GUAM STRIPTEASE IN PACIFIC STUDIES

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The presence of a striptease industry on the island of Guam is rooted in a complex series of historical events and changing perceptions of female nudity. This paper introduces the study of Guam striptease to Pacific Island Studies through the author's own case study narrative as an exotic dancer. Due to the novelty of this topic for the Pacific, the historical and narrative aspects of this paper provide a preliminary background of Guam striptease for future research through a multi-disciplinary approach.

The term striptease evokes many thoughts and perceptions to a variety of perspectives and cultural backgrounds. An immediate self-affirmation of never going to “those places” may surface to the minds of some individuals, while others may recall a bachelor party they attended where one or more exotic dancers\(^1\) were present. It is also likely that readers here may have been to or lived on the island of Guam who immediately reminisce happy gatherings with exotic dancers, both in and outside of the strip bars\(^2\) where they worked. This latter sentiment is one that I personally associate with Guam striptease and that I suspect is shared by a considerable portion of Guam's service industry community of workers, clientele, friends, and family members. The art and business of striptease on Guam has a distinctly powerful and open presence on island and is undeniably a major component of Guam's socio-cultural network of community relations and kin. Strip bars on Guam and the people employed in them form an intricate part of a wide range of cross-cultural interactions that characterize the diverse population of this southernmost and largest island of the Mariana archipelago in the Southwestern Pacific.

The presence of an exotic entertainment industry on Guam has emerged from a complex series of global historic events largely due to the politically strategic geographical location of Guam in the last five centuries. The striptease community on Guam offers a unique set of socio-cultural patterns of human interactions that further demonstrate Guam's pluralistic and multi-ethnic population. The premises upon which cross-cultural interactions occur in Guam's strip bars are rooted in a history of changing global perspectives of the female nude, particularly those of Euro-America, Asia, and the Pacific Islands. Guam continues to be a global strategic post as a result of its current political status as an unincorporated territory of the United States, and has also become the furthestmost outpost for the expanding North\(^3\) American striptease industry, which has become increasingly mainstream in the last few years. Due to its proximity to Asian countries and their culture-specific sex-related industries, Guam has developed an exotic entertainment industry that is unique in the world.
The business of owning and operating strip bars on Guam incorporates both North American style stage striptease performance and Asian style floor hostess entertainment. The languages spoken, the dancers’ music selections, the dancing styles performed, and the diverse workforce and clientele that make up Guam's striptease community are only some aspects of this enterprise that shape its unique character. Due to such frequent mass arrivals of primarily Japanese tourists, United States military personnel, and international business entrepreneurs, Guam strip bars have become contemporary physical spaces where an intense degree of cross-cultural encounters take place. Most of these encounters are primarily between men and women, due to the nature of the sales necessary for business. However, many interactions also occur between co-workers, friends, and family, both inside and outside the strip bar. Encounters made and relations formed in Guam strip bars often extend to other places on island, such as beaches, homes, businesses, educational institutions, and subsequently to other parts of the world via travel and web communication. The Guam strip bar is then not only a physical space where cultural exchange takes place, but also a figurative one throughout the island and to other parts of the Pacific and the world. Guam strip bars are often known and referred to by name in other Pacific Islands, Japan, and the United States.

This study is based on ethnographic data, field research, and pertinent literature that formed the basis of my graduate thesis, which was inspired by my own experience as an exotic dancer and entertainer on Guam from November 1997 to November 1999. It would be difficult to limit my discussion here to an adherent and established form of academic discourse without incorporating to a necessary degree some personal narratives from this extraordinary experience in my life. Not only do I intend to formally introduce this unique art form, lifestyle, and business venture to readers of Micronesian and Pacific Island Studies, I would also like to offer this largely unknown and rarely documented component of Pacific Island gender relations as a consideration in Pacific discourses of gender and ethnic representation.

By offering a first-hand perspective of my former employment as an exotic dancer on Guam, the interpretation of the presence and study of striptease on Guam and the larger Pacific is unfolded here through three basic points of departure. The first identifies the present position of the Guam strip bar in the Pacific and outlines the historical events and time-specific perspectives of female nudity that surround its emergence on island. The unique levels of cross-cultural exchange that take place inside Guam strip bars are shaped by a complex history of commercial relations between, but not limited to, Pacific Island women and foreign men. In the second, I share details of my working experience that relate to the unique character of this business on Guam, particularly the intense degree of cross-cultural interaction from my encounters with men and women from so many cultural backgrounds. Although I am not a Pacific Island woman myself, I hope to offer a positive and well-represented interpretation of Pacific Islander response (particularly for Guam) toward the striptease enterprise, even through my own perceptions, worldviews, and biases as a Latin-American woman. The third and conclusive point addresses the relevance of this topic in Pacific Island Studies to a variety of academic disciplines and theoretical frameworks. A consideration of gender relations formed in Guam strip bars may offer a broader understanding of ethnic representation on Guam. Along with other existing literature on gender in the Pacific, Guam striptease offers new insights into changing gender relations in an age of travel and electronic communication.

**HISTORICAL INFLUENCES**

Gendered and Island-specific patterns of high levels of cultural mobility are not new to the Pacific. Cultural exchange and commercial transactions between foreign men and Island women have been occurring in the Pacific Islands since at least the 18th and 19th centuries with the arrivals of European whalers, traders, missionaries, and administrators. With
food, water, and female companionship being of most immediate human necessity to the foreign men, Island women began to provide them with these basic necessities in exchange for material commodities introduced from beyond their home island. An extensive collection of these historic encounters is found in historian David Chappell’s Shipboard Relations between Pacific Island Women and Euroamerican Men, 1767 - 1887 (1992). Chappell notes various roles of Polynesian women in these encounters; they were particularly savvy in learning the outsider’s language, voyaging with foreign men aboard ship, and establishing themselves as mediators in trading transactions to assist their Island chiefs and male kin (p. 140, 141, 148). The gradual shaping of more complex Islander trade relations in the Pacific eventually resulted from and was largely influenced by the consistent negotiation of Island female companionship, and Island women increasingly took on an ambassadorial role in the representation of their home island to the outside world.

Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands were under more religious control by the Spanish mission and administration during the 18th and 19th centuries than other Pacific Islands. Relations between foreign men and Island women in the Polynesian Islands were less restricted by Eurocentric moral codes than on Guam, which had long been established as the headquarters of both the Catholic mission and political administration of Spain’s Pacific empire (Crocombe, 1991, p. 119). However, Laura Souder (1992) has revealed that in spite of the rigid character of the Spanish mission and administration of Guam, Chamorro women also participated in the exchange of sexual favors for commodities from explorers and other members of the galleon trade (p. 156). These types of encounters coincide with the emergence of what may have been the beginnings of a service industry on Guam that initially catered to the household, cooking, laundry, and companionship needs of predominantly male Spanish seafarers and administrators. Eventually, employment offered by the Spanish administration to maintain and operate their galleon trade also led to a gradual increase of male in-migration from Asian and South American countries, particularly the Philippines and to some degree Mexico and Peru (Crocombe, 1991, p. 118-119). Much like Island women today, women interacted with an increasingly diverse transient male population, and a considerable frequency of encounters occurred from commercial negotiations of varying levels of female companionship. Although it is not known how many of these women were foreign, it has been evidenced that women in sex professions have worked and resided on Guam since the 17th century (Stade, 1998, p. 13). The collective sex profession enterprising of resident Island women may have contributed circulation of currency into Guam’s economy during the last three centuries of the Spanish administration.

By the time of the 1898 acquisition of Guam by the United States after the Spanish-American war, it is likely, though undocumented, that a significant group of wealthy women resided on Guam who were established in various sex professions. The beginning of the United States administration saw an increase in mass arrivals of predominantly Euro-American male military personnel. It also remains unclear exactly when significant numbers of foreign women first arrived to Guam to pursue sex-related enterprises, and exactly when Chamorro women’s participation in the industry decreased. There was an increase in arrivals of Euro-American women who were primarily U.S. military spouses, enlisted women, educators, and healthcare professionals (Hill, 2002, p. 41). It is possible that during this early administrative period some North American women may have employed themselves in sex professions to some degree.

The short but turbulent period of the Japanese occupation on Guam during World War II (from December 10, 1941 to July 19, 1944) brought with it an abrupt and exploitative sex industry in which Japanese administrators forced Chamorro women into sexual labor. The testimony of Mariquita (Howard, 2000) provides a glimpse of the horrific amount of rape and violence experienced by Chamorro women during this period. Encounters between Chamorro women and Japanese men
were often not consensual exchanges of sexual favors; the women did not submit willingly to the men’s sexual demands, and they were certainly not paid or otherwise rewarded for performing the sexual acts that were forced upon them. Some Chamorro women who were subjected to these horrors may have suffered more from the beatings they received for refusing to give in to the sexual demands of Japanese men (p. 112). Traumatic memories of the Chamorro women who experienced these violent acts remain largely unspoken and unwritten. It has been documented, however, that Japanese *geisha* houses were established on Guam during this time (p. 87), fewer than those established in Palau, which had been the Japanese empire’s administrative center in the Pacific for over twenty years and during World War II (Nero, 1990, p. 73). Japanese *geisha* and “comfort women” were known to have been brought over to Japan’s Pacific territories during this time (Dr. Dirk Ballendorf, personal communication). The occupation of Japan in the Pacific is characterized not only by its exploitation of resources, but of people as well (Ballendorf, 1990, p. 82). Women were particularly subjected to the violence that took place during this colonial period.

The United States’ recapture of Guam in 1944 marked the new period of US Naval Administration and the formation of the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands, in which the United States had military interests. War and sexuality were becoming synonymous in Islander body representation during World War II and in the years to follow, as is evidenced by historian Teresia Teaiwa in *bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans* (1994). Her study of the naming of the bikini bathing suit after Bikini Atoll following the 1947 nuclear testing of the Marshall Islands points to several antecedents for which striptease on Guam has made its presence. According to Teaiwa, the French creation and naming of the revealing two-piece bathing suit was considered a “celebration” of the efforts of the Allied Powers during World War II (p. 91). At the expense of Bikini and other Marshall Islanders’ relocation from their home islands and fatal effects from radiation and nuclear fall-out, the bikini bathing suit extracts global masses from the grave political realities of nuclear testing.

Air travel became accessible to civilians following the lifting of Guam’s security clearance in 1962, which resulted in more diverse arrivals of both men and women to Guam from other Pacific Islands and the outside world in search of employment opportunities. This event gave way to rapid and simultaneous developments in tourism, education, healthcare, infrastructure, transportation, and communications. According to field information, the first North American style strip bar on Guam opened soon after the security clearance was lifted, placing the beginnings of striptease on Guam early on in the newly forming tourism industry. Strip bars did not open in the village of Tumon until the 1970s, where the majority of Guam’s overall nightlife locations are currently concentrated. Field informants who have owned and operated various bars and clubs on Guam over the last four decades have observed that the first foreign women to employ themselves as exotic dancers on island were from the United States. Most of the clientele in Guam’s first strip bars were male military personnel. One informant, who had owned and operated several strip bars on Guam since the 1970s, recalled an instance when the Catholic Church decided not to shut down strip bars when it was apparent that that they offered young enlisted men an alternative source of female companionship rather than seeking out Island women (particularly Chamorro women). Presently, however, after four decades of striptease on Guam, Chamorro and other Island women have themselves become exotic dancers and entertainers.

The largest percentage of exotic dancers on Guam between September 2001 and March 2002 were Caucasian, Euro-American women, averaging at 45%. Asian (predominantly Korean) women made up an average of 24% of exotic dancers on Guam. Pacific Island women came in third place, comprising an average of 13% of all exotic dancers; Chamorro women alone averaged 9% of all dancers. The remainder of dancers came from many different parts of the world, such as Latin America, Canada, Jamaica, and Sweden, to name a few (Hill, 2002, p. 67). Perhaps one of the most
striking findings in my field research is that Korean women made up an average of 60% of all strip bar owners (p. 69). These Korean matriarchs also own and operate many of the island's massage parlors and karaoke lounges. Many strip bars on Guam have maintained their operations for many years and have become established locales on island and possess their own unique histories. Although there is a high employee turnover rate in Guam's striptease industry, there have always been as many new arrivals to fill the positions of those who have departed. Male revues have also been present, although these venues are usually short-lived and not as successful as the female revues, due to Guam's predominantly male population.

Much like the whalers and seafarers of early contact times, transient men continue to arrive to Pacific Islands seeking female companionship and sexual services. The island of Guam, which had once been Spain's religious and administrative center in the Pacific, is now the striptease metropolis of the Southwestern Pacific region that includes Micronesia and parts of Melanesia. Saipan, to a lesser degree, also has a significant number of North American style strip bars. Although I have not had the pleasure of visiting Hawaii's strip bars in the Eastern Pacific, I know of at least one strip bar that has been open in Honolulu that is part of a corporate strip bar chain out of the United States mainland. This may indicate that some Hawaiian strip bars operate under more Western methods of accounting, but according to J. P. Danko's strip bar guide titled Live Nude Girls: The Top 100 Strip Clubs in North America (1998), one Hawaiian strip bar listing is described as a “favorite haole hangout, where Polynesian dream girls mix with exiles from the continent” (p. 81). He also identifies the venue as having an Asian “house mother” known as “Mama” (p. 81), much like my Korean boss at the Guam strip bar where I worked, who was affectionately referred to as Mamasan.

Perceptions of female nudity have shifted since times of early outsider contact, from both Islander and Euro-American perspectives. Islanders who were once idealized in the Western world as exotic scantily-clad “noble savages” can now be seen wearing more “voluminous” attire to the beach (Teaiwa, 1994, p. 98). On the other hand, Euro-Americans who during early times wore conservative attire and wanted to missionize and clothe the native island population are now sporting bikini bathing suits and other skin-revealing clothing (p. 97 – 98). For Guam, it has not been uncommon over the years to see females of all ages swimming in shorts and shirts. However, among more recent generations, teenage and young adult women are often as scantily clad as the tourists as well as the idealized female icons of popular global media. Western ideals of femininity have become integrated cultural expressions of many Chamorro women, particularly for those who have chosen careers as dancers of North American style striptease on Guam, some even performing in parts of the United States mainland. Although they make up a small percentage of dancers in Guam strip bars, the fact that Chamorro and other Pacific Island women have taken on this profession is a testament of power in gendered negotiation of female Islanders and their cultural adaptation over many generations of gendered contact for the acquisition of material and monetary commodities.

**PERSONAL ETHNOGRAPHY**

There have been many events and places throughout my life that led me toward the easiness with which I took up striptease as a profession. It is for this reason that I will start at the beginning of my life. I was born in 1974 to Martha Elena Calbimonte from Bolivia and Juan Enrique Martín from Spain on the United States Island Territory of Puerto Rico. At the age of one, my parents and I moved from San Juan, Puerto Rico to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, where I was enrolled at Escuela Nueva, an experimental Spanish-speaking preschool modeled under the Cuban educational system. Around the age of three, my natural parents drifted apart and my mother met Joe Oscar Hill, Jr. from Tennessee, who would become Dad. I was then entrusted to the care of my maternal grandmother in La Paz, Bolivia, where I spent my fourth birthday while my mother married Dad. That very year my new
parents returned to Bolivia to collect me and move back to the Dominican Republic, where I was then enrolled at the Carol Morgan School for pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten. Dad worked for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and I was now becoming educated under their governmental umbrella. The school, like many others throughout the world, was private for those outside of United States government agencies and military. When I met him, Dad had already worked for and lived in USAID posts in Bangladesh and Panama, and had even been to Guam briefly. He had always been a man of open heart and spirit, and was very candid in conversations of sexuality; one of my favorite stories of his travels was one in which he was very taken with the beauty of the Thai transsexuals he had encountered.

By the age of five, my new parents and I moved to Baltimore, Maryland, where I was enrolled at Jackson Road Elementary School, a public United States elementary school. Baltimore was a brief post for Dad's work with USAID, so I was only enrolled for first grade at the school. Dad had been presented with the remarkable opportunity to work in Bolivia for a four-year USAID assignment, so the family jumped at the chance and we moved to La Paz, Bolivia, where my extended maternal family lived. I was enrolled at the American Cooperative School for second through fifth grade. My younger brother Joe Oscar Hill, III of Martha and Joe, Jr. was born during this period, in Memphis, Tennessee, during a family vacation. It was during these years (the first half of the eighties) in La Paz that I had taken interest in Dad’s monthly Playboy subscription, which could always be easily found right on top of his nightstand. In his nightstand drawer, he had issues of Hustler magazines among a collection of manuals and other literature on nudism and sexuality. Needless to say, Dad was very comfortable with his own nudity and had always dreamed of joining other nudist families seen in brochures of nude-friendly locations and organizations. Therefore, I had become very comfortable and unashamed of my own nudity from an early age, and Playboy magazine became what is to this day among my favorite sources of art and literature.

When Dad’s assignment in Bolivia came to an end, our next family post was Guatemala City, Guatemala. I was now enrolled at Colegio Maya, also private and governed by the United States, from fifth through half of tenth grade. Although we had no relatives in Guatemala, our family maintained close ties with other families employed by USAID whose children also attended Colegio Maya. These years (the second half of the eighties) marked the beginning of my womanhood, and Dad’s Playboy magazines continued to allure me. Guatemala also happened to be the place where I first learned of Guam, when the island name appeared alphabetically prior to Guatemala in encyclopedias and reference books.

When Dad's assignment in Guatemala came to an end, he retired from USAID and we moved to Cape Coral, Florida, where I graduated from North Fort Myers High School in 1992. Attending a public high school in the United States was a dramatic change after many years of enrollment in small overseas North American schools. I then attended the University of Florida in Gainesville where I finally purchased my own subscription to Playboy magazine and completed my undergraduate anthropology degree. Dad began to struggle financially while I was away at Gainesville, and was unable to support me financially. While initially working as a waitress, I was approached by the owner of a lingerie store who wanted to hire me as an exotic dancer for private parties. I accepted the job immediately and had discovered that I could easily make large sums of money in short amounts of time, which allowed me more time to dedicate to my studies. I delivered strip-grams in Gainesville during my last four months of undergraduate study. Immediately prior to graduation, I attended a career fair where I happened to learn of and was offered an employment opportunity on the island of Saipan (United States Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands) as a hotel sports coordinator. Although I had begun to consider striptease as a full-time profession upon graduation, I was ex-
cited at the opportunity to live and work in the Pacific region.

I will never forget my first arrival to Saipan, which was the first time I had ever been anywhere near the Asia-Pacific region. I began an anthropological journal that was inspired by the similarities I observed between Saipan and Latin America, such as food products, Catholicism, and Chamorro language and intonation. I had also learned of the existence of the University of Guam Micronesian Area Research Center (UOG-MARC) from a professor at Florida prior to my departure from Gainesville. I did not arrive to Guam until fifteen months after my arrival to Saipan.

I was left penniless toward the end of my stay on Saipan following a decision by the hotel management not to renew my contract with the sports department. This resulted directly from a striptease act that I performed at a Saipan strip bar one evening. The Japanese owner of the hotel informed me that my actions gave the hotel a bad reputation, even though the Japanese patron who saw my stage performance, a regular visiting Japanese guest, was never criticized or questioned for being at the strip bar in the first place. Rosie Busby, my good friend that shared her apartment with me when I was unemployed in Saipan, was also a former exotic dancer, and had suggested that the both of us move to Guam together to pursue new employment opportunities. She would seek employment as a dive instructor, and I would become an exotic dancer.

I was offered full time employment at a Guam strip bar the very first night I arrived on island in November of 1997, and the very next day I visited the University of Guam and enrolled for graduate courses in Micronesian Studies. I took up initial residence in rent-free “dancer housing” that the strip bar provided. I lived there for almost two months before moving to an apartment that Rosie and I rented together. She eventually arrived to Guam and became a dive instructor and occasionally worked at the strip bar with me to earn some extra cash. She even filled in on nights when there was a shortage of dancers. I adapted very easily to a comfortable lifestyle of striptease and graduate study for the two years of my employment in the strip bar.

The bar’s most consistent clientele was made up of Japanese tourists, American military personnel, and local businessmen. However, there have been waves of particular clientele that arrived as a result of independent events, such as those following Typhoon Paka’s direct hit to the island of Guam in December 1997. With the exception of the night Paka struck, the strip bar where I worked opened right up the next day, offering many people a refuge that was generator-powered, air-conditioned, and provided cold refreshments. A mass arrival of male FEMA contractors and other workers to the strip bar resulted in very profitable earnings made by myself, my co-performers, the hostesses, and the bar owners. Another such sporadic mass arrival was that of enlisted men aboard the Kittyhawk during Tandem Thrust in March of 1999. Although much of the profit was made from entertaining transient men, dancers such as myself also developed friendships and relationships with resident clientele in order to establish a regular source of income. My “regulars” all came to see me repeatedly for a variety of reasons, and all had diverse backgrounds. Some came to watch my stage performance, others sought private dances, while others enjoyed conversation and company with the purchase of $20 ladies’ drinks (Hill, 2002, p. 65).

I had always been comfortable with my nudity and found it both mentally and physically effortless to remove my clothing during dance performances in front of a variety of audiences. However, even I was awestruck at first by the unusually high levels of physical contact occurring in Guam strip bars between exotic dancers and clientele. Although touching the dancers is technically illegal on Guam, this law is hardly, if ever, enforced, and touching has become so commonplace that it is expected and dancers would not be able to make much money unless they “broke” this law, which we all did. I quickly learned to become just as comfortable with allowing customers to touch my body during stage shows, private dances, and sometimes while conversing and
drinking to maximize my profits. In this lies a dangerous dichotomy between striptease and sex work. The line between the two is ambiguous on Guam. Negative connotations associated with the word “prostitution” present a challenge in my study of Guam striptease, and only by recognizing sex work as a legitimate profession can my analysis of Guam strip bars be facilitated.

Guam has a sex-tour industry that is comprised of massage parlors, karaoke bars, and strip bars. Sex workers predominantly work out of massage parlors, but can also be found to a lesser degree at karaoke and strip bars. Unlike the majority of North American strip bars where absolutely no touching is permitted, exotic dancers on Guam are each able to set their own limitations on the amount of touching and sexual services they want to provide. Generally speaking, sex workers make up a minority of exotic dancers, although the data necessary to prove this is difficult to obtain. In my experience, I have observed that the choice to offer sex among exotic dancers on Guam was acceptable and respectfully not questioned or probed, yet there were few women who were candid about it. A fellow dancer used to offer me $10 commissions for each male Japanese tourist referral given to her that I did not want to offer sex to. This type of symbiotic relationship made my job much easier when dealing with excessive requests for sexual intercourse. Although sex does occur in the guise of private dances at Guam strip bars, most exotic dancers on Guam do not make it readily available to customers.

Upon retrospect, I find it amazing how much cross-cultural knowledge I gained in the two years I danced on Guam, exchanging the performance and touch of my body for monetary profit. The process of touching became so routine, that I, along with many other dancers, incorporated it into my dance performance. The stage show in particular offered me more control of the movement of hands on my body, and my approach to male customers who offered dollar bills was culture-specific and set to music. Some transient North American men were often pleasantly surprised to learn that touching my body was permissible, unlike the strip bars they were accustomed to on the U.S. mainland. It was even pleasurable to see the happy expressions on their faces when I would guide their hands along the areas of my body that were comfortable to share through touch. Island men, on the other hand, were fully aware that touching was permitted when they partook in the tipping ritual. For this reason, I was often comfortable with not having to guide their hands at all because I could usually trust them to know which parts of my body were appropriate to touch. As a general rule of etiquette in Guam strip bars, touching a dancer’s genitals during her stage performance is considered inappropriate. Not all men are aware of this upon their first experience to the touch-friendly atmosphere of Guam strip bars.

Beyond the strip bar to my current residence in North Fort Myers, Florida, the close relations that I formed with other exotic dancers, hostesses, bar owners, bouncers, and bartenders are maintained to this day by way of the internet. The social bonds formed from within striptease circles on Guam are particularly strong, especially between dancers. The shared experience of nude performance to such a diverse audience brings these women closer together to form a sisterhood that is rarely experienced among co-workers of other professions. Exotic dancers on Guam constitute a community all their own, because it is in essence a community of communities. The multi-ethnic component of what I am identifying as the Guam striptease community is a powerful expression of cultural unity on Guam. Due to the relatively small size of Guam, individual exotic dancers have achieved celebrity status on island because they encounter so many members of Guam’s multi-ethnic population. Although often subjected to high expectations of touching and sex, some exotic dancers on Guam have a presence that is as highly regarded as some of the island’s politicians. Candid discussions about strip bars are common throughout Guam, and through my observations, going to a Guam strip bar is not an unusual and covert activity. The Guam strip bar is more than just a place to watch live nude female performances. It is a site of intensity, of both physical contact and social
bonds. It is a site of refuge from the aftermath of a typhoon or from an overnight layover between global destinations. It is also a site of learning how to love and understand people from different cultures.

**RELEVANCE OF GUAM STRIPEASE**

A diverse canon of contemporary studies of North American strip tease and their historical antecedents in Vaudeville and Burlesque performances appeared almost suddenly during the 1990s. Many initial written works on the topic of striptease are predominantly descriptive of the various contexts in which striptease has become an established North American art form. These contexts range from the urban surroundings of strip bars to terms that identify specific dance moves in striptease, such as the *bump and grind* and the *shimmy* that researcher Katherine Liepe-Levinson identifies in great detail in *Strip Show: Performances of Gender and Desire* (2002, p. 112-113). Though initially relevant to the overall introduction of striptease to North American academic readership, excessively lengthy descriptions of strip bars are usually included in these emergent written works to familiarize people with strip bars—people that supposedly do not go to them. Today, strip bars are common establishments of entertainment as are other nightclubs and discos, both in Guam and the North American mainland. My intention here is to present the study of Guam strip bars by analyzing the historical and contemporary cross-cultural dynamics that make them unique from mainland bars, rather than go into lengthy detail about what the interior of the bars look like, what specific dance moves are performed, or what the dancers’ costumes look like. Although these aspects are described at some length in my graduate thesis, it is not my intention to submit this new research to a voyeuristic academic readership that is only interested in such trivial data, which can be obtained by simply setting foot inside a Guam strip bar, or any strip bar. Certain descriptions I make in this piece about my experience as an exotic dancer on Guam are those that relate to the study of gendered cultural exchange and community alliance.

The study of striptease on Guam cannot be studied in isolation from the island’s historical contacts with the outside world, its political status, other sex-related enterprises, and its patterns of ethnic representation, some of which I have explored above as I’ve worked to locate it in time, space, and type of activity. An excellent example of one North American study is Robert Allen’s *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* (1991). Allen explores the popular culture surrounding the burlesque performances from the late 1800s as well as the political upheaval surrounding their presence throughout the United States. Allen’s work also provides an extensive reference to the basis of Western historical perceptions of female nudity during the same years of whaling and seafaring in the Pacific. Because the history of Guam striptease is rooted in cultural and sexual exchanges between Island women and foreign men, the study of sex work is also critical alongside striptease, particularly the socio-cultural patterns of exchange that occur in Guam (Workman, et al., 2001) and Asia (Law, 2000). The management of Guam strip bars also share many similarities with Asian owned and operated karaoke bars and to a lesser degree, massage parlors.

In my observation, however, Guam striptease is just one of numerous groundbreaking topics among an important burgeoning body of literature in the area of Pacific Island gender studies that identify outside (particularly Western) influences in Island gender representation. Chappell’s extensive collection of encounters between Island women and foreign men (1992) offers a time-comparison study of Guam strip bars. Similar to the cross-cultural encounters that Chappell notes as having occurred on the beach or aboard ship in the 18th and 19th centuries, such passing encounters between resident Island women and foreign and local men often occur in Guam strip bars. His concept of the ships as spaces of “liminality” can also be applied to Guam strip bars, where established social norms are broken and the ship (or strip bar) becomes a “zone” in which “cultures reveal themselves to each other” (p. 131).

Offering a Micronesian woman’s perspective is Teaiwa’s study of bikinis and Bikini
Islanders, demonstrating the North American tendency to sexualize war by naming a revealing two-piece bathing suit after an island that was decimated by nuclear testing (1994, p. 87). This fact is often taken for granted when watching an exotic dancer on Guam performing in a bikini. Sexuality and military objectives are still synonymous and can be evidenced in Guam strip bars, as military personnel’s contributions still make up a major part of an exotic dancer’s income. An increase in war and military mobility also creates an increase in revenue for exotic dancers, both on Guam and throughout various military posts in the North American mainland. Many of the enlisted men who currently frequent Guam strip bars are coming from or going to places such as Iraq and Afghanistan.

From a Chamorro female perspective, Souder identifies Chamorro women’s changing roles throughout history in spite of the lack of their documentation in historical accounts (1992, p. 143). In the last few decades there has been an increase in liberal attitudes toward sex and sexuality among Chamorro women, largely due to influences of the North American “sexual revolution” (p. 146). Chamorro women often frequented the strip bar where I worked, sometimes arriving in groups or even with their boyfriends and husbands. Many of the Chamorro exotic dancers that I met were married and supporting their family at home, some were students at the University of Guam, and some had traveled to other parts of the world to dance. Strip tease was an excellent source of income to support their families, further their careers, and travel the world. Although some had family members that did not always agree with their career choice, the ease and power with which they could obtain their needed commodities was undeniable.

Chappell, Teaiwa, and Souder are among the finer examples of gender research in Pacific history that give a particular voice to the study of Guam striptease and other contemporary studies of gendered cultural exchange. As a foundation for the study of striptease specific to Guam, however, are works that have mostly dealt with striptease in the United States. The majority of these works have been in the fields of theater and performance arts (Liepe-Levinson, 2002), cultural studies (Allen, 1991), sociology (Meckel, 1995), and anthropology (Cunningham and Hayes, 1998). This study and interpretation of Guam striptease takes these works into consideration along with a growing literature of Pacific Island gender studies. I offer very openly and candidly my own life as one case study in this analysis for future undertakings of this research. Although I am a not a Pacific Island woman myself, my case is representative of one example of the many foreign women that choose Guam to pursue a career in exotic dancing. A personal narrative of a Chamorro exotic dancer has not yet been offered; this would certainly be a welcomed and necessary perspective on this topic. Since there are also many Chamorro women who frequent strip bars and develop friendships with dancers, their perspectives would also offer further insight into the changing historical negotiation of Chamorro and other Pacific Island female sexuality. There will always be a heterosexual male gaze upon Guam and the Pacific Islands, and the women that maneuver the direction of this gaze have the power to shape future gender relations. World historical events have been largely shaped by female sexuality in many forms and through a variety of culture-specific perspectives, and Guam is no exception in its continued strategic role in global affairs.

Women have been exotic dancers on Guam for over four decades now. Many of them stay on island for a few years; others commute to Guam from another country for a few months out of the year. The island of Guam has also become an established international destination of a striptease circuit that consists primarily of Alaska, Puerto Rico, Hawaii, Australia, and Japan by traveling exotic dancers (primarily North American). Some have made Guam their permanent home and have settled and married into local families. New generations of children are born on Guam whose mothers are or were exotic dancers. Through the power of female sensuality and seduction, exotic dancers on Guam help to fuel an uncertain, largely tourist-based economy. The idea of living in the “island paradise” that Guam offers draws
many women from around the world to its striptease industry by both word of mouth and web-based job postings. The freedom of travel and the proximity to many international destinations are aspects of exotic dancing on Guam that give women the incentive to stay on island. Foreign women will continue to arrive to Guam to pursue this unique opportunity, and Chamorro and other Island women will also make the choice to offer live nude performance to a multi-ethnic audience. The possibilities in Pacific Island discourse on Guam striptease are open-ended in regard to gender relations, cultural exchange, history, demographics, politics, and ethnic representation. This analysis offers a preliminary background for future studies in Guam striptease, and also encourages a broader understanding of the particular experiences of exotic dancers on island toward a deeper consideration of the life choices they make and the personal narratives they can offer us.

ENDNOTES

1. The term exotic dancer will be used here to address women who offer live nude performance. The term stripper is frequently used in popular culture and also throughout the Guam community. Although employed by many on Guam (including exotic dancers themselves) in a positive manner, the term stripper may have negative connotations for readers outside of Guam, particularly in the United States, where conversations of striptease are more covert in academic circles.

2. The term strip bar will be used here to refer to the venues that offer live nude performance. Another common term that can be used is strip club, which is also employed throughout the Guam community. Although many of the locales that offer live nude performance on Guam have the word “Club” in their name, the term may be associated with large-scale nightclubs and strip clubs in the United States. For outside readers, replacing club with the term bar will aid in the visualization of Guam’s strip bars as the small, cozy retreats that they are.

3. People who grow up throughout South and Central America have a tendency to refer to the United States as “North America.” People throughout the United States, however, refer to their own nation simply as “America.” As a Latin-American, my employment of the term “America” refers to the entire continent of America, North, Central, and South. By referring to North America, it is not my intention to exclude Canada (a common Latin-American shortcoming of the use of the term), and I use the term “United States” as an adjective when possible.

4. The employment of the term Island women in my contemporary discussions and dialogues of Guam striptease may include both native and resident outsider women for the case of exotic dancers. I make the distinction between native and foreign Island women whenever possible.

5. The term haole originated on the Hawaiian Islands and is commonly used to identify mainly light-skinned Euro-American people. The term is also employed on Guam and carries with it a complexity of interpretation when related to the study of identity and ethnic representation of the island’s multi-cultural community.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


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