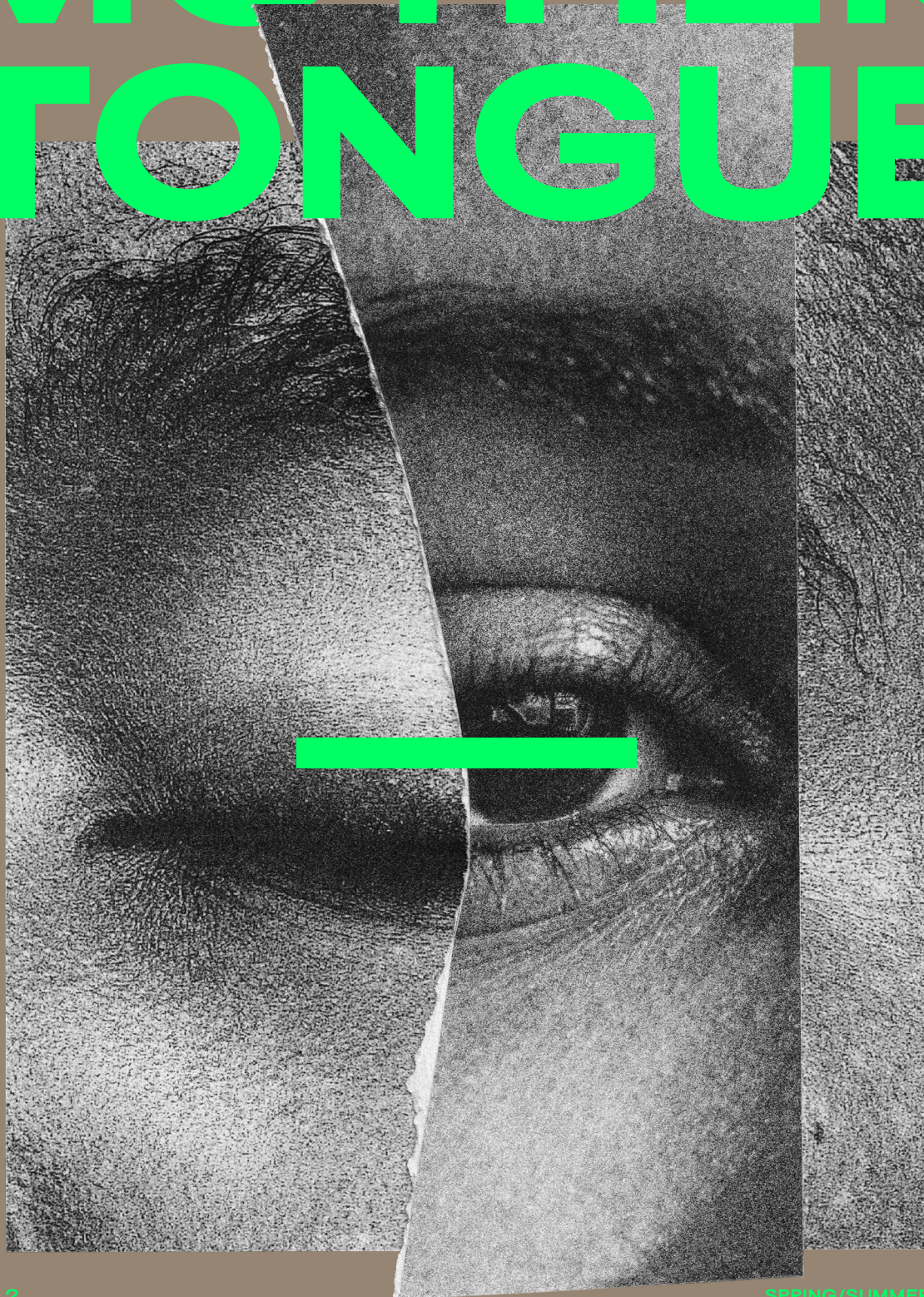


# MOTHER TONGUE





Photographer  
Bronwen Parker-  
Rhodes and writer  
Emily Dinsdale  
on stripping,  
subversion and  
finding feminism  
center stage.

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# *Many Things At Once*



A YOUNGER VERSION of myself was appalled by the notion of stripping—of throwing dollars like applause at women reduced to their bodies. My understanding of it was that women who allow themselves to be objectified are contributing to the very thing that oppresses them.

But any human socialized as a woman understands that the meaning of the word “allow” has a flimsy foundation, especially as it pertains to our bodies. As author Lily Burana puts it in her memoir *Strip City*: “Anyone who thinks being sexually objectified is the ultimate degradation has never been politically objectified.” Had I unfairly labeled consensual objectification as anti-feminist?

If we are to accept the objectification of women’s bodies as a cultural inevitability, then doing it on your own terms becomes an imperative—a sober surrendering and a radical mobilization.

These ideas solidified when I watched *Dear Delicious*, a 2015 short film by British filmmaker and photographer Bronwen Parker-Rhodes. In it, a client in a strip club confesses to a dancer: “I think we’ve evolved to treasure female beauty because it’s potent, and so transient.” The words are read over close-ups of a lingerie-clad dancer executing confident slow dips and turns on a pole. “You scare the shit out of me,” the client adds. Our deepest fear is not a woman skillful in the art of seduction, Parker-Rhodes is saying. Our deepest fear is female seduction as ennobling.

“So many women in the world want to celebrate the female body and relish in the attention of men but feel they can’t ask for that,” says Parker-Rhodes. “And stripping can be very validating.” When we speak over Zoom, she is in her London apartment wrapping production on her new book, *Wanting You to Want Me: Stories from the Secret World of Strip Clubs*, which is co-authored by journalist Emily Dinsdale. It draws on more than 15 years of archival photography, transcribed interviews and essays to explore the ambiguity of work that both objectifies and empowers.

Parker-Rhodes was in art school when she began performing. She hasn’t just “followed” her subjects throughout the years, she is one of them. Her work doesn’t “other”—it’s an insider’s view, inviting the audience to bear witness to equalized, relatable women. “Some of the stories in the book contradict one another—they don’t all sit comfortably side by side,” says Dinsdale, who is also a dancer. “They raise questions as much as they answer questions. It was important for Bronwen and me to preserve those contradictions and allow space for them to exist.”

### Why do these stories need to be told now?

**Bronwen:** I felt like so many memoirs or films have attempted to capture that world. But it was always just one person’s

experience. And a lot of the time it was shouting about how empowered and how great the experience was, trying to justify it.

**Stripper narratives do feel like a rigid genre. The narrator’s depiction is usually a polarized one, with little nuance.**

**Emily:** What strippers represent as cultural signifiers is not at all simple. We knew that we wanted the book to not be too neat. I remember us quite consciously deciding that we would not ask the question: “Why did you become a stripper?”

**Bronwen:** That was super important. It’s just one of those questions that you get asked a lot.

**Emily:** Because it is interesting, isn’t it? It is interesting how people end up in this business. And it’s not that it’s not relevant, it’s just we didn’t want people to feel ...

**Bronwen:** Like they have to justify their decision. It’s like there’s an expectation that there’s got to be some big trauma. It can’t be something simple and straightforward. There are so many different stories in this world. We didn’t want to impose one voice or narrative.

**Emily:** In the space of just one shift, you can have that kind of empowered feeling where you feel on top of the world, but you can also feel really encroached upon, or compromised, or kind of grossed out.

**Bronwen:** It can be such a roller coaster. Or it can be like time is going unbelievably slowly, and like you’re wasting your life.

**If there’s a risk of feeling like you’re wasting your life, what’s the draw?**

**Emily:** There’s an archetype that I encountered over and over again as I was discovering music as a teenager, and it’s a female character who wields a lot of power over men. We encounter this character all the time in pop songs and rock and roll: in “Venus in Furs” by The Velvet Underground, in “Lady Grinning Soul” by David Bowie, in almost every song by Roxy Music. I think I fell in love with this species of powerful female sexuality; it captured my imagination and I think you can live out this fantasy to a certain extent in a strip club. You can be this character in the song, like when you’re dancing in your bedroom, except now you have an audience. In the book, we raise the question of whether the dancers are acting out the customers’ fantasies or if they’re enacting their own desires and the customers are nothing but props. For me, it was quite often the latter.



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**I've always thought strippers were being treated as props, and that's what's made the whole scene problematic to me. But you're saying it can sometimes be reversed, so the objectification is going both ways. A dancer might be acting out that powerful archetype, which feels inherently feminist. But the client is also acting out a fantasy, and that one feels inherently anti-feminist.**

**Emily:** You're oversimplifying men and women's desires as men's being oppositional to women's. I suppose what I'm interested in is: Which of our desires are the product of this patriarchy we all inhabit? And that goes for the dancer and the customer. Desire is an interesting thing to examine. It can be so amorphous and hard to pin down. But if I think about things that turn me on, and about conversations I've had with women friends about what turns them on, a lot of it is about being held aloft in the male gaze as an object of desire in some way, or enacting this type of character from songs I mentioned, a character which is, ultimately, articulated and defined by men.

**So while male desire is defined by men, female desires are sometimes also defined by men. That seems problematic to me.**

**Emily:** I suppose it's the commodification of female sexuality. I still kind of feel like I am participating in something that's detrimental to women in a wider sense. Then again, I might think differently tomorrow. I have a contradictory relationship to it all. I have my own concerns about what I'm participating

in, and what I'm propagating. And I haven't really answered those questions for myself just yet.

**I'm curious what you think about the link between sexuality and physical appearance, and the way that plays out in the club.**

**Emily:** I often wonder if we would be better off if the conversation about sexuality shifted from broadening ideas of beauty to one that has nothing to do with appearance at all.

**Bronwen:** Do you feel that emphasis on appearance more in the stripping world than outside of it?

**Emily:** I felt more insecure about my appearance before I was a stripper.

**Bronwen:** Being in that space, surrounded by mirrors, seeing yourself naked from every angle 24/7, obviously makes you more aware of stuff that you wouldn't normally look at in so much detail. But I also remember before I started dancing, I had real hang-ups about my vagina. I thought it was ugly. It wasn't until I became a stripper and saw all the varieties of different vaginas all the time and the responses to the different vaginas, that I was like, *Oh, I've got this all wrong*. And that was great.

**Emily:** I think I had a romanticized idea in my head about strip clubs when I began and, on the whole, I wasn't disappointed, actually.



**Bronwen:** Men come to strip clubs to have real experiences with real women, regardless of whether we are all playing parts in a fantasy world. If a woman really believes she has the power, she generally does.

**So it's not really beauty being validated, but your confidence and personality. And you have an actual dollar amount to support it. But is there more to stripping than the money that's made?**

**Emily:** I read some quote that really rang a bell with me, which was: "Most people's lives are shaped by their desire to avoid embarrassment." I'm shy and I'm not someone who would even really dance in a nightclub. For me, it was really triggering just doing the audition. Not necessarily the nudity, but just occupying the stage and not making a dick of myself during that length of time. Forcing myself to be exposed in this way made me realize the power of my own body. It became quite a thrill.

**Bronwen:** Even after doing it for nearly 10 years, I would still get a buzz from my song coming on. So much music is now just forever attached to that world.

**Emily:** I used to like dancing to "How Soon Is Now?" by The Smiths, which had those lyrics about going to a club and feeling lonely and going home and crying. I used to like dancing to things that had a slightly more subversive element to them. The idea of stripping appealed to me because I'm quite drawn to countercultural things.

**Stripping as countercultural suggests the outside world isn't accepting of it. I'm wondering how this outside versus inside dichotomy feeds into relationships with men and women.**

**Emily:** Stripping helps you build empathy. You do see the way that men—certain groups of men—are themselves damaged by the patriarchy.

**Bronwen:** One of the girls we interviewed for the book said before she started dancing she was always quite scared of men. And then she became a dancer and she saw their fragility on a daily basis.

**Emily:** The overarching story that women shared with us was about feeling accepted in the club amongst the women, and the camaraderie that comes from it. We're the best of friends because we're part of this secret society. It's like being Masons or something. When you're in that environment, it accelerates this pace of intimacy because you're doing intimate things. People are trimming their pubic hair in the changing rooms as you're having your lunch. You start talking about things that are more personal. But [those relationships] live in that space. It doesn't always work to take them outside and into your "normal" life.

**What about relationships with women who don't strip who know that you dance?**

**Emily:** One woman, a fellow journalist, once pulled me aside, all concerned, and asked why I was still dancing. I've got a





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little boy and she's got sons, and she said, "As a mother of sons, I feel like I really want my boys to see me using my brain."

**Bronwen:** What an absolute cunt.

**Emily:** The thing is, she wouldn't have said that if I was a ballerina or if I was a 100-meter runner or a swimmer. It's not about using your body and using your physical being. It's the sexual element. This little exchange really crystallized for me a lot of the problems with perceptions of sex work and how it intersects with ideas of feminism and labor.

**Bronwen:** When you are a stripper, people question you about that. So, it gives you a lot of insight into yourself and your sexuality.

**And that questioning brings up some contradictory ideas. If there is a part of stripping that feels like it might be detrimental to women, why do it?**

**Emily:** Ultimately, we live in a culture which is misogynistic. Sometimes I think that being a stripper is just a way of navigating that world and turning that to our advantage. But not every woman has the means to turn things to their advantage, and there's a kind of privilege in looking the right way that enables you to do that job.

**Bronwen:** I definitely became less judgmental since becoming a dancer because you are just constantly meeting so many different people, having so many different conversations that you just would not ever have otherwise. I feel like, on the whole, that's a good thing.

**Emily, the publication of this book is also your public "coming out" as a stripper. How are you feeling about that process in this moment of anticipation?**

**Emily:** It's just my family, really, that doesn't know. And I think that a lot of their concerns about it might be like my concerns. I feel like doing a book is a good way to come out: It legitimizes it in some way. They respect books and literature. They're already quite proud about me doing a book, and they know that it's about strippers. My auntie was like, "Oh, can't you do a book about something nice?"

**Bronwen:** My parents knew that I DJ'ed [at clubs]. But when I transitioned from DJ to stripper it's not like I ran home and said, "Mom, now I'm a stripper!" It was like, suddenly my [laundry] was a little bit different—more neon. I'd been doing it for a while before it was spoken about. They knew, but we didn't

talk about it, because however liberal and hippie and cool they are, I was still very young, and I lived at home.

**Do you feel like motherhood changed your ideas around stripping?**

**Bronwen:** Being a stripper was intrinsic to my identity, and I was terrified of losing it after becoming a mother. I had an episiotomy, and I was scared of the reaction to my new vagina. But once I'd done my first lap dance, I realized that I had even more power and strength as a woman than I'd had before.

**Emily:** It changed me, and therefore it changed how I felt in the space of the strip club. I was conscious of my body having this other purpose after experiencing pregnancy and childbirth and breastfeeding. So going back into dancing, I felt different.

**Are you planning on sharing this part of your life with your children?**

**Bronwen:** My son is now 4 and I've always been super open with him about being a stripper. We have a pole in the living room, and he's been hanging off it since before he could walk; he watches me practice at home and tries to copy the moves. Obviously, he doesn't fully understand yet what it means to be a stripper, but he also doesn't fully understand what it means to be a filmmaker and a photographer. I think he'll probably grow up nonjudgmental, open-minded and have a healthy relationship with his body.

**Emily:** My son has only just turned 8, but I do envisage it being something we discuss one day, as part of many wider conversations about the complicated world we live in. I hope he perceives it as being symptomatic of the fact that I've done my own thing and do not feel obliged to follow a conventional trajectory, that I work hard, that I have courage and ingenuity. I also hope it demonstrates to him that women can be many things at once. ♥