

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Siobhan Brooks. *Unequal Desires: Race and Erotic Capital in the Stripping Industry*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010. ix + 125 pp. \$60.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-4384-3215-1; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-4384-3214-4.

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## The Racial and Sexual Hierarchies of Sex Work

Siobhan Brooks's *Unequal Desires* picks up where the documentary about unionization and erotic dancing *Live Nude Girls Unite* (2000) directed by Vicky Funari and Julia Query left off, researching issues of race and desire in the industry. As in *Live Nude Girls Unite*, Brooks points to the one to seven ratio of dancers of color to white dancers, and notes that black dancers were not given the same lucrative opportunities to work in the "Private Pleasures" booth with the same regularity as white dancers. These realities are based on largely unquestioned assumptions about the kind of women/experiences a person expects when going to see erotic dancers. Brooks establishes from the beginning that she is approaching this project with a labor perspective and thus feminist debates of "whether sex work can be work" are not considered. Her start "beyond" these debates allows her to dive into discussions that focus specifically on racial dynamics in dancers' lived realities that are often erased or absent from macro-discussions of sex work as work (p. 102). Brooks concretely demonstrates the complexity of intersectional identity markers for those working in the industry, largely in their own words, and also interrogates the implications of structural and symbolic racism and classism within erotic economies.

The main story line of *Live Nude Girls Unite* centers on the challenges dancers faced while trying to unionize at The Lusty Lady in San Francisco. While racial equality was an important issue for the workers, it faded somewhat in prominence, at least in the film's rendition of the

story, as talks continued and gained more intensity before ultimate unionization on August 30, 1997. To look in more depth at the assumptions implicit in the labor politics of the erotic economy, Brooks studied three clubs, two that cater to conventional heterosexual striptease relations located respectively in the Bronx and Manhattan and a black lesbian club in Oakland. *Unequal Desires* reports on the results of thirty-one interviews conducted somewhere between 2005 and 2007 (more specific dates are difficult to discern) with dancers, customers, and managers who vary in race, class, and age. Through these interviews and ethnography, Brooks investigates women of color who have been rejected as performers in mainly white clubs alongside management's perception of race, hiring, and advertising; the relationship between safety, race, and violence in the clubs and their surrounding environment; responses from customers to darker-skinned dancers in general with a particular focus on kinds of payment and tipping; and the effects of racism and stereotypes of both men and women who work in the clubs.

Brooks's main project is to intertwine the racial and sexual hierarchies of sex work that she identifies as having a gap in U.S.-based theory, and she accomplishes this skillfully from cover to cover. Brooks clearly and carefully lays out her key terms, like "desire industries," "racialized desire," "erotic capital," and "racialized erotic capital." With the use of these terms, she locates her work within a contingent of researchers interested in striptease

and sexual labor identified by Katherine Frank in 2007.[1] In line with findings of Becki Ross and Kim Greenwell, Brooks observes that dancers of different races work at clubs largely corresponding to the racialization of the neighborhoods where the clubs are located.[2] She goes on to question this division by interrogating why black dancers are largely absent from and rejected by high-end clubs that feature primarily white dancers. Further, she connects racial stereotyping and desire to the safety of black and dark-skinned Latina dancers and examines customers' specific responses to the bodies of these dancers, versus white dancers. She also looks at wage differences between dancers of various races, racism experienced by support staff in the clubs, and questions concerning racial passing and management policies. Brooks contextualizes the stigma challenging dancers with a concise historical overview of burlesque, focused largely on New York City. She goes on to show that sometimes black dancers can transcend their social, symbolic, and economic status through dancing, which in turn results in educational or economic benefits.

Many aspects of this work make it an important and unique contribution to scholarship. One highlight is the inclusion of a queer owned and operated club in Oakland catering to queer audiences. Through this piece, Brooks analyzes the exchanges between customers and dancers outside of the heterosexual exchange that takes place in the majority of nightclubs featuring female striptease artists. Brooks makes some interesting comparisons between the two styles of clubs, particularly surrounding violence. She also brings her research out of the clubs and assesses the online presence of all of these clubs, paying particular attention to how the clubs try to attract clientele through signifiers of race and class. Finally, Brooks strongly concludes by tying the implications of erotic capital as previously outlined to social policies related to welfare and reproductive rights.

Consistently in chapters 2 through 6, I wanted Brooks to expand her thoughts and analysis, as merited by the scope and importance of her project. I wanted additional interpretation of the sometimes lengthy comments and quotations that she includes from her field research. I wonder, however, if she made a conscious choice to let the narrators' words stand on their own as much as possible and let readers make their own additional interpretations. Various perspectives are presented at different points that could have been related to other material as the work progresses. Furthermore, I wish that Brooks had drawn lengthier conclusions at the end of each chapter. In numerous places, endnotes could have been in-

cluded in the text to add and complicate in more detail the main analysis. Brooks also could have discussed in greater detail her important additions to the recent history of burlesque surrounding zoning laws in New York City.

Unfortunately, and sadly unsurprisingly, Brooks finds that black and Latina women are not paid enough for their erotic work, reflective of dominant attitudes across other industries and economic structures. She further concludes that this is because racism is framed as acceptable due to the industry's dependence on consumer tastes and preferences. This is reinforced by neoliberal ideas that women of color are solely responsible for their ability to access wealth and manage public perceptions. A vicious cycle thus emerges devaluing these women's labor in erotic industries, not just in terms of earnings but also in terms of safety in the workplace. *Unequal Desires* demonstrates the power of symbolic and structural racism and classism, which in turn affects other areas of the women's lives: Brooks makes links to romantic relationships, education, market investments, health, access to justice, immigration policies, and other areas of employment. Despite these depressing but realistic conclusions, Brooks does note that some dancers of color have the ability to "pass" as other races and thus subvert their supposed place within the desire hierarchy; however, this "opportunity" is only available to a few (and is dependent on the idea of a hierarchy existing in the first place). Further, because Brooks has not limited her research to instances of striptease aimed at entertaining dominant heterosexuality, she demonstrates how the queer club in Oakland both challenges and reinforces "notions of patriarchy and masculinity, while responding to the specific needs and desires of working class Black lesbians who mostly are ignored by mainstream White-dominated gay and lesbian institutions" (p. 100).

Brooks tirelessly advocates for diverse groups of activists to ensure that consideration is paid to the real-life positions of women of color, and she shows how this ripples across their lives in order to affect beneficial change in policy and accessing rights. Finally, despite the trap set up by appearance-based industry, Brooks recommends that symbolic affirmative action approaches be implemented in the clubs, such as more promotion for dancers of color. As Brooks acknowledges, dismantling this oppression is daunting; however, her suggestions in the conclusion of some specific and tangible ways to make changes are incredibly refreshing. I sincerely hope that clubs take her up on the challenge despite the fact management, as she notes, is relatively comfortable op-

erating under the current status quo. Throughout the book, Brooks bounces between an academic and a conversational tone in her writing. This technique makes the reader feel challenged and relaxed simultaneously. Anyone interested in striptease, sexual labor, and race could, and should, read this accessible book to inform their perspective and politics of anti-oppression.

## Notes

[1]. Katherine Frank, "Thinking Critically about Strip Club Research," *Sexualities* 10 (2007): 501-517.

[2]. Becki Ross and Kim Greenwell, "Spectacular Striptease: Performing the Sexual and Racial Other in Vancouver, B.C., 1945-1975," *Journal of Women's History* 17 (2005): 137-164.

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