normal' women do not take their clothes off in a club for a living, and 'normal' women do not wish to research such subjects. Hammond demonstrates this when she reveals someone insinuates she must have been abused as a child to have her research interests (Hammond and Kingston, 2014: 397).

It is the responsibility of the female academic to ensure her femininity 'fits' the masculine space of the academy, uber-long hair, red nails, noticeable breasts are indicators that the woman does not belong. The woman's body must not seep into

public space, she might be told her top is too low, too tight, too 'sexy', or in my own case, that I should not wear trousers because my bum 'sticks out'. Once one admits a past in the strip club, one's body becomes a public concern for commenting on and regulating. The female body is public property, regulated, policed and disciplined in a way the male body will never come to know. She must fear the 'body beyond governance' (Skeggs, 2005: 965) and the inscriptions of anti-morality that it imposes. Skeggs argues that:

'It is up to the individual to 'choose' the repertoire of the self. If they do not have access to the range of narratives and discourses for the production of the ethical self they may be held responsible for choosing badly, an irresponsible production of themselves' (Skeggs, 2005: 973).

The constant (re) presenting of the self is tiring additional emotional labour, and is often categorized by leaving one's own viewpoint to imagine what the other actor is thinking. Allie J. Carr accounts for this insecurity by asking:

'How do I look? I'm thinking, while you are all looking at me. From where I am standing this is an exam. I'm wondering what you're looking at, what you're seeing' (Carr, 2011: 1).

Goffman's concept of 'presentation of the self' is useful for understanding how the dancer might choose to perform a role in academia

'a status, a position, a social place is not a material thing to be possessed then displayed; it is a pattern of appropriate conduct, coherent, embellished, and well articulated. Performed with ease or clumsiness, awareness or not, guile or good faith, it is none the less something that must be realized' (1959: 81).

From an embodiment perspective, the lap-dancer remains alive, and conscious effort is given not to reveal her; to avoid slipping into character unexpectedly or unconsciously. Egan reveals how participants feel about 'slipping into dancer mode' (2006: 58). Egan argues that these fissures or slips can be troublesome, dancer 'Trena' recalls that when out with her boyfriend she started 'working the room like

I was at work' (Egan, 2006: 60). Care must be taken from the way I hold myself, the way I walk, the way I flip my hair. The constant self-management of projecting a certain self:

'Goffman defines the self as creative and active, capable of performing and producing not simple a single, unified self but a multifaceted self with the ability to deal with different situations and encounters' (Swingewood, 2000: 17).

The embodiment means I feel the lap dancer, and the inscriptions upon the body which may be interpreted in negative ways. Walking with hunched shoulders so that my body does not spill out, so that my chest does not protrude, preferring back ache to being physically out of place. Sounds, smells, certain shoes and clothing, names, types of lighting transport one from researcher to inner dancer. Egan argues that for dancers:

'modalities of subjectivity are constructed and reconstructed continuously as dancers move throughout the various social cartographies where they have come to know themselves ...' (Egan, 2006: 63).

A guided walk I gave of Sexual Entertainment Venues in Liverpool became the site of such slippages and modalities of subjectivity, as I felt torn between the 'objective' lecturer and the lap-dancer, hyper-aware of guarding against slippages, whilst acutely aware that the lap-dancer had valid insights that theory alone would not provide.

The woman pictured is of course me, and not simply me in a certain context, but a part of me. Frank argues that traditional middle-class femininity is associated with sexual modesty, and that women who dance naked for strangers have transgressed a significant class boundary (Frank, 2002: 264). I would



(Me as lap-dancer, 2006, Matt Ford photography, copyright my own).

second this assumption that the woman who chooses to dance for cash has transgressed an accepted class boundary and by refusing to feel shame is transgressing another boundary. Hanna argues that exotic dance is ‘a form of expression, communication, and within the realms of dance and art’ (Hanna, 1998: 62). Academia is as much of a performance as stripping, as is femininity, and to acknowledge the lap-dancer self as a facet of my identity is to welcome an exploration of body politics. My body is not, and never has been an object, but rather a sexual subject. The mutual exclusive selves (Egan, 2006: 56) of lecturer, researcher, dancer, wife, and friend do not exist, and instead a continuum of selves circulate. Resistance then is owning these different parts of the self, and embracing the stripper as not only a performance, but as a valuable live experience. Acknowledging that teacher or academic does not exist in spite of the dancer, but perhaps in part because of her.

The narrative of the stripper self in academia is necessarily messy and non-linear. She slips, perforates, dominates and shrinks at different times. In conclusion, despite changing landscapes and an argued proliferation in both the expansion of the sex industry and the ‘sexualized culture’ which contextualizes it, I argue that stigma and exclusion for those who have either undertaken work in the sex industry or research it, remain as strong as ever. The emotional labour involved in being a former lap-dancer and managing a professional image means much self-surveillance and critique. One might be labeled merely as stripper or sex worker, or receive mockery of one’s chosen Ph.D area in a way to diminish legitimacy as an academic. The idea that a woman can be either an intellectual or sexual, but not both, remains intact. Likewise stigma can spill out to spoil not only one’s identity, but the credibility of academic work. Alignment of self with a ‘seedy’ industry means blaming the self for unwanted attentions, and the visible body becomes a public body, on display for others to question. Colleagues can use humour to ‘other’ the lap-dancer, or to draw boundaries between dancer and ‘other dancers’. The presence of multiple identities can provoke anxiety in others, posing a threat to normative values and understandings. The female academic must shrink to fit her space, not draw too much attention to herself. To ‘out’ oneself as former lap-dancer is risky, and carries with it risk of stigma and exclusion.

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