

Auto

The Reflexive Self Through Narrative A Night in the Life of an Erotic Dancer / Researcher

Carol Rambo Renzi (1992)

Auto-
ethnography

The following is an ~~autoethnographic~~ narrative that examines my emotional experience while ~~recreating~~ the strip bar setting as a dancer-researcher and the lived experience of writing about it. ~~Autoethnography is consciousness 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.

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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.

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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.

* * * *Wish for more*

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.

Lovey is an awful to come back

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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 baybee!"

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, baybee," 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?

above
below
stated - argued
relations

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.

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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.

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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 to 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. Saturday the dancer does not fit with Carol, the student and wife. I am forced to recalculate myself and consequently everything around me. It shakes me out of the lethargy of my daily life and stuns me for a 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.

