
Introduction

A Typical Shift

As a sociologist interested in gender, I chose to study The Lion's Den for many reasons; chief among them was access. Beyond this practical consideration, The Lion's Den offered me a chance to write about something new—an ethnographic case study of a highly gendered organization, the strip club. By participating, observing, and interviewing, I examined the entire cast of club workers, strippers, and patrons, as well as the space itself, to explore issues of gender, power, and sex work. With regular access and approval from the club's owner-manager, Steve, I conducted my research openly. Over a fourteen-month period spanning 2001 and 2002, The Lion's Den occupied many of my waking hours: not only was I working there as a cocktail waitress; I was observing, researching, and analyzing—so both my feet and my brain sometimes hurt.

Readers may wonder, why study a strip club? What is interesting about such places, sociologically speaking? I contend that we can learn why people become sex workers, as well as sex patrons, by taking a closer look inside this club. We can learn about the underlying strengths and vulnerabilities that lure and frustrate women and men in such places. Further, I examine how the space itself is organized socially and economically. I show how women and men negotiate interactions with each other and the club itself, as well as whose interests strip clubs serve, why it serves them, and how. Often, the gendered, organizational, and economic outcomes cut both ways, leading to simultaneous benefits and drawbacks for those involved.

Stripping is frequently ghettoized as a topic irrelevant to the mainstream; as a result, popular assumptions about the stripping industry are often made on faulty premises. One may suppose that, as part of the sex work industry, strip clubs are inherently structured to men's advantage—men are the primary consumers and owners, after all. However, to assume a priori that women are necessarily oppressed in this industry would be a mistake. Not

only does the assumption of women's oppression minimize women's agency, but also it glosses over the very process by which men secure and exercise power individually and collectively through particular clubs. The opposite viewpoint, however, emphasizes that women experience empowerment as sex symbols who unfasten men's desires, as well as their wallets. Focusing on the possible celebrity, glamour, money, and entertainment that can be associated with striptease performance, these accounts gloss over the often hazardous and unpredictable nature of this industry. In between these poles, there are countless individual stories of strippers' lives that have been bettered and worsened by the sex work industry.

America is often heralded as the land of opportunity, a place where one can pull oneself up by the bootstraps. Within this American story, strip clubs occupy a distinct place. Revenue estimates for "adult entertainment" vary considerably, but, according to industry experts, consumers spend between \$8 and \$13 billion annually on various performances and products.¹ From that total, strip clubs are estimated to draw on average between \$500,000 to over \$5 million.² As men are the industry's primary consumers, these numbers provide evidence of their frequent patronage. In addition, despite variation, revenue estimates demonstrate the potential financial gains that lure women and men to work in this industry. We see in strip clubs both continuity and transformation in femininity and masculinity, in what it means to be a woman and a man, and in what it means to be desirable, connected, prosperous, and powerful. They are sites that preserve vestiges of the past (women's deference and service to, as well as violence from, men) and reveal trajectories for the future (open spaces for women's sexual expression and the explosion of paid emotional labor). Through this inquiry, we gain a mirror onto women's bodies: how they are molded and expressed, understood, prized, and devalued. In a setting like *The Lion's Den* that was designed by and for men, although men often experience power, there is also considerable evidence of dependence and frustration for both patrons and coworkers. As such, strip clubs are a bellwether for permanence and change in contemporary gendered understandings, organization, and performances.

Rather than being an exception, sex work is better understood as part of a dramatic contemporary expansion in paid care and services. Increasingly, both domestic and international women are hired to clean, comfort, and care for various individuals inside and outside of private homes.³ Sex work is best conceptualized as part of this trend precisely because it moves emotional, psychological, physical, and sexual care for individuals out of private households and into the public marketplace.⁴ As increasing forms of paid care

become more integrated and accepted as realities of American culture, the false dichotomies between authentic/fake and paid/free forms of caring are exposed. As anyone who has experienced quality child and elder care knows, relationships between caregivers and clients can involve long-term intimacy. Similarly, relationships between strippers and patrons may involve companionship over many years.⁵

Within strip clubs, the process by which men and women wield, negotiate, and contest power on a local level has not been well explored or understood. In the research reported in this volume, I explored one club in detail to hear multiple perspectives through the voices of club owners, managers, bartenders, deejays, bouncers, doormen, strippers, cocktail waitresses, and patrons. Through everyday practices and personal narratives, I explored The Lion's Den through those who know it best. This volume takes readers inside the club to become familiar with its organization and to fundamentally understand how it works and for whom. Other researchers have focused on collections of individual stories, emphasizing interactions between strippers and patrons.⁶ By contrast, this research looks at the multiple layers of The Lion's Den as an organization—its hierarchy, rules, and practices. The kinds of questions that become possible through organizational analysis allow me to situate individual narratives in a wider context: How does a person's story fit with the workplace practices of others? How are decisions made? Who follows through on club practices? And, when necessary, who enforces club rules? It is my hope that what emerges from studying a strip club as an organization is an intimate portrait of life and work in The Lion's Den.

Situating The Lion's Den

Railton

The Lion's Den is located in a place I call Railton, which is a typical northeastern town. It is largely rural, with suburban enclaves and a quaint town center. Local businesses, smaller mom-and-pop shops, and occasional strip malls, anchored by big-box stores, dot the area. Small family and larger factory farms stretch out alongside park and recreational areas. Given the town's small size, even its Chamber of Commerce emphasizes the region as a whole rather than focusing on Railton. The broader region contains a few medium-sized cities where many of the residents work in small-scale manufacturing, agriculture, education, and health care. Since Railton and other nearby towns did not benefit from the technology booms of larger New England cities, it has kept the remnants of its mill-town working-class past without the veneer

or economic benefits of tourism. The majority of Railton's residents are white and earn modest incomes. In 2000, the median household earnings were just under \$50k.⁷ Lower housing costs serve to offset limited earnings—the average single-family house sold for less than \$140k that same year.⁸

Far from a hub for the sex work industry, Railton and surrounding areas are not known for their sex-oriented businesses. There are no adult bookstores, and The Lion's Den is the only strip club in town. In the area as a whole, almost a half-dozen strip clubs and as many adult bookstores are scattered in nearby cities. In this region, you are as likely to find new burlesque, artistic, or gay and lesbian adult performances in mainstream dance clubs and bars as you are to find straight strip club fare in adult-zoned businesses. Nearby strip clubs all feature female performers for primarily male patrons. One club boasts multiple themed rooms for drinking champagne and purchasing private dances. It also includes fine furnishings and dining. Other local clubs range from simple décor to ramshackle. Two clubs are well known for being even more rundown than The Lion's Den. One of those clubs, *Hot-ties*, had its bathroom catch fire due to faulty wiring. The other, *Backwoods*, is small and has a nondescript bar, some nude pinup posters, and minimal lighting. Since the late 1990s, ownership of most of these clubs, including The Lion's Den, has merged into the hands of *Players*. Despite this consolidation and some physical and personnel changes, area strip clubs have maintained most of their original character.

Given The Lion's Den's relative isolation, Railton residents seemed to tolerate its presence. Unlike other local clubs that have been the subject of media attention as a result of drug busts, shootings, and the bathroom fire, The Lion's Den managed to stay out of the fray. There were no local news stories featuring the club during my participant observation. This lack of attention continued with the club's new owners, who took over operations in the spring of 2004. The absence of negative news stories is important because, despite being a legal industry, strip clubs often come under attack by community organizations that do not want sex work businesses in their backyards. Community standards have placed some constraints on this club. For example, the club's marquee featured only "The Lion's Den" in neon lights, rather than images of nude women or the common adult business symbols "XXX." Actual interventions by police on behalf of community members' complaints were nonexistent. Even with the lack of community backlash, The Lion's Den insulated itself through preventive measures. The club actively cultivated a reputation for complying with laws against physical contact between strippers and patrons to facilitate its market and ward off possible crackdowns.⁹

In addition, the club made regular financial contributions, including huge donations to local police and fire department fundraising drives. No doubt this money facilitated open communication between club management and local officers. The Lion's Den also maintained individual police connections by giving officers free drinks and special introductions to female workers when they visited the club.

Inside The Lion's Den

A neighborhood of single-family houses seems an unlikely place for a strip club, but as the zoning faded from residential to light industrial, a lone neon sign for The Lion's Den beckoned would-be patrons. Flanked by several brightly painted aluminum buildings and empty lots, some with parked tractor trailers, The Lion's Den sat apart from other entertainment-oriented businesses along a wooded street where a suburban neighborhood meets a light industrial zone. On one side of the club's parking lot, an old chain-link fence guarded haphazard piles of scrap construction items and pallets of building materials. On the opposite side and across the street sat empty lots. Surrounded by a blacktop parking lot, The Lion's Den's two-story tan building had housed a bar for as long as anyone could remember, although it had been a strip club for only the past thirty years or so. The entrance sported a single window coated with a dark material that reflects the viewer's image. The Lion's Den was typical of other strip bars in this region: it served liquor, had fully nude female dancers, and catered to predominantly male patrons. In its prime during the 1980s, The Lion's Den touted the region's longest stage and featured acts that included famous pornographic models and actors, drawing patrons from all over the East Coast. Over the next two decades, the club downsized its stage and, at the time of my research, hosted local performers for mostly local patrons.

Like many of the workers, those in attendance were generally white men with blue-collar jobs and high school educations. On weekends, one was likely to see more middle-class professionals and college students. In an industry that is mostly white,¹⁰ race operated in privileged and exclusionary ways.¹¹ In the absence of other races, the club's whiteness was invisible (as whiteness is normatively depicted); no one referred to The Lion's Den as a "white" club.¹² Whiteness, and race more generally, became visible precisely when the occasional African American, Asian, or Latina dancer arrived onstage or when African American, Asian, or Latino men were in the audience. Though racial lines were at times crossed in the club, such interactions

were few and far between, given the club demographics. More often club practices made it evident to people of color that their presence was less than fully welcomed.

On the economic and cultural spectrum of nearly 2,800 nude dancing venues nationwide,¹³ The Lion's Den fell toward the lower end. The absence of a dress code and the presence of a \$5–\$7 door fee helped distinguish this site from more elite clubs in major cities, where business attire is suggested and door fees can be \$20 or more. To ensure that patrons did not become free-loaders, a one-drink minimum guaranteed that those in attendance would spend nearly \$10 upon entering the club. Entrance fees for those under twenty-one included one soda. Rather than the microbrewed or imported beers and restaurant-style dining that one might find in a higher-end club, The Lion's Den had a menu of mostly domestic beers and vending machine food. The Lion's Den was a workingman's strip club. Patron reviews from a popular strip club website underscore this characterization: “[The Lion's Den] makes no pretense of being a gentleman's club,” “This place is a total dive,” and “[The Lion's Den] has gone downhill.”¹⁴

Employees, Strippers, and Management

As a local club, The Lion's Den drew employees from surrounding towns. Given the club's difficulty filling shifts, both male and female workers were often recruited by friends. Male employees were also drawn from the ranks of regular patrons. In both cases, familiarity acted as a proxy for trustworthiness, despite possible conflicts of interest, particularly for patrons who became employees and found themselves in a completely different relationship with the strippers who used to entertain them. This overlap between workers and patrons contributed toward an environment of informality in the club. Male friends and boyfriends who patronized the club were often referred by women. Strippers working within the club also recruited them.

In all, The Lion's Den employed approximately twenty men across four positions—bartenders, bouncers, doormen, and deejays. On weeknights, the club had one bartender, bouncer, deejay, and doorman working. On busier nights and weekends, the club increased the number of bartenders and bouncers to two. Drawing on a sample of one-half of these workers, most were white and ranged in age from nineteen to fifty-six, with an average age of thirty-four. All but one had finished high school, and many had taken college courses. Only two held a bachelor's degree: the owner-manager and a deejay. Nearly equal thirds were single, married, or living with a partner

(table 3 in appendix 1). Despite the small size of this sample, it is important to note its comparability with the region as a whole.¹⁵ Racially, club workers replicated the majority-white makeup of this area.¹⁶ A comparison of male workers' education with regional averages shows that slightly more had completed high school, while fewer had completed college.¹⁷ Since the work requires little experience or formal education, it makes sense that most employees would have no more than a high school education.

In terms of relationship status, one-half of the men in the region were married, while more than one-third had never been married.¹⁸ Though the percentage of single men was relatively comparable across the club sample and the broader region, the percentage of married men was lower for the club workers.¹⁹ It is plausible that adult entertainment may attract men seeking interactions with women precisely because women are largely absent from their lives. Men who seek employment in the adult entertainment industry may also have difficulty maintaining intimate relationships with women, as reported by many of the men interviewed.

Male workers divided control over club operations, with the greatest authority in the hands of bartenders. In addition to their responsibilities behind the bar, the bartenders acted as middle managers, overseeing other workers. Particularly when the club's owner-manager was absent, bartenders resolved conflicts, determined the closing time for the club, and enforced club rules. Bouncers leaned against the walls wearing a disciplined scowl as they watched the goings-on in the club. They were charged with verbally or physically intervening if there were fights between patrons or between patrons and strippers. They periodically left their posts to referee any issues that arose or to chat briefly with other workers. With physically large men serving as bouncers, the threat of expulsion from the club often loomed, though, in truth, bouncers rarely exercised this authority. Seated near the club's main entrance, doormen collected entry fees and checked identification; they also acted as bouncers during daytime shifts. Deejays provided music and ambiance for the club while also coordinating strippers' performances. They decided who should be onstage at any given time to provide patrons with an array of women's body types and hair colors. In addition to announcing each performer before she took the stage, deejays kept track of when strippers arrived for their shifts, when they were due onstage for their next rotation, and what music each dancer preferred.

All of the male employees were paid a wage of between \$4.50 and \$8.50 an hour. The highest wages went to bartenders. Both bartenders and deejays also received cash tips; however, partly these were not tips they acquired

directly. Rather, the tipping system in the club was gendered: strippers and cocktail waitresses were required to share a portion of their tips with male workers. Strippers provided deejays with at least \$10, and cocktail waitresses tipped bartenders 20 percent or at least \$20, each shift.

At any given time, about fifty women worked across three positions in the club: cocktail waitresses, housemoms, and strippers. Most were strippers. There were six to twelve strippers at a time on shift, with lower numbers working on weekdays and greater numbers on weekends. Waitresses worked alone on weeknights and in teams of two or three on weekends. The one club housemom visited the club weekly to schedule strippers' shifts. In the industry, housemoms are veteran dancers hired by the club and its strippers for their experience and knowledge. Typically they act as middle managers in clubs, negotiating on behalf of strippers with management and between the strippers themselves. In exchange for strippers' tips, housemoms provide counsel and offer spare resources like costumes and personal hygiene products. Because The Lion's Den's occasional housemom held none of the typical characteristics associated with this job, she was not included in the interview portion of this research.

Based on interviews with twenty-one women working in the club, I discovered that female workers were mostly white and ranged in age from eighteen to thirty-seven, with an average age of twenty-three. Cocktail waitresses in The Lion's Den were, on average, two years older. Most female workers had completed high school (74%), though percentages were lower than the regional average.²⁰ Many had attended college (44%), nearly the same rate found in national census data.²¹ Cocktail waitresses had relatively more education than strippers; all had completed high school, and most had some college background. Overall, differences in education may reflect the club's proximity to a large number of colleges and universities. In some ways, women's intimate partnerships closely paralleled those of other women in the area, with more than one-third reporting they were single or living with a partner.²² However, only two of the women interviewed were married, a much lower rate than reported by other women in the region.²³ Drawing on strippers' explanations, it appears that adult entertainment is disruptive to long-term intimate relationships.

As part of their work, strippers performed scheduled stage rotations of between fifteen minutes and a half hour, depending on the number of dancers in attendance. The remainder of strippers' time across their seven-hour shift was their own to solicit private or table dances, performances typically for one or a small number of patrons. Strippers' pay

came from both of these two sources; they were not paid a salary from the club. Minimum earnings for private performances were considerably more than for stage work: \$10–\$20 rather than \$1 per performance, respectively. Despite inflation, patrons tipped \$1 for stage dances that typically lasted less than one song; they were dubbed “dollar dances.” Though they were longer (typically one song), private and table dances differed little in their content, though private dances might contain more seclusion and conversation than stage dances.

Though a couple of the dancers had been stripping for more than a decade, this was not their goal when they first started in the industry. Previous research on stripping has found much variation in the reasons women give for entering this line of work. Among the issues discussed are financial motivations, such as participation in low-wage or dead-end jobs; sexual activity and physical development at relatively young ages; abuse and low self-esteem in childhood; growing up in divorced or mother-only households; early childhood independence; and the desire to be found attractive, as well as an interest in exhibitionism and entertainment.²⁴ The strippers in this study emphasized that they danced “for the money.” Indeed, stripping pays more than most of the jobs participants held before their work in The Lion’s Den. However, incomes also varied greatly from stripper to stripper, club to club, night to night, and season to season. Most often, the women at The Lion’s Den were stripping to pay off debts, support children, and finance schooling. As Faith, a thirty-seven-year-old stripper, explained: “I do this because it’s the only way I can make a living as a single mother and have time with my kids.” In all, six of the twenty-one strippers interviewed were supporting children from their incomes.

Cocktail waitresses were paid a salary of \$3.50 an hour plus tips to work seven-hour daytime or evening shifts. Cocktail waitresses spent much of their time selling and filling drink orders, as well as chatting with patrons. Over the course of a shift, depending on the number of customers present and the number of waitresses working, a cocktail waitress might walk miles around the club. In addition to serving drinks, cocktail waitresses oversaw alcohol consumption among patrons and strippers. While, in theory, waitresses could cut someone off from receiving alcohol, these judgments were subject to the review of bartenders who might override them.

Despite the club’s high degree of informality, Steve, the club’s owner-manager, struggled to maintain a level of seriousness around the work performed. In his mid-thirties, Steve often drew attention to his undergraduate business degree to distinguish himself from most of the people in the club, who

had less education. While this one-upmanship may have been simple vanity, Steve appeared to have another purpose: motivating others to make The Lion's Den a thriving business once again. His best efforts included a mandatory meeting of all club performers and employees, as well as an *Employee/Entertainer Handbook* that outlined the roles, responsibilities, and rules for each job within the club.²⁵ Despite such bursts of zeal, Steve was burning out. Much of his time within the club was spent in his office playing computer games and surfing the Internet. From this vantage he could watch through two cameras positioned above the club's cash registers. When Steve ventured into the main room, he often sat behind the bar, talked with the bartender, and aired complaints about strippers and other club workers.

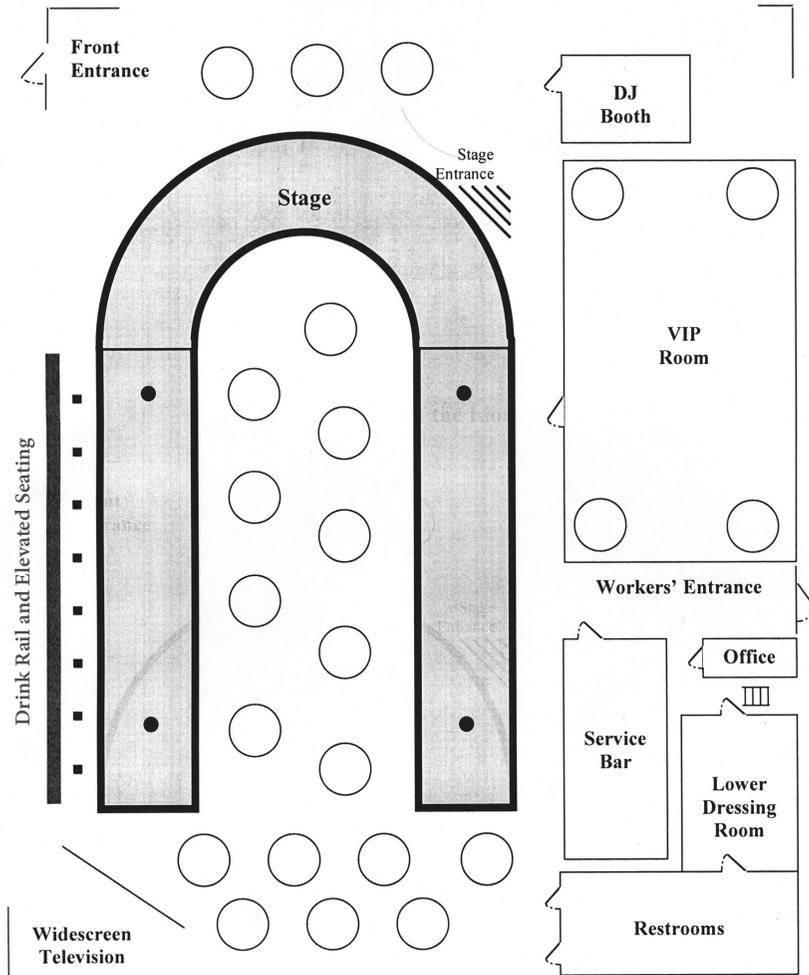
A Tour of The Lion's Den

Parking behind the building, club workers entered through an unmarked back door. Once inside, walking past the beer coolers, the owner-manager's office, and the side entrance behind the service bar, they entered the main room of the club.

The main room featured an aging, parquet-covered stage that was often missing squares and one or more dance poles. Surrounding the U-shaped stage were small, black vinyl banquet chairs with protruding tufts of stuffing. The club walls were flat black with a large mirrored midsection. A once state-of-the-art lighting system hung from the center of the ceiling to provide spotlights, strobe lights, and smoke in an effort to frame the dancers' performances in magic. Beer signs and black lights also helped illuminate the room. Throughout the club, but especially near the service bar, the years of spilled liquor and beer created a sticky, flypaper effect on the carpet.

Patrons entered the club through a door in the front corner and passed by a doorman who checked identification and collected the cover charge (\$7 for those aged eighteen to twenty, and \$5 for those twenty-one and over). Upon entering The Lion's Den, the first thing patrons noticed was the center stage, set at the eye level of patrons seated at and around the stage. This was where the strippers performed their stage dances. Patrons over twenty-one occupied this main area of the club; younger patrons had to stay in an area cordoned off at the front end of the stage adjacent to the entrance called the "sandbox" because of its designation as underage seating. The sandbox was situated between the doorman and deejay booth, presumably for closer observation. The deejay booth was a tiny, elevated room that afforded the deejays a view of the entire club.

Floor Plan of the Lion's Den



Large circles = table dance/VIP dance platforms

Black dots = strip poles

Stairs located between the Office and Lower Dressing Room

The VIP Room was a small private room next to the deejay booth with one door and a large picture window facing the main room of the club. The four private dance stations, located in each of the four corners, had a round, tan, particleboard platform for private dances; each platform was cordoned off by thick, black, vinyl cable from a pair of gray lounge chairs and a tall, pedestal drink table for the customer. Full-mirrored walls were decorated sparsely with drink special advertisements and pictures of nude women. Two artificial ficus trees rounded out the décor. Cocktail waitresses provided drinks (rather than patron self-service), so the small bar in the back left corner did not have any seating. It functioned more as a service bar where cocktail waitresses picked up orders from the bartender. Two sets of dressing rooms for the strippers were located on separate floors: one in a smaller downstairs room behind the service bar, and another in a larger room directly upstairs.

The club's interior had not changed until the summer of 2001, when the management remodeled. The main room's worn vinyl chairs were swapped for similar, but newer, gray cloth-covered seating. Throughout the main room of the club, the sticky, black carpet was replaced by one featuring primary colors in large geometric shapes over a black base. The middle of the room was enhanced by large, rounded, light-pink armchairs placed in paired or four-seat conversation groups around small, round, tan, particleboard platforms used for drinks and table dances. While these renovations improved the club's appearance, the changes only scratched the surface. In other sections, unsteady tables continued to make drink placement precarious. The dancers' dressing rooms retained the torn vinyl chairs and stained carpet. Chipped paint flaked off dressing tables and walls. Changes to the dancers' downstairs bathroom made the space available to any female patron, though hardly any were ever present. The men's bathroom remained unchanged, with its doorless toilet stall and the communal urinal that resembled a shallow horse trough.

A Typical Shift

Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday, The Lion's Den opened at 7:00 PM; Thursday, Friday, and Saturday, it opened at noon. On Sundays, the club was closed. Despite the relatively late starting hours, strippers were frequently not on time for work. Dressed casually, often arriving in jeans and sweat-shirts, dancers wheeled suitcases or duffle bags containing costumes, shoes, and toiletries to the dressing rooms. They added these items to things already housed in the rows of metal lockers positioned on the back walls of the two

dressing rooms in the club. The upstairs dressing room was more social and frequently occupied by the in-house dancers (regular local dancers for the club). Traveling dancers or those looking for a quiet space to get ready often used the downstairs dressing room.

When The Lion's Den had trouble filling shifts, the owner-manager turned to contract dancers from a nearby state to work on weekends. Accompanied by a driver or their boss, this group of six to eight women worked their shifts at the club while spending the weekend in a nearby hotel. In response, the house girls feared the travelers were "stealing their money" or customers and initially shunned them. However, like all new dancers, the travelers became familiar over time, and their competitive edge, rooted in novelty, wore off, as did the resulting tensions with the house girls. While hostilities continued to flare up intermittently, they were limited to specific problems, without the generalized distrust in evidence when the traveling dancers first started working.

Once unpacked, the house girls and travelers chatted with other workers and readied themselves for the stage. Seated or standing in front of mirrors, they inspected their bodies, applied pancake makeup and deodorant, and covered themselves with lotion, glitter, and perfume. They applied eyeliner, mascara, and lipstick and brushed their hair or wigs. Though their underarm and pubic hair was often sparse and carefully manicured before each shift, they frequently used this opportunity for a last-minute shave. They swabbed between their legs with baby wipes and, depending on the time in their menstrual cycle, snipped and concealed tampon strings. Finally, they stepped into their costumes, frequently long, thin negligees over g-string underwear and bikini tops.

The dancers made conversation with each other while they awaited their call from the deejay. Some headed downstairs early to watch the evening's first performers. At this time, most of the strippers consumed their first of several alcoholic drinks. The exceptions were the traveling dancers, whose company had strict rules prohibiting alcohol consumption while at work. Their boss, who often sat in the club during their shifts, assured their compliance. Likewise, club employees (bouncers, bartenders, doormen, deejays, and cocktail waitresses) were not allowed to drink on shift.

While the strippers were getting ready, the cocktail waitresses began delivering the evening's first drinks, often to the dancers. Other early-shift tasks for the waitresses included setting up a "bank" of \$20 from which they made change for any filled orders. This system made it the waitresses' responsibility to have bills tally correctly, since any mistakes came out of their own pockets.

Meanwhile, the bartenders were setting up the register, refilling beer coolers and liquor shelves, cutting limes and lemons for mixed drinks, and filling the dancers' first drink orders. By the front door, doormen and bouncers congregated, talking sports or gossiping over recent events.

The club was often quiet when it first opened, especially during dayshifts, when it better resembled a sports bar. The few strippers who worked daytime shifts were often late or absent. With the lack of dancers matching the lack of patrons, televised sports provided an important source of entertainment. With the music turned down, sporting events were broadcast from a large-screen television at the back of the club. While some dancers requested that the television be turned off, it often stayed on, providing a dizzying mix of competing sounds. The few men in attendance were typically regulars who visited the club often and desired more individualized attention from club workers. The rules around mandatory stage performances were often relaxed during the day, particularly when attendance was sparse. During these hours, dancers regularly sat on the stage or in seats by the television engaged in conversation rather than performing their stage rotations. Since the club often had trouble filling day shifts, the roles of dancer and waitress were sometimes one and the same.

In the early evening on weeknights, the club was thinly populated by a few regulars and a handful of other patrons. The main differences between the early evening and daytime shifts were the tendency to turn the television's volume down (though the set typically remained on) and to enforce the dancers' required stage rotations. Also during the early evening, club workers often pressed younger patrons into service to run errands, including fetching lemons or limes for the club's bartender or dinner for the strippers. The associated perks of running such errands often included free drinks and admission, as well as the title "gofer" and associated niceties (e.g., hearty thanks and friendly conversation).

A number of regular patrons were often in attendance. Jeff and his sidekick, Oscar, both white men in their mid fifties, were a rambunctious duo. They engaged in playful banter with strippers and cocktail waitresses and often referred to themselves as "the Odd Couple," emphasizing their similarities with the 1970s television sitcom of the same name. Joe, a white blue-collar worker in his early sixties, always showed up early, sitting in the corner near the service bar. He sat alone, drinking Budweiser from a glass with a dash of salt. Occasionally, a stripper or a waitress joined him briefly. Strippers learned quickly that Joe never bought dances and rarely bought anyone else a drink. Roger, a white blue-collar worker in his late fifties, often arrived

early or hung around after his afternoon visit. Roger was the butt of many workers' jokes due to his considerable girth, sloppy dress, and huge square glasses. Many a night a bartender or another worker yelled out to nearby strippers or cocktail waitresses, "Don't get too close or be too nice—he'll get the wrong idea!"

Both management and patrons expected that female workers would be congenial and cater to men's needs within the context of services provided by the club. These needs included conversation and companionship, in addition to the more conventional tasks of delivering drinks and dances. Consider the following passage for cocktail waitresses from the *Employee/Entertainer Handbook*:

Use yours and the customer's name. Reason—makes them feel like they are important to you, makes them feel like they belong to our "club," makes them feel like they're your "favorite" customer because you took the time to learn and remember their name. . . . Smile, Smile, Smile, I tried to explain the 10-5-1 rule at the last meeting, at 10 feet you make eye contact, at 5 feet smile, at 1 foot smile and say, "Hi!"²⁶

Management's clear demand for emotional labor on the part of cocktail waitresses made sense because the club's revenue depended largely on drink sales made by these women. Other female workers also advised each other about extending kindness to patrons since emotional labor can increase tips. As Kelly, a twenty-nine-year-old cocktail waitress and former stripper, explained: "You got to act and . . . make everybody happy and listen to all their problems. So I just do it because I make good money." The emotional labor performed by cocktail waitresses and strippers was similar in content to lots of women's work in service-oriented jobs. Like the flight attendants in sociologist Arlie Hochschild's influential study *The Managed Heart*,²⁷ cocktail waitresses and strippers in *The Lion's Den* were expected to cultivate feelings of friendliness to make customers feel "at home." Since the bar did not have its own seating, bartenders' ability to perform emotional labor (something that is conventionally associated with bartending) was greatly reduced. As such, emotional labor became gendered, and women performed the bulk of it.

As strippers climbed the horseshoe-shaped stage, they scanned the audience for patrons with tips. Patrons learned to set one bill, typically a dollar, on the stage to signal that a stripper's dance was desired. Patrons developed tricks to make their dollars stand out by folding them into football shaped

triangles or little tents. In part, playing with money filled time between performances, as well as drew attention to the resources at hand. Patrons often sat themselves at the stage with dollar bills stacked inches high along a thin shelf that ran along the edge of the stage.

Other strip clubs in the state boast white-tableclothed dining rooms, leather furniture, flat-screen televisions, and upscale thematic cigar lounges and champagne rooms. Despite its relatively modest offerings, The Lion's Den found a way to specialize by crystallizing stripping to an essential component of its contemporary form: providing "spread shows," or eye-level views of women's genitals.²⁸ For these performances, the central horseshoe-shaped stage put a squatting dancer in the direct view of a seated patron. With little variation, performances at The Lion's Den took on an assembly line feel as dancers squatted for and chatted with patrons seated around the stage. Strippers' descriptions of men's reactions to the spread shows were fascinating. Some men simply stared at women's genitals. Others perched forward in their seats for closer inspection; still others blew their breath or cigarette smoke onto the women's bodies, apparently designed to arouse the dancers and experience some physical interactions with them. Robin, a young, white stripper, explained she was disgusted "when a dirty man who's like sixty-five with no teeth is sitting there lookin' at you, and he blows his cigarette smoke on your crotch. You can be having the best day, and then something like that happens and you're just like—I've seen what nicotine does to my teeth, I don't want it doing anything to my crotch! What are you thinking?"

From Thursday to Saturday, the club filled up by around 10:00 PM. Patrons and dancers were drinking, talking, and milling about, creating a party atmosphere. The mixture of conversation and throbbing music was punctuated by the deejay's announcements of new dancers and repeated requests to "take care of our lovely entertainers and waitresses." The lights and cigarette smoke whirled around the club. Deejays orchestrated the music, sometimes taking requests but always getting final say on the night's fare. They often blared suggestive popular rock music, including Motley Crue's "Girls, Girls, Girls," Aerosmith's "Rag Doll," and Nine Inch Nails' "Closer" (with a chorus that echoes, "I want to fuck you like an animal").

Later in the evening or on weekend nights, the atmosphere became like a tailgate party, with patrons cheering as if for a sports team. They yelled for strippers to "take it off" and clamored for pole tricks. Pole tricks include doing the splits, climbing, and flipping upside down using long white poles that extend halfway to the ceiling at four points on the stage (see diagram). While pole tricks were crowd pleasers, most strippers simply hooked the

poles in the crook of their elbow and spun around, scoping out the room. This may have been due, at least in part, to lack of skill or interest, but it was also because the poles often wobbled or might even be missing entirely, making pole tricks hazardous or impossible.

While spread shows were the club's centerpiece, scripted nude or semi-nude stage performances framed them. These performances included varying degrees of verbal interaction, from brief conversation to erotic storytelling. Strippers would lean forward and whisper directly into patrons' ears or speak loudly to be heard over the music. Strippers performed from a number of typical positions, including crouching, sitting, or lying on the stage. They modified these movements by lifting a leg, gyrating back and forth, or spanking themselves. Onstage, a stripper might whisper in a patron's ear during a dance to entice his purchase of a private performance. Offstage, dancers walked the club in search of private dances or companionship that might be accompanied by tips or free drinks. Since either party could initiate exchanges, patrons also requested dances. At times, dancers and patrons wooed each other with conversation, flirtation, and a few drinks before moving on to a private dance, making the club feel like a singles bar. On slower nights, strippers watched each other perform or sat together and complained about the lack of tips.

"Closing Time" began to play when it was nearly 2:00 AM. At the end of a shift, the smell of tobacco, alcohol, and perfume infused the club and its inhabitants. After the patrons left, the owner-manager or bartender emerged with bags to collect money from each of the registers. Strippers were often downstairs saying goodbye to patrons or making after-work plans. During this time, more often than not, dancers needed multiple reminders from the deejay to pack it up for the night. Bartenders handed out free beers to the other male workers and cocktail waitresses, who, unlike strippers, were not allowed to drink on shift. Strippers could purchase drinks before the bar closed, but they did not receive free drinks from the club. The club assumed strippers should be spending this time getting dressed and readied for home. Nearly all club employees drank during cleanup. As things wound down, workers chatted with each other about their night, how much money they made, the patrons in attendance, and any unusual events. Cocktail waitresses busily cleared drinks and ashtrays, while the deejay turned up the house lights and shut down the music. The bartender washed glasses, stocked beer coolers, and replaced empty bottles of liquor. After cleanup, the bartender and cocktail waitresses propped themselves near the bar to count their tips. On a good night, tips might total \$120–\$140 for cocktail waitresses and \$70–\$100

for bartenders. Both bartenders and cocktail waitresses also earned hourly wages from the club (of \$8.50 and \$3.50, respectively). Cocktail waitresses further supplemented bartenders' earnings by sharing their own tips, typically \$20 a shift.

Laboring under the weight of bags crammed with clothing, shoes, and makeup, strippers thundered down the stairs from the upper dressing room. Though it would have been nearly impossible for any stripper to sneak out, the deejay often sat near the door to the employee entrance to be sure he received his cut of their night's tips. After the money changed hands, most female workers waited for a bartender or bouncer to walk them out to their car or at least watch them leave from the back doorway. Stories of female workers who were followed home from this and other clubs abound. While some female workers left in groups, others ignored club expectations and departed without an escort, taking the risk of entering the parking lot alone, often with a wad of cash in hand.

At the end of the evening, workers' hopes of big payoffs were either realized or dashed. Despite many nights of marginal earnings, the power of a profitable night held sway over all workers. For example, Summer, a twenty-year-old stripper, described her monetary expectations this way: "Some nights I make good money, like \$400, and if I'd only done this and this I could have made more money." It is this potential for more—more income but also more power, more self-esteem, more celebrity—that keeps clubs in business and workers coming back. Strip clubs are often considered places of fantasy for patrons; the same could be said for workers, as many of their goals are often within reach for only a short time. Nevertheless, it was the possibility that men would be valued for their authority, women would be adored and rewarded, and patrons would experience their desires that fueled the club's gendered organization.

Worker, stripper, and patron ideals depended on overlapping organizational aspects of the club: (1) work roles, authority, and interactions; (2) club norms; and (3) the club's formal work rules.²⁹ Male coworkers continually asserted their influence over female workers through their work routines. They also used gender and sexuality stereotypes as ways to capitalize on their dominance. Given the club's formal work rules, there was little to inhibit or counterbalance male workers' authority. Women, as cocktail waitresses and strippers, hoped to gain both financial and emotional rewards from their work. Especially over time, this compensation was uneven and often declined, alongside mounting struggles to manage the burdens of stripping labor.³⁰ Patrons sought to experience themselves as desirable, connected, and

powerful. While their door fees, drink purchases, and tips to female workers afforded patrons access to erotic performance, alongside kindness from female workers, this relationship was an exchange based on their ability to pay and subject to interpretations of counterfeit intimacy.³¹ The extent to which patrons' interactions with strippers and other club workers were satisfying largely depended on the patron's wants and needs, as well as his relationship with the club. As club workers', strippers', and patrons' narratives demonstrate, strip clubs often hold out unfulfilled promises.

Stripping Strip Club Work

Like most strip clubs (and sex work) in the United States, The Lion's Den featured female performers for primarily male patrons. A revolving number of strippers rotated in and out; most did not remain for long. Besides being financially advantageous to be a new face, The Lion's Den offered few incentives for strippers to commit to long-term service and, assuming high turnover, demonstrated little value in its strippers. In an industry built on the importance of new recruits, necessary to satisfy audiences' appetites for new products, it is easy to discern how and why women are considered expendable. Take, for example, the pornography industry, with its emphasis on variety, churning out thousands of films a year that feature new and younger actors. Strippers are subject to a similar reality by audiences who expect a perpetual influx of young women. Common sex worker stereotypes also emphasize their marginality. Sex workers are often portrayed as drug addicts, vectors of disease, and, by definition, "bad girls"—in other words, not the kind of women men should "bring home to their mothers." Male coworkers, patrons, management, and the strippers themselves mobilize these stereotypes to undermine strippers' importance and emphasize their disposability.

Strippers and other sex workers often lack control over the context in which their labor is performed. Since the early 1980s, sex industry scholars have provided considerable documentation of third-party control over the sex industry.³² This constitutes a shift from the nineteenth century, when women's work in prostitution was largely "unencumbered by third parties," like pimps or madams.³³ Today, the U.S. exception to third-party strip club control is The Lusty Lady theater, a worker-owned collective peep show in San Francisco, a well-known club that is often cited by sex work scholars. The Lusty Lady has a sister club in Seattle that was under the same ownership until 2003, when the San Francisco workers purchased their club (www.lustyladysf.com). Precisely because San Francisco's female employees own

The Lusty Lady, it stands in stark contrast to most other clubs in the industry. Within sex work, third-party control is largely gendered. Despite media attention on high-profile madams like Heidi Fleiss and CEOs like Hugh Hefner's daughter, Christie Hefner, most sex work businesses are owned and run by men.³⁴ Similarly, The Lion's Den was owned and operated by Steve, who also acted as the club's manager. The club's personnel included a typical cast of workers—bartenders, bouncers, deejays, doormen, and cocktail waitresses—who performed customary tasks. During my time in The Lion's Den, there were no roles available to women that broadened women's authority in the club, since housemoms there handled only stripper scheduling rather than a wider range of tasks as in other clubs.

In some ways, The Lion's Den was conventional. In this context, music and stripping were supplemented by televised sports events, a strip club staple. For this entertainment, strip club patrons in The Lion's Den, as in most other clubs, paid inflated alcohol prices and door fees (relative to nonstripping bars), which provided the bulk of the club's revenue. Two central features distinguished The Lion's Den from other strip clubs. First, it was once a high-end club with a state-of-the-art sound and light system and a well-known reputation in the region, attracting feature performers and hundreds of patrons. Since its heyday in the 1980s, the club had fallen on hard times. Besides small cosmetic maintenance, the club remained largely untouched. It now had more in common with other "dive" clubs than it did with elite competitors. Second, under Steve's direction, The Lion's Den maintained a strict division of labor by gender. In practice, this division of labor put power in the hands of men. Men were employed exclusively in positions with authority as managers, bouncers, bartenders, and deejays. Women's jobs—as strippers, cocktail waitresses, and housemoms—had little, if any, formal influence.

In other strip clubs, women may not be excluded from positions as managers, bartenders, and deejays, jobs that many times (though not always) carry some influence over operations. Strippers may also enjoy more authority over their performances by supplying or choosing their own music and developing creative routines with elaborate costumes and props, aspects that were absent from stripping labor in The Lion's Den. The broader sex industry, however, generally puts power in the hands of men. In prostitution, there are far greater numbers of pimps than there are madams. Across forms of sex work, authority is rarely assigned to female sex workers' jobs. This is particularly the case for stripping, where most dancers work as independent contractors and clubs avoid the social and economic benefits and obligations of employment.³⁵ This general disempowerment of female sex workers is what

makes the often-mentioned Lusty Lady theater in San Francisco such an unusual and noteworthy business for being the nation's first unionized and, later, worker-owned peep show.

Given The Lusty Lady's exceptional status, let me say a bit more about it. The Lusty Lady is one of a kind. Often referred to as a strip club, it is really a peep show in which glass walls separate patrons from performers. Patrons view strippers through tiny rooms with doors instead of in open rooms. Patrons' tips are collected through cash machines. Rather than competing for tips, strippers' earnings are distributed based on a dancer's length of employment. Though some conversation is possible over the music and through the glass, it is not a primary part of strippers' onstage performances. The Lusty Lady theater has been the subject of numerous in-depth investigations throughout its transformations since the late 1990s.³⁶ After dancers in The Lusty Lady learned that patrons were filming them through one-way mirrors in the viewing booths, they organized to change club practices. After a protracted struggle, the strippers won representation with the Service Employees International Union in 1997.³⁷ In 2003, the peep show made news again when workers assumed ownership of the club.³⁸ Strippers, who are now co-owners in the collective, make club rules. As a result of this history, The Lusty Lady is an unusually safe and egalitarian place to work.

By contrast to The Lusty Lady, many other sex work contexts, from street prostitution to pornographic filmmaking, contain unsafe working conditions.³⁹ It is the convergence of a strict division of labor by gender, the consolidation of authority into the hands of men, and the club's disrepair that made The Lion's Den a particularly dangerous environment for women. Drawing on studies of gendered organizational theory,⁴⁰ these factors constitute what I call *gendered organizational jeopardy*. Understanding how gendered organizational jeopardy becomes normalized and even expected is important if we are to comprehend how inequalities and resulting dangers operated in this workplace.

Gendered outcomes in the club may at first seem illogical. For example, strippers were both adored and stigmatized, valued and devalued as physical sexual beings, and they simultaneously received the greatest incomes and held the least power compared with other club workers. These contradictory outcomes are part of what sociologist Judith Lorber calls a "paradox" of gender. As she points out, "much of what we take for granted about gender and its causes and effects either does not hold up or can be explained differently."⁴¹ What we see in The Lion's Den is a manifestation of larger cultural processes and arrangements that position women in the world in

relation to what their bodies offer to men. Few (if any) women and girls are exempt from cultural pressures to be attractive, thin, and desirable. Critiques of beauty, diet, and fashion industries have spoken volumes about the harmful effects these external and internal expectations have on girls and women, leading to low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders.⁴² These are the gendered realities of our time, not just for strippers but for all girls and women. When the pressures of the beauty myth collide with a rigid division of labor between men and women, we find the gendered organizational jeopardy reflected within the experiences and stories I outline in this book. In the pages that follow, I explore these gendered contradictions as they emerged at The Lion's Den.

Overview of the Book

In chapter 1, I situate this book within a broader cultural, legal, and socio-historical framework, elaborating on how this research was conducted and my role as a researcher. Building from a gendered organization-of-work perspective, in chapter 2, I demonstrate how strippers were stigmatized, excluded from positions of authority, and put in danger by club rules and practices. Rather than simply the isolated acts of disgruntled workers, women's exclusion and mistreatment were systematic in the club. Indeed, they were woven into the text of the owner-manager's *Employee/Entertainer Handbook*, his blueprint for how the club should operate. In chapter 3, I show patrons' demands for affirmation and group affiliation, as well as the deeply rooted aggression and violence they exhibited toward women. The resulting emotional and physical burdens on strippers did not end there. Workers' and management's lax safety standards and disdain for strippers compounded the risks strippers faced from all men in the club. In chapter 4, I describe the way the gendered organization of work and men's behaviors took a toll on strippers. Strippers detailed a range of (often unsuccessful) strategies and coping mechanisms for negotiating their work. In chapter 5, I explore the economic contradictions strippers faced in the club. Examining the club's organizational form, I show that strippers, in contrast with other workers, experience both economic autonomy and dependence, one of many gender paradoxes associated with stripping work.

After completing my participant observation in The Lion's Den, I frequently wondered what happened to the club and research participants outlined in these pages. To further study The Lion's Den, I made a virtual reentry four years later by examining a popular strip club website's discussion

board pertaining to the club. The postscript, “The Lion’s Den, 2005–2006,” draws on these new data to chart changes in the club and continued troubles for strippers.

Further details on my methodology are in appendix 1. The table in appendix 1 outlines each participant’s socioeconomic information. In appendix 2, I briefly describe each participant’s entrance into The Lion’s Den, as well as the consequences of their work and patronage. I encourage readers to explore this appendix to learn more about Steve, Frank, Roxanne, Faith, and others.

I visited my first two strip clubs in 1993, over a decade and a half ago. Both were rather small, rundown places in central Ohio. The first setting was steeped in dreariness and featured a drunken dancer staggering around the stage. The second club had a vintage look, complete with musty velvet draperies and a small, wooden, spotlighted stage with a tall, brass dance pole. The place was shabby, but it showcased a woman performing something more reminiscent of Cirque de Soleil than striptease. Little did I know then how much these two examples had to say about stripping labor. Reminiscent of these images, within the pages of this book there is much sadness; however, there are also glimmers of strength and talent.