

STRIPPING TOWARDS EQUALITY

ERIC JOST

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The night I stripped for the first time was the night I became an activist.

It was December 2003, and my friends and I – having just finished final exams – decided to celebrate by going to a gay male strip club in Washington, DC. I had no idea what to expect; I had never been to a strip club before – gay or straight.

Approaching the club, I could hear the thumping bass of the music from inside, and my heart was quickening in time with the rhythm as we made our way toward the front door. We paid a small cover charge and made our way onto the main floor. The source of the music came from floor-to-ceiling speakers on either side of an enclosed DJ booth. In front of us, patrons sat around a bar while nude dancers performed acrobatic routines from brass poles hanging from the ceiling. The small main stage – backed by sparkling gold streamers – lined the far right wall as a muscular policeman slowly removed his clothing while a bachelorette party watched in awed anticipation. Along every wall, television monitors broadcast images of men in every possible sexual position.

My friends and I stood in shock, attempting to process the sensory overload that had hit us only moments earlier. I hadn’t even been inside for

five minutes before the club manager – a smallish man in his mid-thirties – walked up to me and asked, “How would you like to dance tonight?” His question caught me off guard. Me?! Dance? Naked?! Only a few months had passed since I lost my virginity, so being suddenly propositioned to enter the sex industry, however briefly, was a complete shock. I glanced at my friends, giggled, and coyly declined his invitation. He didn’t persevere, but told me to let him know if I changed my mind.

After much deliberation with friends, and after the manager and several dancers again attempted to sway me, I decided to suck it up and get on stage. With gold streamers twinkling behind me, I stripped down to nothing but my socks (where of course attentive customers would place their generous tips).

Like any virgin, my first time was less than spectacular. I don’t imagine it was very erotic as I had no idea what I was doing – and I wasn’t particularly confident with my body. Not to mention the fact that my two best friends were staring up at me from the floor below! Additionally, whenever I noticed one of the club’s patrons watching me with any interest, I would quickly look away, embarrassed by their attention. But I finished my thirty minute shift, collected my tips (a paltry \$20), and left the club quickly, afraid to hear any comments from the other dancers, patrons, or the manager. But as I exited the club, my emotions took over and I felt a rush of exhilaration at having broken out of my comfort zone and tried something new. I was hooked!

While I had a great time on stage that night, my overprotective boyfriend and a stint overseas to study abroad hindered my return for almost a year. When I was given an assignment in class to develop an ethnography around a designated “queer space” in DC, I immediately thought that the strip club would be the perfect place to conduct my research – and possibly make my return to the stage. So I made a deal with the manager who had months before coaxed me onto stage: I would strip periodically at the club, in exchange for interviews with club patrons, employees, and other dancers. And, of course, I got to keep all of the money I made. It was a perfect arrangement!

For the next four months, I became something of a regular there, talking to dozens of customers and strippers while writing furiously about the ins and outs of participating in this particular queer space: How the dancers interacted with the customers; how the customers interacted with each other; and how the venue itself facilitated social networking among everyone in that space. Concurrently, I felt empowered by dancing. Never before had I been admired for my body – and the ability to make money simply by using what nature gave me was liberating and my self confidence grew immensely.

As time went on and my research project came to a close, I felt that it was time for me to make a decision: to continue stripping or end my career as I ended my project. Although my friends and my partner all knew that I was doing field work at a strip club, I had decided not to tell anyone about the full extent of my involvement. I felt gratified by the work, but the negative reaction from my boyfriend after my first foray into the world of stripping frightened me into keeping my silence. And that fear ultimately made my decision for me: I would stop dancing. At the time, I couldn't bring myself to face my friends' reactions, and although it saddened me, I felt such a relief upon quitting. No longer would I be lying about where I was going or what I was doing there. In fact, I found myself so afraid of what people would think of me that I didn't tell anyone about my work until several years later.

Even though my tenure in the sex industry was relatively brief, my work at the club impacted me immediately. I began reading anything I could get my hands on regarding strippers, sex workers, and others working in the sex industry. Unfortunately, most of what I read was disheartening. Little to no testimonials or research have been done on or by male sex workers, and many of the texts I read addressing female sex workers were derogatory and unenlightened. Sex-negative feminists, such as Catharine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin, viewed sex work – even gay male sex work – as being exploitative of women and inherently evil; and many of their colleagues seemed to subscribe to that particular point of view. From what I found, it seemed that academia had agreed that the sex industry was put in place for one purpose: to exploit and degrade its workers.

Soon, with some guidance from friends and professors, I discovered the works of Lily Burana, Carol Queen, Annie Sprinkle, and Carol Leigh (aka Scarlot Harlot). Here were women who defied social norms and didn't view sex or sex work as degrading but, rather, empowering. They argued that not only is sex work worthwhile, but more importantly also legitimate, fun, and sacred. I learned from them that sex work is not a continuation of patriarchal exploitation, but instead, a potentially subversive act that, in fact, undermines patriarchy and pervasive sex negative attitudes. These might have been strong women speaking on behalf of other women, but they were suddenly my new heroes.

Encouraged and motivated by my fellow travelers, I entered the world of queer activism. I was determined to not only fight for the rights of GLBTQ individuals, but bring sex worker rights to the forefront and destigmatize sexual norms on the whole. But, to my surprise, many so-called progressive communities seemed far more aligned with conservatives on these subjects. Feminist and queer organizations alike felt that fighting for sex worker rights would hurt their movements' credibility. Even the organizations that I worked with that focused specifically on sexual health or GLBTQ rights never considered sex worker rights a top priority.

In 2006, however, after years of advocating and fighting losing battles with employers, I finally saw a glimmer of hope. I attended the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's Creating Change Conference in my hometown of Kansas City. I was excited to attend the conference particularly because of the "Sexual Freedom Track" the Task Force had carved out within the conference's program. Here were a series of workshops specifically designed to promote the rights of queer people who haven't received the same recognition within the movement.

At one workshop early on in the conference, the issue of sex worker rights came up and I saw my fellow sex workers vocalizing their indignation at the treatment they received by the mainstream GLBTQ rights movement. In a moment of exhilaration, I stood up and added my voice to the outcries, describing my own history with the sex industry and my displeasure with

having been silenced by the GLBTQ community when I spoke out in defense of my right to strip and in defense of sex worker rights on the whole. It was the first time that I had “come out” as an ex-dancer and I remember trembling as I described my experience, fearing the inevitable persecution soon to come as a result of my disclosure.

The amount of support my fellow sex workers and I received was overwhelming, and everyone in that room seemed genuinely concerned over the current state of sex worker rights. I felt that I was witnessing a change within the GLBTQ rights movement – as if the issue at hand finally had a face and a voice. I imagined a great shift to be taking place, as if the 2,000 people attending the conference were now unified behind the sex worker rights movement and we would see it listed as a priority by the movement’s frontrunners.

As I left the conference room for the evening, however, I walked by two participants I had seen periodically throughout the day. As I passed them, I overheard one of them say, “I understand where they’re coming from, but I wish the prostitutes wouldn’t force their ideals upon us.” Immediately my dreams of grandeur were shattered.

My experience at that conference and the lack of action taken in its aftermath has left me wondering why – after living through the ongoing feminist and gay rights movements and the alleged sexual revolution – sex and sex work continue to be among the most taboo subjects in the 21st century? Worldwide, GLBTQ communities have embraced each other’s differences and celebrated our supposed sexual freedom that evades many of our heterosexual brothers and sisters. But the apprehensions I have witnessed when bringing sex to the forefront might bring us to ask ourselves: Is the queer community really as sexually accepting as we like to think it is?

Over the last decade, we have witnessed the rise of the Marriage Equality movement. And while success is being made – however slowly – on that front, our focus on partner rights seems to have frightened us back into our sexual closets. It is almost as if HIV/AIDS made us so fearful to fight for sexual freedom that we have looked for other, more “appropriate” battles to

win. AIDS not only affected our health, but single-handedly erased the entire sexual revolution from our collective consciousness. And although many have worked tirelessly to convince the general public that we are no longer concerned with the “sexual” aspect of our “sexual identity,” the truth is that, by forsaking it, we are lying to ourselves and actually risk losing the right to express our sexuality openly and feely. And I, for one, am not willing to reenter any one of my many sexual closets.

Four years ago, I began a journey that has led me down a path I could have never imagined. A few months dancing nude on a stage has resulted in more judgment and vilification than I ever could have imagined. And while I continue to support the movement that has seen so many advances in recent decades, I find myself more and more disheartened with the battles GLBTQ activists choose to fight; while finding it slightly ironic that a movement supposedly based on sexual freedom has chosen to shy away from sexuality only four decades after the movement’s beginning. Our political activist organizations would be better served to remember the fact that when the riots at Stonewall occurred, GLBTQ individuals were being locked up for the same reasons that sex workers are today.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eric Jost received his BA in anthropology from American University in Washington, DC and is currently an MPH candidate at the University of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia. He is a contributing writer for the Sydney queer newsmagazine, SX, and writes on a variety of issues including queer imagery in the media; GLBTQ rights; sex worker rights; feminism; sexual health; and sex positive culture. When he is not working or studying, Eric spends time writing for his blog, "Confessions of a Gay Male Feminist."