

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/275276719>

# The Reflexive Self Through Narrative: A Night in the Life of an Exotic Dancer/Researcher

Chapter · January 1992

---

CITATIONS  
97

READS  
223

1 author:



[Carol Rambo](#)

The University of Memphis

35 PUBLICATIONS 916 CITATIONS

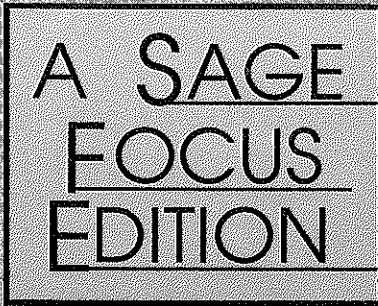
SEE PROFILE



# INVESTIGATING SUBJECTIVITY

*Research on Lived Experience*

Carolyn Ellis  
Michael G. Flaherty  
editors



A SAGE  
FOCUS  
EDITION

## *The Reflexive Self Through Narrative*

### *A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer/Researcher*

CAROL RAMBO RONAI

Listen to my voice; it is a blend of many voices. I am a graduate student, a wife, a daughter, an erotic dancer, a friend; the quantity of potential identities extend into infinity . . .

\* \* \*

Let these three asterisks denote a shift to a different temporal/spatial/attitudinal realm.

\* \* \*

In this chapter, I examine lived emotional experience. I demonstrate the difficulty in extricating a researcher self from other selves while involved in participant observation, and I convey to readers the conflicts in assuming the identity of an erotic dancer. The perspective of "emotional sociology" and

---

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Special thanks to the editors of this volume and my husband Jack Ronai. I would also like to thank Danny Jorgensen and Hernan Vera for their comments on former drafts of this chapter.

the technique of "systematic introspection" assist in achieving these goals. Ellis (1991b, p. 126) refers to emotional sociology as "consciously and reflectively feeling for our selves, our subjects, and our topics of study, and evoking those feelings in our readers." Dilthey (quoted in Hodges 1944, p. 122) similarly discusses a "transference of the subject's own self into a given complex of expressions." Out of this transference "arises the highest form in which the totality of mental life can operate in understanding—that of reproducing or reliving." Like Dilthey, Weber's (1962, p. 36) "verstehen" is an explanatory, interpretive understanding of behavior based on "a grasp of the context of meaning within which the actual course of behavior arises."

Ellis (1991a, 1991b) calls for the use of one's own emotional experience as a legitimate object of sociological research to be described, examined, and theorized. In this perspective, focus on researchers and their feelings during research situations in the field is of particular interest. Because researchers have fluctuating levels of absorption and emotional involvement in their work on any given project, this view offers significant insight into how various participants in settings might be emotionally experiencing their social worlds.

Finally, Ellis (1991a, 1991b) encourages sociologists to use "emotional narratives" written from a biographically subjective point of view for evidence on how emotions are experienced within the context of everyday life. One may produce one's own narratives by consulting one's experience and/or examining other narratives. Using these as data to theorize and abstract from, one produces an emotional sociology that describes, interprets, and embodies lived emotional experience.

The following is an introspective narrative that examines my emotional experience while rejoining the strip bar setting as a dancer/researcher and the lived experience of writing about it. Introspection is conscious awareness of itself, a social process of self-examination involving conversation with oneself. "It is active thinking about one's thoughts and feelings; it emerges from social interaction" (Ellis 1991a, p. 28). In my narrative, I use multiple layers of reflection—a layered account—shifting forward, backward, and sideways through time, space, and various attitudes in a narrative format.

As an undergraduate, I danced to finance my bachelor's degree. In 1987, I danced again to gather data for my master's thesis. During that time, I used participant observation techniques, systematic self-introspection, and interactive introspection. As a participant observer, I observed the behavior of others, recorded conversations, and described the setting and interactions among participants using systematic introspection, and I focused on and recorded my thoughts and feelings while dancing. Interactive introspection

involves working back and forth with others to produce emergent experiences that can be examined. During the study, I interacted with two professors for the purpose of producing these circumstances.

The data presented here come from field notes I took during and after my experience of dancing. They blend events from several nights into a typical "night in the life of a dancer." The participant observer role is never clearly separated from that of being a dancer, a wife, or the other roles I enact. These materials will give the reader a perspective on becoming a dancer/researcher, writing about the experience, and the impact of multiple identities on my "self" as a participant observer. It is my hope that readers will live their own experience while reading about mine and have an understanding of my lived experience as a result.

\* \* \*

God dammit! Another rewrite. The amber letters on my computer screen have engraved themselves on my eyeballs. Every time I look away from the terminal, yellow-brown letters float with me in space. Is this the "real" lived experience, my typing this right now, this very second? This is silly. I reflect and start typing, and the reflection is already replaced by the typing experience.

Childlike, I regress into endless digression, a snake chasing my own tail and swallowing it until I finally disappear into absurdity. This prose dually articulates my opinion of my ability to capture the lived experience as well as stalling on the rewrite. When one describes one's experience, the text is always transformed by the telling of it; clearly demarcated, linear story lines cannot be used to convey lived experience. Instead, the telling of it is a circular process of interpretation that blurs and intertwines both cognitive and emotional understandings (Denzin 1984). The writing style I use here—the layered account—is designed to convey the blurred and intertwined quality that writing about the lived experience of dancing entails.

\* \* \*

According to one editor, I'm having a problem with my "voice." She tells me it is not clear who is speaking at various points in the text I have produced. I need to clarify when the dancer is speaking and when the researcher is speaking. Here's the problem. My voice is cracking as I write this. My identity is fracturing as I spill my guts while trying to produce in my audience an emotional knowing of my experience as a dancer/researcher. I cannot smoothly switch hats and write, "Here is how the dancer in me feels, and

here is how the researcher feels, and here is how the wife feels, and so on." It is dishonest and contrived to sort out separate influences and label them, though occasionally one voice will speak loudly and clearly. My perception of my "self" incorporates influences from these roles, but the end result is not compartmentalized around them. The self produced in this text is emergent from the interaction of those roles.

\* \* \*

My night (nightmare?) starts when I pull into the parking lot of the strip bar. Exiting the car, I step out of my mind and into a surreal horror flick, my black spike-heeled shoes awkwardly clacking their echo across the parking lot pavement toward the strip bar entrance. Already, I'm assaulted by the roaming eyes of drunk patrons as they exit the bar. "Hey, baby, are you the show tonight?" one yells at me as I pass by.

I cringe. I'm not into this. I hate that I'm already perceived as a dancer, and treated accordingly, even before I get into the bar. I put on a cardboard smile. "Ain't we all the show here," I respond, more as a statement than a question. He laughs. The moron doesn't even know I'm implying that he's as much a part of this freak show as I am. For a moment, I hate him for being what he is, for facilitating the existence of this place. I next turn the hate in on myself, the hypocrite. How easily I judge these characters when I'm here too.

Next, I try to rationalize away my emotional outburst. I'm here for research purposes; I'm not trapped by this but here voluntarily, I say to myself. I get off on the idea that I have enough guts not only to dance topless but to share the experience with others. For most people, this event would be a dark hidden secret, better left that way. It is in my self-concept that I'm tough, less influenced by what people think of me than the average person. I dare anyone to disparage me personally for having been a dancer.

Reacting to the characters in this setting cheapens me, whittles away at my resolve, demonstrates that in fact I'm not totally shielded from their opinions. I must straighten up my attitude, be objective, realize that they are acting in the only way they know, and be above reacting emotionally to their actions toward myself or other women in the bar.

Regardless of my cognitive desire to be the intrepid sociologist, braving new frontiers, going where most women dare not tread, my dread of the coming night imposes its presence on my reality in the form of a tightness in my chest that constricts my breathing. The tightness is paralysis. My heart rebels, beating a mad tempo against the constraints of my thoracic cavity.

I imagine the pulse forcing the vasoconstriction to loosen up and dilate with the rush of blood. This sudden looseness is perceived as butterflies in my gut and I am nauseated, afraid I will throw up on the spot. I'm so scared, I almost cry.

My efforts at control barely succeed. The criterion for success is to put one foot in front of the other until I hit the front door. Stark terror lurks below the surface, waiting for a weak millisecond to attack and take hold again. I want to hide and cry and run away, in no particular rational order. I extract a sadomasochistic delight from the image of fleeing the bar, defeated by my fear, into reassuring (male?) arms. "Now don't you know better than to try and go into a place like that?" my fantasy male chides me, asserting his mastery over me and my situation even as he offers salvation and comfort.

Get a grip, damn it, it's only a fucking bar, I mentally slap myself, finding my desire for dependence both attractive and repulsive. I get a charge of machismic satisfaction from not giving in to these emotions. To divert my attention, I again seek my enthusiasm for my research, but it's not there. The closer I get to the door, the more I don't want to dance.

\* \* \*

My body always knew better than my mind how much I hated dancing. Every "first" night at a new bar produced hives on my face and/or swollen eyes and lips. After dancing for a week, I inevitably ended up with the flu. Often I quit dancing when I had been sick for a while. Once I quit, recovery was around the corner. I can rationalize all I want but something inside me controlling the show hates doing this. I should probably listen to it, shut it up, or integrate it.

\* \* \*

If I am quiet and do not distract myself with the inane details of living life; if I just listen, but not for words; if I just let go and feel for a second, then there is a tightly wound, densely compressed emotion that wants to leap out of my chest—bypassing my mouth and my brain—and scream.

\* \* \*

Bury it. I can't listen to that and get anything done. My self is torn into little pieces that must be reassembled into a self that will survive the night. I am Carol, researcher, and wife, yet I am also Sabrina (my stage name), cock-tease, and hustler. My master's thesis topic is tough to legitimate to

myself and others. This world I desperately want to understand assaults my reality system and my identity. The roles—dancer, wife, and researcher—often clash with one another. Things become muddled when I try to explain why I am willing to disrobe in front of strange men in the name of research. What is it with me that I am able to do this when others in my culture find the concept untenable? Good wives certainly don't do this to their husbands. Or am I in fact just another dancer with a good line of bullshit, playing the marks?

The self who is all of this is a processual dialectic, emergent from the interaction of all the demands that society places on individuals acting in their social worlds (Blumer 1969). I supposedly have a self that is a whole, neatly divided up into parts or facets that act to fulfill the tasks of particular roles. But, in reality, each facet exists only because my culture demands I frame each separately from the others regardless of the clashes and overlaps that result from the demands of the roles. The self exists as a process in a constant state of transformation and flux; it is the dialogue between the facets. There are no hard and fast answers to what the situation "really is." The answer changes as quickly as I can reflect on it because the situation is constantly in motion. Self is fleeting.

I am frightened. I have total responsibility for what is happening. Sabrina is not a separate self, nor some kind of alternate identity to be blamed, like one of the faces of Eve, but is a culmination of all my dark potential. There is no safely isolating this, cordoning it off from the rest of my identity. Having been/being a dancer is part of what I am. The need to understand these processes compels me finally to open the door.

\* \* \*

I often feel like I'm not a "real" dancer. I use the line "I am going to school!" to legitimate my dancing to myself and others and to provide a disclaimer as to why I am there. This backfires sometimes, as I seem to have a talent for getting into trouble with other dancers and customers. One customer, trying to get revenge on me for not giving him a hand job, told two dancers that I said I had more class than they did because I attended college. For the rest of the night, the dancers shoved me around whenever they could get me alone, and said things like, "You don't have to go to class to have class, bitch," and "What have 'you' got stuck so far up 'your' ass!"

One dancer took me aside and asked what I said to the customer. Upon hearing about my refusal to deliver on the hand job, and discussing with her the aforementioned general character of what I tell customers about why I'm



in the bar, she told me, "You know, I bet none of us feel like we are 'really' dancers, at least I don't. I'm just doing this for my kids."

Another spoke up, "I've got steep car payments."

And another said, "I want to get enough money together so that I can get my kids back with me again. Their dad got custody because I'm broke." Perhaps believing that you are not really a dancer is part of being a dancer. Maybe I am a "real" dancer after all.

\* \* \*

Tobacco smoke and loud music belch from the orifice that is the bar's entrance. The red inner walls are coated with a dank brown nicotine sheen that glistens when the outside lights hit it just so. Inside the tunnel-like hallway, the place is filthy. Trace odors of alcoholic-vomit breath, sweat, feminine musk, and stale smoke sour my stomach. In combination, these qualities inescapably suggest entering a cold, rank, infected womb. This kind of thinking is not productive so I shut down my thoughts to steel myself against the onslaught of confusing stimuli. The dark innards of the bar together with the loud music and colored lights generally leave me disoriented and unable to see for about 45 seconds. The cumulative effect of entering the bar is that of crossing the boundaries of "the real world" to enter a more ethereal, alternate reality.

Sure enough, I step behind and startle two guys waiting for their eyes to adjust before they start navigating the bar's floor plan. They quickly part to let me pass, then follow me to the front desk, where they are left, leaderless, to fend for themselves. They are not regulars; regulars would not be so passive. The bouncer informs me that I am sixth on stage, following a girl named Sunshine.

I negotiate my way to the dressing room, saying hello to a familiar customer who promises to buy me a drink. I swing my hips in a wide rapid arch to barely avoid the groping hands of a man who swears, "I have died and gone to heaven. Momma you're built! Come to me baybeee!"

The tone of his drunken whine pisses me off. I put a smile on my face to disguise my wrath. As if acting the coquette, I smack his hands as hard as I can and whine, "Get a life, baybeee," mocking his tone back to him.

"You're a feisty little cunt, aren't you baybee," he yells, laughing, as I pass him.

A whisper in my head tells me, You needn't have said anything to him; you just escalated the situation. Why did you strike out at him like that?

Another voice answers: His weakness is disgusting. If he has to paw people and whine like that he deserves what he gets. Fuck him.

For god's sake, can't you be a little more above it than that? Besides, what he said was the first hurt of the night. It's so early in the night for hurt feelings or for a bad attitude.

The badder, the better, I think to myself, annoyed with this wimpy voice so easily upset by some silly ass calling me a cunt. I fake a sardonic laugh to myself at the childish exchange of body part names and move on to the dressing room.

Having never met Sunshine, the dancer I follow on stage, I ask around in the dressing room to see who she is. After a bit, a woman in front of the mirror with a butchered haircut and attitude speaks up. "Yeah me, I'm Sunshine. What of it?" Damn, I think to myself, I'm not up to a showdown this early in the evening.

Rapidly, I reply, "I needed to see you so I'd know who to follow on stage."

With an upward stroke, she traces her lower eye lid in an obnoxiously thick black line, while watching me in the mirror. To my relief, she smiles and says, "You scared me. I don't need to be in trouble with management already."

Now I understand her aggressive attitude. She is new. Jocularly, I return with, "Yeah, you're fined a hundred bucks, hand it over." We laugh and the tension eases out of my body. I'm grateful I'm not going to have to fight. Sunshine holds out her hand, and I shake it. Her dry palms and abrupt gestures during the handshake reflect her brusque defensiveness. I decide I like her.

The dressing room is deceptively cheery, lit with bright fluorescent bulbs and feminine chatter. At shift change, about 30 women must cooperate with one another to change clothes in a space designed to hold 10. Tempers flare around the dressing room as half-dressed women step over each other and bags of costumes and makeup to reach differing destinations such as the mirror, locker, electrical outlet, sink, or toilet. Conversation is generally about men, money, or who is feuding with whom these days.

I try to make my space as small as possible, doing all my changing in front of my locker. To save time, I put on makeup and style my hair before I leave home. I'm privately smug that I get ready faster than everyone else and am generally one of the first dancers to "hit the floor." Sometimes, though, I extend my stay in the dressing room to eavesdrop on a good conversation. Tonight, however, my nerve is shot; the man who called me a cunt got to me. I don't feel as cocksure as I need to in order to "be a dancer." Like being thrown from a horse, I have to get out on the floor as soon as possible or else I will have a bad attitude for the rest of the night.

\* \* \*

When a dancer has a bad attitude, she is failing to act out the role of "dancer" because she has failed to control her outward display of emotion. Like the airline attendants in Arlie Hochschild's (1983) work on the commercialization of emotion, dancers must "work" on their negative emotions so that customers in the bar will feel like they are in a "friendly and convivial setting."

Fear, for instance, inhibits a dancer from contacting customers or dancing well on stage. If a dancer appears frightened, customers are generally turned off. As one informer put it: "I'm not here to scare the girls. I'm here at least for the illusion that they like me. When I see a scared new dancer, I feel like the boogie man."

Another bad attitude is overt belligerence. One manager was discussing an older dancer he claimed was suffering burnout: "I actually watched her hit a customer on the arm, stick out her hand for the money, and tap her foot on the ground like it was just too much trouble to stand there and wait for him to tip her. She walked off and didn't even say thank you when the customer handed it over." The customer complained to the manager and left the bar. In this situation, the dancer was refusing to get into the part of being concerned for her customer. Like airline attendants suffering burnout, this dancer "may refuse to act at all, thus withdrawing her emotional labor altogether. Since the job itself calls for good acting, she will be seen as doing the job poorly" (Hochschild 1983, p. 188). If a dancer comes in the dressing room claiming to have a bad attitude, it is general knowledge that she means she is not making money because she can not force herself to "act" right.

\* \* \*

With all the confused emotions I have about dancing, even dancing for my master's degree, I wonder as I write this why I put myself through it if I hate it as much as I claim? Making large amounts of money and getting a great deal of attention are motivations, but they do not get at the heart of the attraction of dancing.

I become something that is other than what my "self" normally is. The environment elicits behavior and attitudes from me that in nondancing everyday life I would not have a chance to experience. My idea of who I think I am shatters in the face of what I become in the bar. Sabrina, the dancer, does not fit with Carol, the student, and wife. I am forced to reevaluate myself and consequently everything around me. It shakes me out of the lethargy of my daily life and stimulates me for a little while.

\* \* \*

Exiting the dressing room, I notice a regular customer I neglected the night before because another customer asked me to sit with him first. Deciding to hit on him, I say flirtatiously as I approach his table, "Dick, I'd like to talk with you when you have the time."

"If I'm in the bar later, then maybe," he replies. It is obvious that Dick's feelings are hurt from the night before. Scorned customers are hard to win back. I walk past Dick and seat myself at a nearby table, leaving him the option to join me while not forcing myself on him. After a while, when Dick does not approach me, I walk toward three men sitting in the corner and ask them if they would care for some company. Once Dick sees me "with other men," he leaves the bar. Dick, in my opinion, is too sensitive and too much into the illusion of being wanted by these women. I get angry at his gullibility for a second, then stifle it. I have other things to think about.

One of the three men, a customer in a silk suit, with two gold rings and a Rolex watch, responds to my overture and asks his more casually dressed companions to move over so that I may be seated. He promptly orders a drink for me, asks my name, and introduces himself as Tom. After introducing his friends, Fred and Harry, Tom asserts, "Coming to this bar was Fred's idea. I want to show these guys a good time, and if this is what they want to do, this is what they are going to do."

Silently, I am amused at Tom's condescension toward Fred and Harry. Tom haughtily continues, "A girl like you, can't you do better than a place like this? I could get you a decent job."

"Where?" I ask. "Doing what?"

"I could get you a job at one of the nursing homes I own. You could work in the kitchen or with the patients. Do you have a valid Florida driver's license?" I think to myself, Sir Galahad wants to take me away from "all of this" so that I may respectably scrub the halls of his nursing home.

Annoyed, I tell him, "I appreciate the thought, but I am doing fine." I give him a pitch about how I am working my way through college, so I won't be stuck doing this the rest of my life. He buys it and pontificates for a while about the importance of college.

Later, I ask, "Would you care for a table dance?"

"No," he responds, "I don't go in for that sort of thing. Tell you what though, why don't you do one for Harry?" I am beginning to realize I am not going to make much money off Tom. He is buying plenty of drinks but acts uninterested in anything more than entertaining his friends.

\* \* \*

*The Table Dance*

Clothed in a bra-like top and full panties or other revealing costume, the dancer leaned over a seated patron, her legs inside his, and swayed suggestively in rhythm to the music playing in the bar. Theoretically, customers were allowed to touch only the hips, waist, back and outside of a dancer's legs. Many men tried and some succeeded in doing more. (Ronai and Ellis 1989, pp. 275-76)

\* \* \*

During the next song, I stand and dance for Harry, who slides himself all the way down to the end of the chair so that my leg brushes his crotch. I back up an inch or two from him and continue to dance, but turn my backside to him so that I can regain my composure. Harry places his fingers beneath the elastic leg openings of my panties, attempting to trace an inward path to my crotch. I reflexively jerk away from the gesture in part because it tickles and because the idea of him reaching his goal is repulsive. The snap of the elastic reverberates loud enough against my ass so that his compatriots are aware of what he is up to. I look to either side of me at both men. They are amused, grinning ear to ear. For a split second, the thought of hitting them with a closed fist enters my mind. It would be great to mangle them, to shatter their jaws, to permanently wipe those asinine smiles off their smug faces. I think about the potential money, I think about my role as a researcher, I take a deep breath, and I turn around to face Harry again.

"God, what a body," Harry says. "You stick with ole' Tom over there, he's loaded. We're in from Chicago, and we have a condo out on Treasure Island. We would love to have you out to visit. Five hundred dollars for a private party."

"What do I have to do at this private party for five hundred dollars?" I ask.

"Anything goes baby, anything," is his reply.

I have difficulty keeping Harry's fingers out of my panties. Every time I turn around to face him, he attempts to put his fingers in my crotch. "Hey, be cool about that," I say, "I'll get in trouble with my boss."

"Just havin' some fun baby," he replies.

No one is going to sympathize or give a shit about how this guy is treating me. I asked for this because I picked this job. I knew what I was getting into when I chose this as my research topic. Why should I expect anything different? I'm the type of woman who would take this kind of job, so I am getting what I deserve. It all becomes my fault.

Sometimes, the whole thing strikes me as absurd, and I laugh. Other times I feel like crying. In the past, I have left customers to go cry. This night is new, however, and my strength fresh. I'll get through this dance.

Afterward, Harry says, "Seriously, think about that five hundred dollars, and stick with Tom."

Later, Tom asks me to dance for Fred, and warns, "Fred offended a girl earlier by putting his hands where they don't belong."

Armed for battle, I approach Fred, who says, "I cannot be held responsible for my actions. I am a dirty boy, and I like to have a good time."

I say, "Momma will keep the dirty boy in line." We laugh. I get him to talk dirty to distract his hands from action.

"Tell me about your favorite fuck," I ask, while dancing.

"Oh, I like it all kinds of ways," he replies. "I'd love to get you in the sack." He sticks his tongue out at me and waggles it.

"Bad boy, are you propositioning me?" I ask.

"It's my duty to proposition you, my duty as a red-blooded horny American male."

"You may need to be disciplined, bad boy."

"Oh, please, don't hurt me." We laugh.

"Did you know I can lick my eyebrows?" he says.

"That line is as old as the hills on my grandmother's chest, and older than the line I just fed you," I reply.

"I swear, sweetheart, I may be old, but you are missing out on the best damn fuck you would ever have," he retorts.

I picture fucking this old buzzard and lose control of my face. I have to turn around and dance with my rear near him, so that he can't see my disgust. I get the buzzard image out of my mind, pull my face together, and turn back around.

"Triple O baby," he says, "I bet I could give you a triple orgasm."

I look at his face and, instead of picturing this activity, I watch his bushy eyebrows go up and down and see him as absurd. I think to myself, this rotting carcass of wrinkled flesh is no threat. Just keep your shit together until the dance is over.

"I could fuck the living daylights out of you, if you would only give me the chance to show you," he says, intruding into my thoughts. At this point, I find the distance I need to tolerate his routine. Thinking of him as silly is doing the trick. I'll never have to screw that. Additionally, my routine is working—he hasn't laid a hand on me through the whole dance.



At the end of the dance, he tells me he wants his friend Tom to loosen his tie and relax. "I'm concerned for anyone wound that tight," he says with conviction.

I exclaim, "How nice of you to be concerned. Even perverts have their good side."

"Get moving along and entertain Tom," Fred says, swatting my butt.

Because it is my turn to dance on stage, I leave the trio. My dance is listless, distracted, and uninvolved because there are few men in the bar. Two drunks with puke breath each tip me a dollar. I avoid kissing their stench by rapidly getting up from my kneeling position. They look piqued, but I ignore them. Dealing with all this grossness is starting to take its toll. Anger spawned of helplessness creeps around the fringes of my consciousness, providing a steady backdrop to the evening's mood.

After my main act, I dance on the side stage. One of the men there appears to be retarded, or at least his demeanor seems strange. With glazed blue eyes peering out beneath an enlarged forehead, and a slack, narrow jaw, he takes an unusually long time, clumsily tipping a one dollar bill to the woman on the main stage. At the side stage, he tips me a ten. My first impulse is to tell him he made a mistake, but I say nothing. I think to myself, would the other girls give him back his money? Hell no! Every guy who walks in here is a potential source of money. I would take the money from a drunk, so why not from him? After all, I'm here for the money. Perhaps he even intended to give me the ten because he liked me a lot and wanted to get my attention. Probably not. I keep the tip, not recognizing the significance of how far my researcher role is losing focus in my thoughts.

\* \* \*

My decision gnaws at me much of the night. What a fucked-up society. Who lets retards spend their free time in titty bars? He didn't have the ability to know what he was giving me as a tip. I should have given it back. Should we give IQ tests to all the guys who walk in here? Who the hell teaches these people values anyway? Who taught me mine? It is difficult to justify how easily I can change my behavior when I am working as a dancer. Inside the confines of the establishment, I feel free to take their money from them in any manner I can, short of outright theft. Outside, I judge the same acts as wrong. A "real" dancer, though, would take the money. But would a "real" dancer feel bad about it later?

\* \* \*

With my stage acts completed, I hang up my dress in the dressing room, put on a push-up bra and panties, make a note to ask some dancers what they would do in the situation with the retarded guy, and return to Tom's table. When he asks me if I will meet him at the Hilton, I get royally pissed and say, "I'm not allowed to date the customers." He gives me a napkin with his home address and telephone number on it. "I'm not allowed to take phone numbers; I am not a prostitute," I state emphatically.

He begs me to see him. "You just have to go out with me. I don't think of you as one of these women. Wouldn't you please consider it?" His slight inebriation lends a weepy quality to his voice, and it is getting on my nerves. I have not made enough money off him to justify putting up with this bullshit. I decide to leave Tom holding his drink.

Merril, the customer I approach next, walks with a limp and a cane. He has long blonde hair braided to his waist, tanned skin, and is short but stocky like an amateur body builder. He says right up front, "Don't worry about me, I'm full of shit." I should have taken him seriously.

"I've been coming to this bar for years, and I've dropped a lot of money in here. I make a lot of money so I don't have to work."

He says he used to be a biker, at one time played in a rock and roll band, and fought in a war.

I ask, "What do you do these days?"

His response is, "I get tan." I ask him if he wants a table dance. He smiles and says, "Here goes the routine."

Once we are seated, he says, "I eat real good pussy. I bet you've got a fine one. I love pussy. I can eat that all day. I knew a chick once who could eat better pussy than me. She was wild."

Trying to tune in to the tone of his bullshit, I ask him, "What do you consider to be the criteria for a fine pussy?"

He looks at me with what I take to be mock shock and says, "Well, now, I didn't expect you to be so nasty."

I say, "You brought it up, now answer the question."

"What the hell?"

"Answer the question for Christ's sake, or do you feel guilty?"

He slams his beer on the counter and says, "I don't feel guilty about nothing. Do you feel guilty about something?"

"No," I state. "I just heard you say something, and I want to know what you meant by it. Hey look, I ain't ever had a woman or nothing, right? I just wanted to make some interesting small talk."

"Well, shit," he declares, "I ain't never had a woman neither."

We both laugh at this. "Man, but I ain't used to women being just as vulgar as me!"

I get into these moods where I love to fuck with these guys, deriving a perverse pleasure from pushing a point entirely too far. I say, "So do you feel guilty for bringing it up? Is that why you won't answer the question?"

"Guilty!" I love it that this is bugging him. "Shit, I don't feel guilty about nothing, woman. I want to eat your goddamn pussy and fuck you, and if you think I'm gonna feel guilty about all of this, you are full of shit." He calms down, turns to me, and says with a sly smile, "Why do you ask questions, do you feel guilty about maybe wanting me to eat your pussy and fuck you?"

"Nope," I say, trying to conceal my shock at how adept he is at turning the bullshit back on me, "Just trying to understand where you are coming from."

"I'm comin' from here," he says as he grabs his crotch. Then he says, "No, I'm serious, you and me, let's get together. Would you play with me? Do you fool around?"

I am intimidated by how quickly the conversation has shifted in his favor; that is, he is now controlling the subject matter. "I'm not going anywhere with you," I say defensively.

"Why not?"

"Do you really expect someone you met in here to go out with you?"

"Get away from me with that bullshit," Merrill says, jerking his body away from my side of the table, "Don't hand me that crap."

"You're not being fair," I say. "See this from my point of view. I would be dead by now if I dated every guy who wanted a date from me." The conversation is now in my control again. I'm running one of my regular routines on him. He cannot win in this interaction. The worst I can do at this point is to fail to sell him a dance. But I know he will buy one. How else will he "prove" to me he is an OK guy?

"But you're not considering my side of things," he says.

"What is your side?"

"It's frustrating, 'cause there ain't no way I can get you to go out with me. The only reason you give is that you're chicken. You don't grab life and go for the gusto do you? You stay safe."

The routine continues through four fairly innocent table dances. I suggest to him that I need time to get to know him before I would consider going out with him, and he buys dances as an excuse to spend time with me, until it is my turn to dance on stage again. I collect my money and leave.

Approaching the main stage, I become furious but swallow it. Why do these assholes act this way? Why can't they treat me like a person? Why must

they turn me into a thing? Why do I care so much about it? Why can't I simply be above it? After all, I am here for research purposes. Why do I act the way I do? I feel the anger as I swing myself out into space and onto the stage, twirling a mad entrance just a little too fast for the music.

As I accept a tip, someone attempts to French kiss me. I keep my mouth shut tight against the attack. You can do anything you want to the outside of me, but I won't let you inside. The only thing I can't protect myself from is the words that get in my ears and seep into my brain. I feel the residue from his spittle. When I accept a tip from the next customer, I feel the moist drops of saliva on his moustache and know their germs are mingling. I am hopeful that I have transmitted some horrible mutated disease to this second asshole who is trying to French me also. How dare these men be so stupid in the age of AIDS and other venereal diseases, hell, even the flu? Now I must concentrate on not licking my lips until I can get to the dressing room to wash my mouth. The next customer turns his cheek to me. I use his cheek as a place to wipe off the germs and moisture. This is gross to be going through. Why am I doing it? I keep getting angrier and angrier. It escalates exponentially now. But I must act nice, pretty, and pleasant or I am not doing my job.

Nasally, I take a deep breath, inhaling the electric guitar power chords belting out at me from the speakers. It's a song by a heavy metal band. The singer cries out he doesn't know how to say he's leaving, with emphasis on the word *leaving*. He repeats this in melancholic melodrama, this time with the emphasis on the word *how*. The refrain is followed by an excellent power riff reminiscent of Neil Young's "Cinnamon Girl" or "Rust Never Sleeps." I abandon my body to the music, the guitar energizing me, wailing out my soul. What a great song to play the last set of the last day you dance, ever in your life, I think to myself.

\* \* \*

There is another reason I like the song. A dancer named Sheila used to play it every day as her opening number. On stage, she would move her hips from side-to-side in automaton fashion, her hands clasped over her head, her face deadpan—its only redeeming value the piercing ice blue eyes. Everyone stayed away from Sheila because she was "creepy." I would sit and watch her, wondering why she looked so empty, so vacant. She could have been a drug abuser, but I secretly feared (self-centeredly concerned for my own outcome) that she was burned out on dancing.

One day Sheila wasn't around any more. I asked some of the women if they knew about her. They did not know and did not care. "She's trouble,"

one told me. "She's an ex-con. Got out not too long ago." The others agreed it was best that she left.

I will never know why she liked that song, but now I imagine that Sheila was reliving leaving prison when she played it. She was singing to all the guards, and all the inmates, and the warden, maybe even the governor himself, "I don't know how to say I'm leaving." In my melodramatic fantasy of her fantasy, she even has an electric guitar that she is playing in peak form, offending everyone with its wailing abrasiveness. Fuck 'em all honey, you got out. Good for you.

When I reflect on this in a particularly upbeat mood, I imagine (hope) that she left dancing, realizing that it too is a type of prison (probably not). Many songs I hear on the radio will make me think of a certain dancer, but I decided to use this song myself because I stupidly avoided Sheila like everyone else and want to pay some kind of homage to her to assuage my guilt, and also because I hope to "leave" one day too.

\* \* \*

Stepping up on the edge of the counter that surrounds the stage, careful of my foot placement so that I do not knock over a drink or step on a patron seated there, I stare directly at the strobe, undulating precariously, and I reflect on the fact that *I am leaving*. Here I am, topless, wearing only black pasties, dancer briefs, spike-heeled shoes, and a bow tie, dancing in front of a bunch of screaming, clapping, strange, drunk men, and I don't care. The audience is not real. It's a TV picture with the sound turned off and the stereo cranked up. They are part of my show. The only thing that is real is my hate—a hate so tangible it is a pure, steady, high-pitched tone that rings through my ears above even the guitar. I feel calm set in. It is an empowering high, a meditation on hate—Zen and the art of hate. Perpetual Pollyanna, the girl in me trying to understand everything, the woman who looks to rationalize, is gone. Being nice against your will sucks. Being nice to manipulate, to control, is the point!

\* \* \*

The voices are all talking at once, droning. I can't hear any individual voice unless I stop and strain to single out one. They are many, yet they form one voice. That swarming, screaming confusion is myself, unsettled, frustrated, and thus angry, looking to act on circumstances to control them and to soothe the disordered identity that is the conglomerate noise. I am high on my

hyperacute awareness of reality; every stimulus is an irritant. I must not give myself over to the conforming drone, the soothing sellout. I am in danger of falling into the void it forms forever. Staying angry would solve the problem; I'd never be hurt again.

\* \* \*

I walk to the dressing room when I am through dancing and wash my face. Next, I use mouthwash to clean around my mouth. Finally, I gargle. Ha! Ha! You bastards are always trying to get inside me with your fingers, your tongues, your dicks. You didn't make it this time did you? I have, of course, deceived myself. They are always inside me. I give them their "bastard" status. They are in me because I have feelings about them.

The mirror reveals my red-rimmed eyes, my blotchy complexion. I look like hell. I breathe deeply, the sound of the running water from the faucet hypnotizing me, harmonizing with the confusion in my brain. I exhale, then gag on an unlabeled, undefined, emotional release that rises up as far as my throat before I catch it by clamping down on it with my epiglottis. To let it escape is to relinquish control of my emotional affect. I focus on the running water, actively trying to regain the drone by merging the sound with my memory of the droning sensation. How am I going to make up my face to disguise how bad I look?

I stare into the mirror, into the blacks of my eyes, imagining I can see the cords that wire my eyes to my brain. I am trapped in here, this body I see, this situation I'm in; there is no escape. The reflection is not really me though, but a flat, two-dimensional representation. The mirror behind me casts its reflection on the mirror in front. I see my face and my slightly oversized behind reflected back at me in an infinite exchange of reflections, creating the illusion of two three-dimensional corridors that disappear at some vanishing point on a horizon.

My image within this is still flat, even with two viewpoints. I am reminded of the video arcade shooting game that appears to have depth except when one focuses on shooting the objects. They are either near, midway, or far, nothing in between, two-dimensional in a three-dimensional space. I am also trapped in the reflection, its prisoner. I can only know myself through reflection, yet any one reflection is never totally accurate. It always depends upon the surface, the context. But I assure myself that the greater the variety of reflections I am able to experience, the better I will understand.

\* \* \*

A buzzing, high-pitched, swarming drone sets in again, calm and rapid motion all at the same time. My anger is something to ride, something to use, rather than something that will ride and control me. It is a strange adrenaline calm that has suffused my being. It could eat me up, because it pretends to be calm when it really is an inferno; it is welcome because I don't feel tired, vulnerable, frustrated, or fed up any more.

Now it is time for my side stage performance. My dancing is confident, every step well placed. I set my jaw and cop an attitude. Dancing in my anger, indeed reveling in it, I lose touch with my surroundings. Belligerence pulses through my body to the beat of the music. I no longer have to think about the act of dancing; I am no longer self-conscious. I am at one with the game.

The song playing feeds my anger to a self-righteous frenzied peak. It is about a woman whose mate has had an affair. It is obvious this man has ripped the soul right out of her body as she pleads with him emotionally to realize that she loved and needed him. But then the tone of the song becomes cold, a monotone, calculating, mocking. This man has cheated on her and is no longer worthy of her love. His feelings no longer concern her, and the rest of the song is delivered in the spirit of revenge as she informs him she is looking for a new love, "*baby*." Men always cheat, I think to myself. Look at all these jerks out there with wives and girlfriends, they are all cheating or trying to.

The song is transformed as it weaves into my reality. It is now about all men and all women. All men are using all women. Well fuck you all, because I've found a new love baby—power, control, and money. Use me and I can find a way to use you, manipulating the very thing you are using me for. I feel vindicated for fucking with these guys. The more I take their money, the better I am serving justice. The question of the retarded guy no longer bothers me. I laugh at the idea that it could even have been an issue.

No longer confused and upset, now I smile a lot, and I'm sassy and wisecracking. Control never waivers for a moment. Anger brings confidence and self-assurance. These men have proven to me they are not people but objects that deserve to get burned or even animals that must be treated roughly to be controlled. I don't worry about them any more. I can't.

\* \* \*

Later, as I leave for the night, my anger travels with me outside the bar. I am convinced all men see all women as pieces of ass. Go fuck yourself Mr. Nice Guy. You don't really exist except as some sort of trick to get me into the sack with you. I'm not buying it. At home, my unfortunate husband (a Mr. Nice Guy) is transformed into "one of the assholes," even though he

isn't selling anything. He suggests a late night restaurant outing to Denny's or Village Inn, and I silently question his motives, wondering what he is "really" up to. I ask him to wait until I take a shower.

Similar to Hochschild's airline attendants, I am sometimes unable to turn off "the act" when I leave the bar. My dancer self becomes fused with my other selves in such a way as to make it difficult to step out of the role when leaving the bar, so the shower is very important to me. First, I suds up from head to toe and rinse the foreign touches, foul odors, sweat, and grime from my body. After I consider myself squeaky clean, I make the water as hot as I can stand, and rotate slowly under the shower, making the temperature hotter still. The burn is purifying. The purification would not be as sincere if I were to turn the water up when I was still dirty; I must be clean. Some of the night's sins go down the drain with the water. Upon exiting the shower to the cold contrast of the air-conditioning, it occurs to me that it is considerate of my husband to wait up this late and be willing to let me shower before taking me out.

Later still, after several arguments have started by my making the worst of everything my husband says and returning home from the meal, I fling raw emotion at my computer keyboard, pelting out the hate and the tears. The act of writing seems to dissipate more of the hate high, as if having to rationalize what I feel enough to write it gradually brings me back to "outside the bar" reality. I finally decide that my husband isn't an asshole.

\* \* \*

After awakening at 1:00 p.m. the same day, I call Danny, one of my professors. "Danny," I say tentatively, "I fucked up again."

"What do you mean by saying that?" Danny patiently responds.

"I turned into a dancer again last night, I was there only for the money at the end, and I'm having a hard time maintaining my objectivity. I'm not even sure what that is any more, or if it is ever possible."

"So what did you get down?" he asks.

"Nothing but a bunch of head fucks," I reply.

"Tell me about it," he says. In this manner, conversing about the data, Danny reels me in. Soon we are talking about "becoming the phenomenon," "emotion work," and "negotiation strategies." Danny and I talk for a couple of hours while I take notes. By the end of the conversation, my "researcher" identity has been reestablished to some extent. I'm not sure I'm happy about it though, because soon it will be time to dance and it would be nice not to have to go through this process again.

\* \* \*

After two days of participant observation, a friend noted a marked difference in my outward demeanor. I was walking with her in the mall, when suddenly she pulled me into one of the stores, looked me up and down, and said, "All the men are staring at you, Carol. You'd think you were wearing something really sleazy, the looks you're getting." I was wearing a T-shirt and jeans.

My silent reaction was, of course they are. I was not concentrating on acting a part, but I was aware of inhabiting my body differently. I am normally self-conscious about my height of 5'9", and I have poor posture as a result. It was the most natural thing in the world, however, to hold my shoulders back, my head up, and put a little bounce in my step during the times I was dancing for a living. It was not an act but part of my reassembled self; the self formed in an attempt to resolve the role conflicts that arise in interactions both in and out of the bar. When I have not danced for a while, this act is impossible for me to manufacture believably.

\* \* \*

Just like striptease dancing is a form of exhibitionism, this form of writing is an emotional striptease. Using participant observation and systematic sociological introspection (Ellis 1991a), I make my experience as a dancer/researcher the object of study. Using the layered account, I construct an emotional narrative (Ellis 1991b) that depicts the difficulty of maintaining a researcher self in the face of other role demands.

The layered account demonstrates that the impact of participant observation on the researcher's identity is not always the simple problem of "going native" and "becoming the phenomenon" (Jorgensen 1989; Mehan and Wood 1975). The various role conflicts and multiple levels of absorption discussed here cannot be described in terms of a place on a two-dimensional continuum marked *researcher* at one end and *native* at the other. Nor can it be described in terms of being a nonparticipating observer versus a fully participating member (Adler and Adler 1987). Even as a total observer, the researcher interacts with her subject every time she thinks about the data, thus contributing her own influence (style of thinking, biases) to the report.

When I reflect on my ideas, revise them, and rewrite several drafts of a paper, differing levels of absorption at each point in the process contribute to the production of the paper. According to Myerhoff and Metzger (1980, p. 99):

All single reflections are distortions. True reflections can only come from many images, a selection offered from among which one chooses, discards, makes corrections. Only in maturity, with multiple images, is greater accuracy possible.

The layered account is deliberately structured to resemble what Schutz (1970) termed the *duree*, by which he means the stream of consciousness as it naturally flows in the lived experience. Although it is not possible to capture the lived experience, the layered account as a form allows me to express the multiplicity of identities I embody when making a report. Research is plagued with all the emotionality and uncertainty of any human behavior. The layered account reveals my values and position in the frame as well as the situationally embedded contexts out of which my emotions and other behavior arise.

During an exposition on the journal as genre, Myerhoff and Metzger (1980, p. 98) argue that "the necessity for analytic, critical presentation required by academic convention destroys the message. Even the words freeze the contents." Any literary form imprisons lived experience; yet, without form or structure, it would be impossible to convey any experience. The layered account is a structure that organizes and conveys knowledge normally unrelated to classical scientific and/or ethnographic reporting methods.

Emotional sociology (Ellis 1991b) allows readers to incorporate the cognitive/emotional experiences of the researcher into their own stock of knowledge (Berger and Luckmann 1966), thus gaining a resource that may be consulted in the future. This layered account provides the essential elements to readers so that they may read, and vicariously live, an experience through the medium of the text provided by the author. The knowledge from living the experience of interacting with the narrative is an emotional, precognitive apprehending that is sublime, unstructured, and nonverbal in nature. The layered account is an attempt to invoke in the reader the emergent experience of "being" and to use many voices to induce in the reader a comprehension of an alien voice while at the same time fostering the understanding that we all are processual, emergent, multivoiced entities living different situations yet sharing similar lived emotional experiences.

### References

- Adler, P. A. and P. Adler. 1987. *Membership Roles in Field Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.  
 Berger, P. and T. Luckmann. 1966. *The Social Construction of Reality*. New York: Anchor, Doubleday.



- Blumer, H. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism*. Berkeley: University of California.
- Denzin, N. 1984. *On Understanding Emotion*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ellis, C. 1991a. "Sociological Introspection and Emotional Experience." *Symbolic Interaction* 14(1):23-50.
- 1991b. "Emotional Sociology." Pp. 123-145 in *Studies in Symbolic Interaction*. Vol. 12, edited by N. Denzin. Greenwich, CT: JAI.
- Hochschild, A. 1983. *The Managed Heart*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hodges, H. A. 1944. *Wilhelm Dilthey: An Introduction*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Jorgensen, D. L. 1989. *Participant Observation*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Mehan, H. and H. Wood. 1975. *The Reality of Ethnomethodology*. New York: John Wiley.
- Myerhoff, B. and D. Metzger. 1980. "The Journal as Activity and Genre: On Listening to the Silent Laughter of Mozart." *Semiotica* 30:1-2.
- Ronai, C. and C. Ellis. 1989. "Turn-Ons for Money: Interactional Strategies of the Table Dancer." *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 18(3):271-98.
- Schutz, A. 1970. *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Weber, M. 1962. *Basic Concepts in Sociology*. New York: Citadel.

6

## *The Consequences of Poetic Representation*

### *Writing the Other, Rewriting the Self*

LAUREL RICHARDSON

This chapter is consciously self-revelatory, but my purpose in writing it is sociological, not confessional. Almost axiomatically, interpretive social scientists assert that our work has consequences for others and ourselves. Sometimes we write about the consequences to others, but less often do we reflect upon the consequences to ourselves. Even more rarely do we consider those consequences in terms of subjectively felt experiences. This chapter joins the growing genre of research, however, that does take as its subject matter the lived experience of the researcher (see Denzin 1987, 1989; Ellis 1991, 1991b; Ellis and Weinstein 1986; Reinharz 1979; Richardson and Lockridge 1991).

Interpretivists have a particular set of norms and values regarding what should be studied and how it should be studied and communicated. Like other social scientists, interpretivists inherit an academic culture that holds a traditional authority over them. That culture suppresses and devalues its members' subjective experiences. For example, we are expected to write papers in prose, reference others, place our work in a lineage, objectify the topic, and focus on the expressed topic rather than on the self-as-producer

---

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I thank Amber Ault, Carolyn Ellis, Mike Flaherty, and Ernest Lockridge for their careful readings of an earlier draft of this chapter.