

# INTRODUCTION



This book explores how women negotiate the tension between sexuality and status in contexts where their use of the first jeopardizes the latter. In Italy, the country where I undertook research for this book and where I am from, the patriarchal division of women into ‘good’ and ‘bad’ based on how they manage their sexuality is entrenched and forceful. More broadly, this binary informs the experiences of many women living in ‘Western’ countries (Giddens 1992, 111),<sup>1</sup> albeit in different ways and as mediated by their social location. This book, then, speaks of the experiences of women living in Italy, with some of the insights it offers potentially resonating beyond the country’s national boundaries.

The opening vignette offered an instance of how this patriarchal binary is reproduced in everyday life. Daniela’s moral-laden juxtaposition of women pole dancing professionally in strip clubs for male customers’ pleasure and women who dance alike but for their own leisure and pleasure in recreational pole dance schools posited that these two categories of women were of unmistakably different *kinds*. Fear of being on the ‘bad’ side of the binary kept all the women in check. Zeza hid her lap dancing past from her recreational pole dance peers, while Daniela reassured prospective female customers that their respectability would not be jeopardized if they were to attend her school.

Feminist media and cultural scholars have primarily discussed the commercial success of recreational pole dance taking off in the early 2000s as an expression of the ‘pornification’ (McNair 2002) or ‘sexualization’ of mainstream Western culture (Attwood 2006; 2009). These terms point at large-scale transformations occurring in the intertwined domains of sexual

cultures and economies, encompassing the proliferation of online pornography and people's do-it-yourself sexual productions; the gentrification of parts of the erotic entertainment industry; the diffusion of retail sexual commodities and the (neo)burlesque revival. These transformations reflect and reproduce the blurring of the boundaries between 'mainstream culture and the adult commercial sex industry' (Brents and Hausbeck 2010, 9), occurring at a time when neo-liberalism (D. Harvey 2005) has met 'post-feminism'. The latter has been alternatively conceived by some scholars as a new, 'third wave' feminism (Genz and Brabon 2009) and by others as a 'backlash' against the second wave (Faludi 1991). Nancy Fraser traced its roots to the 'disturbing convergence' between the contemporary demands of capitalism and second-wave Western feminism's goals (Fraser 2009, 97–98), as the mainstreaming of some of the second wave's keywords has coincided with their radical resignification. 'Empowerment' became an individual objective that women can achieve through consumerism (McRobbie 2009; Evans and Riley 2015), their 'free choice' to become the willing sexual objects of male desire (Gill 2003, 104) and the marketization of their 'erotic capital' (Hakim 2011).<sup>2</sup> In the background of this new cultural landscape, structural constraints and intersecting inequalities dissolved (Gill and Donaghue 2013) in a randomized matrix of individual preferences, choices and responsibilities.

From within this cultural context, the figure of the female stripper started to circulate in Hollywood celebrity movies and 'daytime television talk shows' (Frank 2002, xxi) as an icon of the 'empowered' woman who is intensely and confidently sexual. One of the precursors of this change was the movie *Striptease* (Bergman 1996), starring Demi Moore in the role of a secretary who starts working as a stripper to pay the legal expenses in her child custody trial.<sup>3</sup> In parallel, pole dancing became a mainstream leisure and fitness activity for women. Starting in the US and Canada, it first expanded to some other Western countries, and, gradually, to most other parts of the globe. In academia, feminist scholars have mainly engaged with the study of women's engagement with this practice to discern whether and how it may contribute to reproducing or subverting gender relations of power between men and women. Some consider recreational pole dance to promote women's sexual objectification under a new guise (Whitehead and Kurz 2009; Donaghue and Whitehead 2011; Owen 2012). Others suggest that it may be authentically empowering for women (Holland and Attwood 2009; Holland 2010). A third perspective highlights the tension between women's individual agency and the oppressive structures under which they negotiate it (Just and Muhr 2019). At the same time, scholars doing research on women working as exotic dancers – including women who pole dance for work – remind us that real-life

strippers continue to be direly stigmatized (Frank 2002, xxvi; Egan, Frank and Johnson 2006a, xix; Price-Glynn 2010, 35; Colosi 2010, 168; Barton and Mabry 2018, 615).

The book starts from this cultural ambivalence towards the figure of the woman who uses her sexual desirability for her own leisure and pleasure or for work to discuss the role of the ‘whore stigma’ (Pheterson 1996) in women’s processes of subjectivation in Italy. It looks at *recreational* pole dancing as a ‘pleasure’ practice – that is, an activity that women learn in their leisure time and perform free of charge on different occasions (e.g. birthday parties, pole dance schools’ public events) for the pleasure they obtain by doing it in front of an audience. Recreational pole dancing holds the promise for women to feel intensely sexually desirable, as female strippers are, by offering them non-professional stages where they can enact and enjoy such pleasurable performance of selves. However, this promise is fraught with the danger of being stigmatized as ‘whores’, as real-life female strippers are. This book, then, shows that many women react to this looming threat by deploying respectability ‘tactics’ (de Certeau 1984) through which they displace the whore stigma onto ‘other women’ and particularly lap dancers, ‘foreign’ and sex working women.<sup>4</sup> It thus follows the journey of the whore stigma as it travels across these different categories of women who, in different ways and at different sites, put their sexuality to work.

## Women and the Whore Stigma

At the centre of this book lies the experiences of subjects who identify as women and are socially classified as such based on their appearance. Therefore, the subject ‘woman’ includes both cis and trans women. This choice reflects the assumption that in patriarchal and heteronormative contexts, such as Italy, humans who are perceived to occupy the ‘woman’ position are subjected to, and thus have to negotiate, the whore stigma. The risk, intensity and experience of this gendered stigmatization is nonetheless mediated by women’s position within a ‘matrix of domination’, where ‘intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained’ (Collins 2000, 227–28).<sup>5</sup> It is from within this dense field of power, which is structural, relational and subjective, that women construct selves.

The book adopts a Foucauldian understanding of the role of discourse in processes of subjectivation (Foucault 1990; 1984). Michel Foucault argued that at any particular historical moment discourse makes available a limited repertoire of subject positions that individuals may take up by adopting specific technologies of the self. Drawing from his work, Judith Butler elaborated the notion of the ‘paradox of subjection’ to describe the

ambivalent 'process of becoming subordinated by power as well as the process of becoming a subject' (J. Butler 1997, 2). This concept tames Foucault's otherwise deterministic view of the self as a mere product of discourse, thereby highlighting that while no subject can exist outside of the discourse in which it comes into being it is not univocally determined by it either. Since no subject can rise above the conditions in which it was and is constantly being formed, then nobody can claim to see everything 'from nowhere' (Haraway 1988, 581) nor adjudicate what may constitute a subject's 'authentic' consciousness and agency (Moore 2001; Mahmood 2001). As the author of this book, I translate this ontological condition into an epistemological and ethical commitment to pursuing 'strong objectivity' (Harding 1993). Hence, as 'the subject of knowledge', I have been placing myself throughout 'on the same critical, causal plane as the objects of knowledge' (Harding 1993, 69).

Although Foucault did not specifically address the construction of the woman subject through the discourse of sexuality,<sup>6</sup> his conceptual repertoire can be adapted to fit within a broader materialist feminist analysis of sexuality and power. Indeed, in Italy, women's subjection through sexuality occurs within a patriarchal moral and political economy of their virtue and dishonour. Women are either defined by forfeiture or subsumption into sexuality: they can be 'good', like the Christian icon of the chaste woman and mother (the Madonna), or 'bad', as women whose intense sexuality is a source of male desire and contempt (the 'whore').<sup>7</sup> In Italian language, this binary corresponds to women's classification as either *sante* (saints) or *puttane* (whores). The latter term has a plethora of synonyms, suggesting its living and generative qualities.<sup>8</sup> Significantly, it also has a quasi-tautological, ontological relationship with the subject 'woman' – for example, the expression *una buona donna* (a good woman) can be ambivalently used to describe either a 'good' or a 'bad' woman.<sup>9</sup>

While the term 'whore' literally means 'prostitute' (Pheterson 1996, 37), its definitional scope is much broader than women selling sex. It does, indeed, potentially apply to any woman transgressing chastity norms, such as by displaying sexual confidence and skill and/or having (had) sex before or outside of marriage, with multiple partners, and/or with another woman (Pheterson 1996, 45–46). In the words of Gail Pheterson, the 'whore stigma' is an 'instrument of sexist social control' (Pheterson 1996, 20) that can equally mark women who are in or out of sex work. It is, in fact, 'a *female gender stigma*' (Pheterson 1996, 65), regulating the relationship between women's sexuality and their status based on patriarchal notions of female dis/honour. A woman's labelling as a whore harbingers danger, as it may lead her to experience 'social ostracism, denial of rights, and/or sexual and physical violence' (Pheterson 1996, 66–67).

The concept of the whore stigma is widely used in scholarship on women selling erotic and/or sexual labour (see, for example, Chapkis 1997; Nagle 1997; Sanders 2005; Hallgrimsdottir, Phillips and Benoit 2006; Scambler 2007; Robillard 2010; Grant 2014; Capous-Desyllas et al. 2020). Some of these works follow in the wake of Goffman's pioneering *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (Goffman 1963), focusing on how sex workers negotiate the whore stigma in their everyday lives by managing the relationship between their public and private selves. Beyond the study of the erotic and sex markets, the purchase of this concept has been limited (but see Zambelli 2018; Krivonos and Diatlova 2020) – although there is an extensive body of scholarship engaging with the study of practices and experiences of 'slut-shaming'.<sup>10</sup> Effectively, then, the 'whore stigma' has primarily been empirically studied as an *occupational* rather than a *gendered* stigma. Yet, while women undoubtedly enduringly constitute the bulk of the sex working population (Smith and Mac 2018, 4), the effects of the whore stigma stretch well beyond the boundaries of the sex market: 'while only some women may be sex workers, all [women] negotiate [the] whore stigma' (Grant 2014, 76).

I suggest that here is where materialist feminism needs a Foucauldian notion of discourse to reconceptualize the whore stigma as both an everyday instrument of social control (Pheterson 1996) and a disciplinary device of subjection (Foucault 1977) partaking in the production of the very 'woman' subject. It operates both in the form of external checks on women's behaviour and as a technology of the self. Women's compliance with the patriarchal chastity norms underpinning the whore stigma is thus a means to cultivate their social value and human status in a sexist society. By shifting the focus of analysis from the experiences and negotiating strategies that individuals may adopt to manage their stigmatization to the structures producing it, this (re)definition of the whore stigma follows in the wake of the recent body of sociological scholarship that embeds the study of stigma in a structural analysis of power and inequality (Link and Phelan 2014; Tyler and Slater 2018; Tyler 2021).

Whilst acknowledging the *longue durée* of the circulation of the whore stigma as a disciplinary device contributing to reproduce women's structural subordination to men, its specific form (i.e. the looks and behaviours deemed 'improper' and the punishment that a transgression may trigger, etc.) changes in time and place. Hence, some of the stigmatized and stigmatizing behaviours that Pheterson identified in Western countries over twenty-five years ago may no longer be as intensely or frequently so, depending on women's different social locations. Nonetheless, the book will show that in Italy the whore stigma remains a powerful and ubiquitous device of discipline and social control of women.

*Intersections of Gender, Race and Class*

Women's experience of the whore stigma as an instrument of social control is not evenly shared across race, class and gender. For example, recent research has shown that in the US 'a large number of trans Latina sex workers were arrested by anti-prostitution law enforcement as they were assumed to be sex workers for being out in the street: simply for "walking while trans"' (Mai et al. 2021, 24). Intersectionality (Combahee River Collective 1977; Davis 1982; Lorde 1984; Crenshaw 1989; Collins 1998; Collins and Bilge 2016) is thus central for a nuanced and situated analysis of the forms and effects of the whore stigma. Incorporating this paradigm thus requires looking at the role of sexuality in the creation and reproduction of class-based, gendered and racialized hierarchies of power and rule both in Western European countries (Mosse 1996) and their former colonies (Stoler 1995).

In eighteenth-century North-Western Europe, the rise of the bourgeoisie was accompanied by the formation of its attendant ideology of respectability. Sexuality became a social class marker, and the middle classes adopted the exercise of moderation in the pleasures of sex as their self-ascribed distinctive trait (Foucault 1984; Mosse 1996). Nevertheless, compliance with this austere behavioural code was unequally demanded of men and women. The sexual double standard granted middle-class white European men leeway to enjoy some premarital and extramarital heterosexual sex without jeopardizing their status in society. However, this latitude was inadmissible for middle-class white European women, whose chastity was constitutive of their value on the marriage market and in society. Women's very expression of sexual desire was problematized as a sign of their purportedly incomplete evolution and/or natural-born deviance (Lombroso and Ferrero 1903). As chastity became a distinctive property of 'respectable' white middle-class women, promiscuity, sexual excess and impropriety became the defining markers of their female others – that is, working-class women and female prostitutes. Women's use of space crucially signalled and reproduced this gendered and class-based boundary: since respectable women ought to remain secluded within the walls of the home, "women of the streets" [became] a euphemism for prostitution' (Skeggs 1997, 46–47).

In colonial contexts, sexuality was deployed to mark a people's purported stage of modernity based on a racialized temporality culminating in Western civilization. Nineteenth-century evolutionary social theory theorized humankind's teleological progression from 'primitive promiscuity, marriage by capture, and exotic forms of sexual abuse' to the perfection of Victorian sexual morality (Lyons and Lyons 2011, 68). 'Inferior races' were imagined as sexually degenerated (Mosse 1996, 39–40) and at the mercy of their sexuality (Mosse 1996, 153–54), and these racist and sexist stereotypes fed into white Europeans' self-condoning 'white men's burden'

narratives. It was a Khoikhoi woman, Saartjie Baartman, who was made to signify this racist and sexist hierarchy of rule between the white colonialists and the racialized people under their domination.<sup>11</sup> Back in the European metropolises, these racist depictions of ‘primitive’ sexuality contributed to shoring up further the edifice of the sexual double standard. ‘[C]onfronted with lecherous savage ancestors, [white European men] might excuse their visits to [female] prostitutes as inevitable expressions of male nature’ (Lyons and Lyons 2011, 70). Conversely, white European middle-class women were warned that their ‘elevation above the primitive was tenuous at best and depended upon strict adherence to domestic norms’ (Lyons and Lyons 2011, 70). The distinction between unchaste white European women and the racialized people living under European colonial domination was deemed to be so tenuous that by the end of the nineteenth century ‘the perception of the prostitute ... merged with the perception of the black’ (Gilman 1985, 229). White European female prostitutes became ‘the metropolitan analogue of African promiscuity’, and they came to be represented as ‘white Negroes’ (McClintock 1995, 56).

The book will show that today these intersecting gendered, class-based and racialized stereotypes continue to shape the tension between women’s sexuality and their status in Italy. For example, they contribute to making some places and practices unevenly accessible to women across race, and they influence the different exchange values attributed to women’s erotic and sexual labour (Chapter 5). They are also refracted in (women’s) ‘exotic value’ – a novel concept that I coined to capture the ambivalent attraction and contempt underpinning the changing relationship between race, place and a woman’s heterosexual desirability. In her ethnography of women working in the exotic dance industry in New York and San Francisco, Siobhan Brooks defined ‘racialized erotic capital’ as a property of (women) matching normative beauty standards, which, in the US, generally correspond to ‘someone who is White, young, and/or has a lean body’ (Brooks 2010, 7). Differently, as I will show, my concept of exotic value is ambivalent, situational and fluid (Chapter 5). It encapsulates both the erotic power of the ‘pornotropics’ (McClintock 1995, 22) and contempt for people coming from an ‘anachronistic space’ (McClintock 1995, 30). It may vary based on the ‘racial grammar’ (Bonilla-Silva 2012) of the (male) beholder of the gaze and (women’s) race manipulation skills and possibilities.

### *Crossing Boundaries and Binaries*

The book’s preface highlighted how some women negotiate the tension between their use of sexuality and their status by reproducing moral-laden hierarchies of power among them. In Western countries, these relational

processes of subjectivation and othering have rarely been the object of ethnographic enquiries. Feminist scholarship on women's engagement with practices of sexualized consumption, erotic and/or sex work primarily follows in the wake of the sex wars' debate on women's oppression or liberation (Chapter 4). Ethnographic studies of contemporary pleasure practices, such as recreational pole dancing (Holland 2010; Griffiths 2016) and (neo) burlesque (Cervellon and Brown 2014; Blanchette 2014), prevalently discuss their significance for the reproduction or challenge of the unequal gender relations of power between men and women.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, ethnographies of women exotic dancers mainly focus on the gender relations of power at play with their regulars (Frank 2002; Egan 2006) or the club's management (Colosi 2010; Price-Glynn 2010) (but see Brooks 2010 for an intersectional analysis). Ethnographies of women selling sex mostly discuss the labour dimension of their activity, including studies focusing on one (Sanders 2005; Day 2007; Agustín 2007) or multiple sex market segments in one or more countries (Chapkis 1997; Bernstein 2007; Mai 2018).

The blurring of the boundaries between practices of sexualized consumption (including pleasure) and erotic and/or sex work constitutes the backdrop to some of these studies. However, at the empirical level, they generally follow rather than cut across the leisure/work and consumer/worker binaries. This categorical approach best illuminates the peculiar conditions shaping women's experiences in a specific site and/or occupation. However, one of the unintended effects of this epistemological structure is that it isolates women who are in sex work from women who do not engage in sex work, thereby contributing to reproducing this morally laden binary. It also obstructs a relational (i.e. intra- and trans-categorical) understanding of women's subjectivation processes and the othering process and power hierarchies these rest upon and reproduce. Hence, while a few scholars have highlighted that some sex workers managed the whore stigma by displacing it onto another category of women (Brennan 2004; Andrijasevic 2010; Robillard 2010; Rivers-Moore 2013), this discussion has rarely been pursued relationally (but see Parreira 2021), let alone across the non-/sex working women binary and/or intersectionally.

This book seeks to contribute to these bodies of ethnographic work by exploring how women negotiate the whore stigma across a continuum of sites of pleasure, erotic and sex work. This field design offers two main advantages. First, it contributes to the empirical study of the 'sexualization of culture' by allowing the surfacing of imaginary and material points of contact between them. Second, and most importantly, it enables travel across, rather than reproduction of, the non-/sex working women binary. By bringing together the narratives of women pole dancing for pleasure, women who pole/lap dance for work, women selling sex and the author's



subjectivity – as reflected in this writing – the book will explore the workings of the whore stigma as a disciplinary device of the subjection of women. It will identify recurrences in the gendered, racialized and class-based othering processes underpinning women’s negotiation of the tension between their use of sexuality and their status. By tracing commonalities across the non-/sex working women binary, the book will foreground the intersecting structures of oppression under which Italian and migrant women in Italy negotiate selves. In doing so, it aims to contribute to a materialist feminist politics of liberation.

### Sexscapes of Pleasure

Each of the sites where I undertook this research have women’s commodification of their sexuality at their core, albeit in different ways. Recreational pole dancers paid to learn enacting a peculiar practice of (hetero)sexiness for their pleasure, while lap dancers performed erotic and emotional labour, and sex workers performed sex work, for male customers’ pleasure.<sup>13</sup> The book will show that these practices of consumption and work did not strictly belong to any discreet site of either leisure (pleasure) or work but cut across them, engendering the perception of a continuum. Some women moved between these sites at different times of their lives, and the practices moved themselves, blurring the boundaries between mainstream leisure and the erotic and sex markets. For example, recreational pole dance instructors were often invited to perform commercial shows in a wide range of non-sex establishments (Chapter 2). Accepting to do so implied venturing out of the protective ‘recreational’ label, losing the pivot of their ‘distinction’ (Bourdieu 1984) from their ambivalently admired and despised female other – that is, the ‘lap dancer’. Lap dancers, for their part, recurrently faced male customers’ requests to perform ‘extras’ – that is, to sell them sex acts, thereby being effectively treated as ‘prostitutes’ (Chapter 3).<sup>14</sup> These sites were also intertextually intertwined in women’s respectability tactics. Indeed, many recreational pole dancers and lap dancers’ claims of dignity and value largely rested upon the absent presence of the women inhabiting the next site along this continuum, who occupied the metonymical position of the ‘whore’. All across these sites, women’s gendered stigmatization was visually signified by their physical proximity to a vertical pole: that which they danced with in recreational pole dance schools and ‘night clubs’, or that which they waited underneath (the streetlight) to be picked up for work.

In this book, I use the notion of ‘sexscape’ (Brennan 2004) to refer to the cultural landscape and the sites of pleasure and work wherein I undertook fieldwork. Drawing from Arjun Appadurai’s work on the new landscapes

engendered by contemporary global cultural flows at the end of the last century (Appadurai 1996), Denise Brennan defined ‘sexscape’ as ‘both a new kind of global sexual landscape and the sites within it’ (Brennan 2004, 15). In her ethnography of Dominican women’s engagement in sex work, she posited that Sosúa – the site where she did fieldwork – was so radically altered following its inclusion in international sex tourism circuits that it had become ‘a “sexscape” of sorts’ (Brennan 2004, 14). In later years, Brennan returned to this concept to anchor its scope to the scale of transformations that the sex trade may trigger in the social relations constitutive of a site. In particular, she objected to its use as a synonym for commercial sex venues in the ‘developed world’, as their presence, she argued, ‘by no means defines social and economic life outside of these [red light] districts. Neither do the female citizens of these places necessarily become associated with sexual availability’ (Brennan 2010, 312). Some scholars have used Brennan’s notion of sexscape to study the racialized sexual economies developing in international tourism sites in the shadow of the structural inequalities between economically wealthier and poorer countries (Lamen 2014; Jaiteh 2018). Other scholars have moved away from its strict definitional boundaries, albeit without explicitly discussing their theoretical underpinnings.<sup>15</sup>

In this book, I expand Brennan’s concept of sexscape in two directions. First, I return to Appadurai’s original work to put the cultural dimension of globalization back to centre stage. I shall thus widen the scope of this notion beyond the sphere of commercial sex practices and sex work sites to encompass the effects of the global circulation of sexual images, artefacts and commodities on imaginaries and practices of self-making. Unfolding in the wake of the cultural glamorization of the figure of the female stripper, the globalization of recreational pole dance thus offers a site to explore the role of the imagination in the production of modern subjectivities (Appadurai 1996, 31), akin to Jonathan Skinner’s work on the transnational consumption of the salsa dance (Skinner 2007; 2016). The book will show that appeals to ‘modernity’ and its (newly) coterminous ‘sexual freedom’ were central in female recreational pole dancers’ negotiation of this practice in what many described as a ‘backward’ country.

Second, I shall redefine the link between sex work and the ‘forces of a globalized economy’ (Brennan 2004, 16) to consider the impact of international migration on the structure and composition of the erotic and sex markets in Western European countries. Over the past thirty years, in fact, large numbers of cis and trans women have been migrating to Western Europe from countries economically impoverished by predatory neoliberal policies and the enduring legacies of the transatlantic slave trade and European colonialism in order to sell sex (Agustín 2007; Chimienti 2010; Mai 2013; Oso 2016). In Italy, the impact of these migratory flows on the

sex market is visibly reflected in a prevailingly migrant street sex working population (Chapter 1; 4; 5). Similar processes have transformed the labour market for female-to-male erotic entertainment (Chapter 3; 5).

Therefore, my notion of a ‘sexscape’ includes but is not limited to erotic and sex work sites – as it inter alia encompasses sites of leisure (pleasure) – and it is not spatially confined to economically poorer countries, because both people and cultural imaginaries travel across national borders. In this book I focus on what I have defined as *sexscapes of pleasure* – sites, that is, at the core of which similarly lies the commodification of (women’s) sexuality, albeit in different ways. Women may themselves consume it (i.e. in the form of pleasure practices) or perform it to produce someone else’s pleasure (i.e. erotic and sex work practices).

### *A Multi-scaped Ethnography*

The object of a multi-sited ethnography is the study of a ‘cultural formation, produced in several different locales’, rather than the study of ‘the conditions of a particular set of subjects’ (Marcus 1995, 99). Whereas I pursued my research in one country only, I did not study the specificities of women’s experiences in one discreet location. Instead, I explored how Italian and migrant women negotiated the whore stigma – that is, a cultural formation regulating the relationship between women’s sexuality and their status – across multiple sites. My research thus unfolded through juxtaposition and comparison of different but interconnected sexscapes in a culturally similar site. In this sense, it could be said to consist of a multi-scaped, more than a multi-sited ethnography.

‘Bringing people of widely divergent classes and cultures into a common framework allows us to render visible aspects of social life that rely on, or even consist of, invisibility in their individual contexts’ (Herzfeld 2015, 18). Indeed, the contrast between sites of pleasure and erotic and sex work allowed me to identify some of the effects of the matrix of domination producing women’s uneven distribution across them (Chapter 5). Thus, the book will show that race, nationality, class and gender heavily affected women’s presence, visibility and position in these sexscapes. For example, some sites were exclusively inhabited by ‘white’ Italian cis women (the inverted commas underlining the ambiguity and instability of this racial descriptor when applied to this nationality (Chapter 2; 5)); in other sites there were none. Trans women were either absent from or invisible in pleasure and erotic work sites, but they were the highest paid on the street for their sexual services.

This book is based on ethnographic fieldwork I conducted in some cities in northern Italy, mainly throughout August 2012 to October 2013, and

less intensely until September 2015. This generic spatial qualification reflects an ethical concern for ensuring respondents' anonymity – something that I discuss in-depth later in this Introduction – whilst preserving the veracity and meaningfulness of the analysis that follows. As an Italian (cis) woman, I did research at 'home' (Jackson 1987), in the sense that I studied my 'own society, where "others" are both ourselves and those relatively different from us, whom we see as part of the same collectivity' (Peirano 1998, 123). However, before I started it, I had spent almost a decade away from Italy, having made a home in different countries, particularly in the occupied Palestinian territories and Lebanon, where I lived for years while working in international 'development' projects. Home, to me, back then as much as now, was both 'peripatetic and multisited' (Amit 2000, 8). Hence, when I travelled to Italy for fieldwork, I had already defamiliarized enough from the society in which I was born to be able to feel and work with and through 'the duality of belonging and alienation, familiarity and investigation' characterizing the traditional distinction between 'home' and 'field' in ethnographic fieldwork (Knowles 2000, 54).

I undertook participant observation in three sexscapes (which I describe next); I interviewed Italian and migrant women inhabiting them or who had in the past and I participated in local activities (workshops, debates, marches) concerning the politics of sexuality in Italy from feminist and queer standpoints. Interviews were open-ended and revolved around the relationship between women, their work,<sup>16</sup> and the society in which they performed it – including questions on when and how they first started doing their work, what they liked and disliked about it, and how they felt they were socially perceived for being in it. Interviews with sex workers rights' activists also addressed the history of their organizing in Italy and the transformation of the sex market following the closure of female brothels in 1958 (Chapter 1; 5). Interviews were reciprocal (Chapkis 1997, 7), as women could and sometimes did turn some of the questions back on me or posed new ones, contributing to a joint reflection on the issues at stake. The power relations between us were nonetheless structurally uneven. Moreover, the intense politicization of women's sexuality characterizing the Italian context at the time of my fieldwork (Chapter 1) may have impacted on what some women felt like sharing or omitting during the interview with me. Therefore, in my analytical and interpretive work, I have never stopped asking myself 'why a story is told in this way, how the location of the speaker shapes the tale, how the position of the audience affects what is heard, and ... what is at stake politically, personally, and strategically in invoking this particular version at this moment in this context' (Chapkis 1997, 212).

I now turn to the description of the three sexscapes where I undertook my research. For each, I provide the rationale underpinning their inclusion

in my field and a description of the research activities undertaken. Subsequently, I briefly describe the profile of the women inhabiting them that I encountered and/or interviewed.

### *Recreational Pole Dance Schools*

When in September 2011 I started developing my research, I purposefully moved to London from Beirut, where I previously lived and worked for years as a consultant in international gender and development projects. Newly arrived, I was quite disoriented by the abrupt shifts in the rhythms and scale of my social world. One day, while at a hula-hoop class in my newly 'local' gym, I overheard two white British women discussing the remarkable body toning effects of 'pole dance'. Flabbergasted, I turned and asked them to tell me more about it. A long-time fitness regular, I had never stumbled upon this activity before. The only dance with a pole that I could think of was that which women performed in strip clubs for *work* – that is, neither for leisure nor exercise. The women were themselves astounded at my surprise and encouraged me to go and try it myself at one of the many gym clubs offering it in town. As I reached for my computer that night to do some research online, I realized that pole dance classes were indeed taught everywhere in England, including in mainstream fitness club chains. By contrast, there were very few venues offering them in Italy, and these were only ad hoc 'pole dance schools'. The choice to include the latter in my field thus emerged from this contrast in scale and a two-fold assumption: first, that in a few years, the market for this pleasure practice in Italy would have similarly boomed (as it indeed has) and second, that, accordingly, in that precise historical moment, its identity formation was at a liminal stage (Turner 1979). What I mean is that, in Italy, pole dancing was still largely associated to its strip club genealogy and so the few women navigating its transition to a pleasure activity were seeking ways to practice it without incurring in its stigmatized and stigmatizing association with real-life female strippers. There and then, therefore, women could be seen actively negotiating the tension between the 'pleasure and danger' (Vance 1984a) of their sexuality and their status as 'good' or 'bad' women.

At the start of my fieldwork, I thus enrolled in a beginner's class to gain competence on the kind of workout involved in the activity. I disclosed my researcher identity to the school's owner, instructors and peer pole dance 'students' (this being many instructors' term of choice to describe the women attending their classes), but I did not subsequently interview any of them. Gradually, I began establishing contacts with other instructors, in other schools, which I later interviewed; I participated in schools' open days, celebrations, and local and national contests, and I familiarized

myself with the practice's emerging identity by reading pole dance blogs and watching online pole dance performances. I then undertook fourteen in-depth interviews with women recreational pole dance entrepreneurs and/or instructors, many of whom also performed commercial pole dance shows outside of the strictly recreational pleasure context.

I furthered my understanding of women's negotiation of their practice of recreational pole dancing in two ways. First, I realized in-depth interviews with students of an atypical class, gender and/or age profile. I thus interviewed a young woman in a precarious job who became so fond of it that she started attending daily classes despite the high costs involved; an opposite-sex couple who learned it the DIY way due to economic constraints; and the mother of a prodigious teenager, who spoke of her daughter's ambivalent experiences of admiration and stigmatization in relation to her practice. Second, I contrasted recreational pole dancing with other leisure activities that appeared to me to be similarly infused with a promise for women to feel sexy and desirable, thereby falling under the pleasure category. While on the field, many pole dance schools introduced classes of (neo)burlesque and a triad of circus disciplines (aerial silk, trapeze and circle) combining grace and strength – that is, two attributes characterizing physical activities stereotypically classified as 'female' (I.M. Young 2005). In order to understand these ongoing transformations, I thus interviewed four burlesque instructors; a burlesque 'student' who also sold sex toys at home through ad hoc meetings and 'parties' (McCaughey and French 2001; Curtis 2004); one instructor of aerialism and one instructor of 'Oriental' dance.

### *'Night Clubs'*

As earlier relayed, the mainstreaming of recreational pole dancing as a pleasure activity is historically embedded in the glamourization of the figure of the female stripper, who professionally pole dances for male customers' pleasure, in strip clubs. Most recreational pole dancers were ambivalently seduced and disturbed by this material and imaginary proximity, and, indeed, their respectability narratives were largely set against the women working at these sites (Chapter 2) – hence my decision to include women working as lap dancers in my field.

Entrepreneurs and managers of female-to-male erotic entertainment venues in Italy use a broad range of exclusively English terms to present their businesses ('sexy bar', 'sexy disco', 'lap dance', etc.). However, the 'vernacular' expression in use is 'night clubs' or simply 'nights'.<sup>17</sup> Likewise, the women working in these places are generically defined with the English

term ‘lap dancers’, corresponding to ‘exotic dancers’, which encompasses women ‘stripping, lap dancing [and] table dancing’ (Frank 2007, 502).

Ethnographies of women working as exotic dancers have been authored by scholars who had insiders’ access to these venues (Frank 2002; Egan 2006; Price-Glynn 2010; Brooks 2010; Colosi 2010; Law 2012). Aesthetic considerations made me refrain from pursuing a similar path. As an outsider, however, gaining access to these venues was not straightforward. While in many Western countries such as the US and the UK the market for erotic entertainment underwent a process of gentrification and diversification, in Italy, this transformation has not taken place (yet?), and ‘night clubs’ largely cater to male customers only. Except for some rare women-only or ‘women welcome’ events, women can only enter if they accompany a man who is considered responsible for them, like a guardian (Chapter 3). In the face of these tight, practical constraints, I considered the possibility of asking a male friend to come with me and pretend that it was the other way around and build my access route from within. Yet, the thought of taking up this subordinate position in my own research was uncomfortable. Eventually, I opted for attending mixed, ‘women welcome’ events and nights (Preface; Chapter 3), to which I often went in the company of some female friends. Once inside, I was able to approach some female staff members, who later mediated my access to women working there as lap dancers. Scholars who did not have a direct, work-based entry route into these venues have likewise relied on gatekeepers (Bott 2006, 25–26; Dahinden 2010, 331). I subsequently interviewed two women who worked as human resource managers and nine lap dancers. Thanks to contacts in the recreational pole dance space rolling in, I was also able to interview two former ‘acrobatic strippers’ – that is, women performing acrobatic-intense erotic shows and who toured night clubs as special guests. Once off stage, acrobatic strippers perform the same emotional and erotic work as their colleagues, so that in common parlance their peculiar job profile is similarly subsumed under the generic ‘lap dancer’ category.

I furthered my understanding of women’s work in this sexscape by comparing it with proximate occupations in which women provide some form of emotional and/or erotic labour, albeit from without the boundaries of the female-to-male erotic entertainment market. I thus interviewed a go-go dancer working in LGBTQ+ clubs and four *ragazze immagine* (image girls). The latter work in discos (but also commercial settings such as trade fairs), where they are paid to beautify the venue by virtue of their physical presence and provide bespoke companionship to male customers, thereby contributing to increasing their alcohol consumption (Zambelli 2018).<sup>18</sup>

*Street Sex Work Areas*

In many recreational pole dancers and lap dancers' eyes, women selling sex constituted their utmost female other, which they dreaded being identified with, hence my choice to include the sex market – specifically, the street, which is both its most stigmatized segment and the most accessible one for an outsider due to its visibility in public spaces. Some of the women selling sex explicitly identified as 'sex workers', which is a political and foremost class identity that 'de-eroticizes the public perception of the sex worker' and 'force[s] the] recognition of sex workers outside of a sexual transaction' (Grant 2014, 125). For the migrant cis and trans women whom I met while they were selling sex on the street, however, their work appeared to be more a 'temporary activity rather than an identity' (Chapkis 1997, 185). In this book, I thus refer to the latter as 'sex working' women because although there and then sex work was their main occupation and source of livelihood, addressing the identity question would have required using other research methods than those that I describe below. This term is also better at capturing the multifaceted temporalities underpinning the women's engagement in the sex trade. Whilst for some it constituted and may long remain their primary occupation, others engage in it flexibly, such as in response to an acute economic need, as a buffer between other jobs, cyclically, seasonally, or in other ways still.

Akin to scholars who have researched street sex work ethnographically (Agustín 2007; Bernstein 2007), I entered the field by collaborating with associations offering outreach sexual and reproductive health information and safer sex items to cis and trans women selling sex on the street.<sup>19</sup> I shared my research project with the associations, and after completing a technical training course for volunteers, for a year I regularly went out with one of them on their night-time outreach service. Over time, I developed a degree of familiarity with some women, with whom miscellaneous conversations emerged from our nonetheless mainly health-focused exchanges. However, right from the start, I decided not to approach sex *working* women for interviews. The power imbalance between us was dire, partly because of the self-ascribed 'helper' position I occupied and partly because many of them were probably undocumented migrants. In those circumstances, any unusual personal questions coming from anyone sitting inside the outreach van may have been cause for suspicion, and I did not want to risk jeopardizing in any way the association's street credibility or the effectiveness of their interventions.

Instead, I interviewed women sex *workers* who were open about their current or past engagement in the sale of sex, either because they were public figures and/or because they had publicly shared their experiences. Most had street sex work experience, with some having worked on the street only



and others having instead worked mainly indoors. I thus interviewed three Italian women sex workers and two pioneering sex workers' rights activists (who consented to my use of their names): Pia Covre, who co-founded with Carla Corso the *Comitato per I Diritti Civili delle Prostitute* (Committee for Prostitutes' Civil Rights; from now on: *Comitato*) and Porpora Marcasciano, who is the president of *Movimento Identità Trans* (Trans Identity Movement, MIT).

### *The Women*

Women's presence across this continuum of sexscapes of pleasure reflected marked patterns of racialized, class-based and gendered segmentation (Chapter 5). Recreational pole dance entrepreneurs and instructors were overwhelmingly Italian cis women. Although some Italian cis women worked as lap dancers, the latter were prevalently Eastern European cis women. On the street, except for a few Italian trans women, people selling sex were mostly migrant cis and trans women from Eastern European and Latin American countries, respectively. Women were predominantly white, but their whiteness was internally stratified (Garner 2007) based on their nationality and also carried, as I will show, some exotic value.

Women's ages prevalently ranged from late twenties to mid-thirties, other than Italian women who were or had been in sex work, most of whom were older than forty. Except for Porpora Marcasciano, all the women I interviewed were cisgender. This outcome was neither by design nor coincidence but reflects the workings of intersecting structures of oppression, including homo- and transphobia (Chapter 5). Likewise, I did not encounter in these sexscapes women whom society could have labelled as 'disabled' based on their appearance.

Except for a handful of women who relayed being of middle-class origins and who were working (or had worked) as either lap dancers or sex workers, most of the women were part of the working class – in the sense that it was work rather than inherited wealth that was the source of their relative economic security. Most Italian women pole and lap dancers had completed or were in higher education, while most migrant lap dancers relayed having entered this job right after high school. I do not have this information for the migrant street sex working cis and trans women because it did not emerge during the conversations we had while on outreach service.

## **Ethics**

The research that this book is based on received ethical clearance by the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London). It is

Sexscapes of Pleasure

Women, Sexuality and the Whore Stigma in Italy

Elena Zambelli

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premised on the respect of human dignity and integrity and its thrust arises out of a commitment to social justice, of which the elimination of any form of discrimination is a milestone.

All the women that I encountered and/or interviewed were subjected, as women, to the whore stigma, though some more intensely than others due to their engagement in erotic or sex work. Street sex working cis and trans women's migrant status exacerbated their social vulnerability further – hence my choice (earlier explained) not to interview them. I always sent the women I wished to interview – all of whom were adults – detailed written information about the research objectives, the interview's main topics, their rights as participants and the confidentiality procedures. I did so to ensure that they had sufficient time and information to decide whether they wished to proceed. Before the interviews started, women were reminded that they could refuse to respond to any question, stop the interview at any time, and/or withdraw their consent to its use even after completion, without the need to provide any explanation.

Interviews were all audio-recorded with the women's permission. I transcribed each audio file verbatim and anonymized interviewees to prevent their identification: I changed names and ages as well as cities of birth, residence and work, and omitted references to peculiar events or circumstances. I then sent the women the transcript for their verification, inviting them to let me know if they wished for me to cut or alter any further information.

### *An Intimate (Auto)Ethnography*

I designed my research project in the aftermath of a wave of sex 'scandals' revolving around the (then) Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi (Chapter 1). In an interview of that time that went viral, one of the female escorts involved argued that '[i]f you are a beautiful woman, and you want to sell yourself, you have to be able to do it because beauty is a *valore* [value; asset] that not everyone has or is paid for. ... *Se sei una racchia* [if you are a skag], *se fai schifo* [if you are minging], you must stay at home.'<sup>20</sup> Her words elicited widespread condemnation, and admittedly – and shamefully (Probyn 2010) – it was my sense of disorientation in the face of this blunt social Darwinist statement of the survival of the most beautiful that puzzled me into researching the relationship between women, sexuality and the market. What I had not anticipated was that in its course I would have learnt to trace the roots of this otherness within myself.

A cis Italian woman born and raised in a working-class family and neighbourhood, the risk of being labelled a *puttana* (whore) was an immanent and polymorphous threat, for which no haven was ever safe enough. Since

my adolescence, I have seen the ‘whore’ label applied only apparently incoherently to girls discovering their sexuality with male peers from within and without a long-term relationship; girls and women in a relationship with a man after breaking up with another; girls and women for some reasons considered to be ‘misbehaving’; and women who did not themselves ‘misbehave’ but whose offspring did – in fact, the Italian translation of the expression ‘son of a bitch’ can be equally rendered as *figlio di puttana* (son of a whore) and *figlio di buona donna* (son of a good woman). The space separating the subject ‘woman’ from the subject ‘whore’ was so narrow and unstable that, in hindsight, it appears as if it was a lingering tautology in the process of its making.

Well into my late adolescence, these were the only connotations of *puttana* I knew, meaning that I did not know it similarly applied to women selling sex. To be honest, for a long time, I just did not know that there was such a trade. Some sex working women were regularly stationed on the main street close to where I lived with my parents, but I do not remember the latter ever saying a word about their presence. Nor did I ever ask my parents who the women standing still in the dark of the night were. It was as if their existence was being denied despite their incontrovertible presence in front of me. As a result of this suppression, I must have become accustomed to the women’s illegibility, leaving me with no lingering questions to raise. Still, growing up, I had frequently heard some young men using the circumlocution *vattene sui viali* (go on the boulevards) to mean that, for whatever reason, they considered the girl or the woman to whom they addressed it to be a *puttana*. When one night I eventually ended up there, on those boulevards, I realized the literal sense of that expression.

A female friend and I were out with some male friends a few years older than us (they already had a driving licence and a car). Suddenly, they decided to drive towards the city centre out of ‘boredom’. Once we hit the boulevards encircling it, instead of going into town, they started driving all around it, in fits and starts. Each time they spotted a sex working woman, they slowed the car down – almost stopped it in front of her – and then started honking, shouting and gesturing insults, just to speed away immediately afterwards, before the women could lash back at them. As I learnt then, that was the so-called *puttan tour* (whore tour). A typically male youth ‘leisure’ practice and homosocial bonding ritual, this activity does not necessarily entail such violence against sex working women; in fact, some male youth do ‘approach them to strike up a conversation’ only (Crowhurst and Eldridge 2020, 171). Still, for the two female adolescents in the back of the car, the experience of this violent spectacle instilled in us the terror of ever being on its receiving end.

Now a cisgender heterosexual woman in her mid-forties, I was single for most of my life. I have always thought of myself as an independent woman striving to go for what felt good to her and refuse what was not, rather than feeling bound to fulfil a straight life at all costs. This research, however, shook some earth beneath my feet. I began to wonder how my ex-partners viewed my independence and sexual ‘freedom’, and the more I delved into it, the more I sensed the forcefulness of the patriarchal binary splitting women into either *sante* or *puttane*. Starting from myself, I eventually learned that a woman’s classification as a ‘whore’ does not depend on her receipt of money for sex but on her being a woman in the first place (Pheterson 1996, 65).

Therefore, the journey that I narrate in this book is simultaneously an autoethnography (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Ellis, Adams and Bochner 2011) and an ‘intimate ethnography’ (Waterston and Rylko-Bauer 2006). It is written from the perspective of a cultural ‘insider’, who, whilst researching her own society, becomes aware of the violence underpinning her own subjectivation – violence that is simultaneously personal and political, visceral and structural, epistemic and material, embodied and disavowed. To date, the ‘intimate Other’ at the centre of the ‘intimate ethnography’ field has primarily been an ethnographer’s family member.<sup>21</sup> Differently, the intimate Other in my research is not primarily a physical person with whom I stand in an intersubjective relationship but a figure that is both archetypal and mundane and that is constitutive of my own subjectivity – the whore. Therefore, while making features of my ‘culture’ accessible to ‘outsiders’, this book also reflects the outcome of the process through which I have come to know the woman I was *terrorized* not to be(come) – the woman who confidently displays and uses her sexuality on her own terms, whether for pleasure and/or for work. Writing this book, then, is not just an end in itself. In sharing this journey, I seek to elicit epiphanies of liberation from the constitutive violence of the whore stigma that non- and sex working women are subjected to – albeit in different ways, and as mediated by their social locations.

I distinctively identify the early seeds of this intimate (auto)ethnographic plunge in a conversation I once had with an Italian male researcher. At the end of a conference, I shared my early puzzle for the recurrent stigma displacement and othering processes that I was observing among the women in my research. As soon as I finished my tentative illustration, he burst into laughter. ‘What a class solidarity!’ he exclaimed sarcastically. Flabbergasted at his unempathetic reaction, I could not put my gut feelings into words, as back then I did not discern the flaws in his reasoning yet. Now I know that mine was an outburst of ‘feminist rage’ (Ahmed 2017) against his male privilege, as he added insult to the injury of the structural gendered violence

under which women negotiate their subjectivities. I have also learned that there is more than one reason why the struggle for sex workers' rights matters to me.

## Book Outline

Chapter 1 sets the historical and conjunctural context for understanding the moral and political economy of sexuality in Italy, particularly the forcefulness of the binary juxtaposition of 'good' and 'bad' women. Starting from a puzzling and widespread contemporary nostalgia for *case chiuse* (closed, i.e. tolerance houses), it traces the special place that female prostitution occupies in the sexual politics of the Italian nation state and the Catholic Church. It subsequently offers an overview of the key transformations in the country's social and legal discipline of sexuality following its rapid post Second World War modernization, including the formation of the contemporary ethnonationalist discourse in which the figure of the migrant and the prostitute have come to overlap. In conclusion, it sketches the specific historical context in the aftermath of which I undertook fieldwork, consisting of the era of sexual-economic austerity following the sex 'scandals' involving the media tycoon and former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi.

Chapter 2 discusses how women recreational pole dance entrepreneurs and/or instructors managed the tension between sexuality and status, which this pleasure practice touches upon. It foregrounds how, behind an official desexualizing script, many women were attracted to this activity for its promise to make them feel sexier whilst remaining respectable. The chapter illustrates how women used metaphors of healing and modernity to affirm the pleasure involved in their own and their students' practice. Nevertheless, it also shows that many of them negotiated the whore stigma arising from the practice's strip club association by displacing it onto a category of 'other women', whom they depicted using intersecting gendered, class-based, and racialized stereotypes. In conclusion, the chapter traces recreational pole dance's journey to respectability, showing how it seemingly relied on the discursive erasure of the very same women that first introduced this practice in Italy while working in 'night clubs'.

Chapter 3 illustrates how the real-life women embodying recreational pole dancers' ambivalently admired and despised female other – that is, 'lap dancers' – negotiated the whore stigma from within their workplaces. It shows how women inhabited contexts where their skills were simultaneously valued and feared and where the lingering possibility that they may be available to provide male customers with commodified sex on demand exacerbated their gendered stigmatization. Subsequently, the chapter discusses

the most recurrent discursive repertoires – narratives of self-entrepreneurship, familial sacrifice and love – that women mobilized to dignify themselves at work. It will also show that, akin to most recreational pole dancers, many lap dancers managed the whore stigma by displacing it onto another category of female others, who in their case mainly consisted of women selling sex from within and without the night club.

Chapter 4 shifts the focus onto the women embodying recreational pole dancers and lap dancers' ultimate female other – that is, women selling sex. Against the background of the feminist sex wars on the nature and regulation of prostitution, and particularly the debate on boundaries in sex work, the chapter highlights how women claimed value through or despite their work. It argues that some sex working women claimed it in their endurance in a challenging, sometimes hazardous, always precarious and harshly stigmatized job, which sustained their own and their family members' livelihood needs and social mobility aspirations. It also shows that some sex workers claimed value in their capacity to negotiate the structurally unequal relationship between capital and labour a bit more in their favour. Together, I will contend that Italian and migrant sex working women and sex workers' narratives offered ways to conceptualize the relationship between women's sexuality and status beyond patriarchal-defined notions of female virtue and dis/honour.

Chapter 5 analyses the effects of the matrix of domination on the presence, visibility and position of different categories of women in the three sexscapes previously discussed. It particularly describes sexscapes' racialized and gendered segmentation at the crossroads between racist and sexist constructions of sexuality of colonial roots, a political economy of migrant labour exploitation and restrictive prostitution and migration laws.

The Conclusions outline the book's theoretical and empirical contributions. These mainly sit within the ethnographic study of women's subjectivation in contemporary Western countries, the sociological study of (the whore) stigma and scholarship on migration, intimacy and work. They finally offer reflections on future lines of investigation.

## Notes

1. Giddens also included the qualifier 'Christian', but I wanted to highlight here the caveats of this specification when unaccompanied by the acknowledgement of the intertwining of race and religion in Europe's colonial conquest (Wynter 2003); the endurance of native and enslaved people's cultures (Mintz and Price 1992) despite the horrors of colonization, slavery and racial segregation; and the super-diversity (Vertovec 2007) characterizing contemporary life in these countries' 'global cities' (Sassen 1991).

2. Hakim described 'erotic capital' as 'a nebulous but crucial combination of beauty, sex appeal, skills of self-presentation and social skills [making] some men and women agreeable company and colleagues, attractive to all members of their society and especially to the opposite sex' (Hakim 2011, 1). Developed in a heteronormative framework, this concept is premised on the so-called 'male sex deficit' – that is, the assumption that men are naturally endowed with 'greater sexual desire [than women]', leaving them 'frustrated from an early age' (Hakim 2011, 3). Women's heterosexual desirability thus becomes an asset to potentially take advantage of (Hakim 2011, 57).
3. More recently, the movie *Hustlers* (Scafaria 2019), starring Jennifer Lopez, portrays the adventures of a crew of female strippers financing their glamorous lifestyles by tricking wealthy male strip club patrons.
4. In his pioneering *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau theorized the difference between strategies and tactics based on the 'types of operations and the role of spaces: strategies are able to produce, tabulate, and impose these spaces, when those operations take place, whereas tactics can only use, manipulate, and divert these spaces' (de Certeau 1984, 29–30).
5. Patricia Hill Collins posited the existence of a relationship of scale between the concept of the matrix of domination and the intersectionality paradigm. The latter, she said, 'refers to particular forms of intersecting oppressions, for example, intersections of race and gender, or of sexuality and nation. ... In contrast, the matrix of domination refers to how these intersecting oppressions are actually organized' (Collins 2000, 18).
6. He did only marginally in his discussion of the problematization of the 'hysterical woman' (Foucault 1990, 103).
7. In feminist psychoanalytic accounts of the formation of the subject, the women's division in this binary is seen as a reflection of male split sexuality. Sigmund Freud posited that in the Oedipal phase the male infant experiences the mother as 'both virginal, pure, noble, sexless (as a consequence of his repression of his own sexual wishes about her), and a whore, the result of his realization that, long before his birth, the mother has already been unfaithful to him (with the father)' (Grosz 1990, 129). In adult life, men manage this ambivalence by 'embodying its elements in separate "types" of women, either virgin or whore, subject or object, asexual or only sexual', reserving 'asexual admiration' to the first, while feeling 'sexually attracted to, yet morally or socially contemptuous of, the second' (Grosz 1990, 129).
8. The dictionary of synonyms and antonyms by the 'Treccani' Italian Encyclopaedia of Science, Letters, and Arts lists the following equivalent terms: *bagascia, baiadera, baldracca, battona, bella di notte, buona donna, cagna, cocotte, cortigiana, donnaccia, donna da marciapiede (o di malaffare o di strada o di vita o, di facili costumi), donnina allegra, etera, falena, gigolette, lucciola, lupa, malafemmina, marchettara, mercenaria, meretrice, mignotta, mondana, passeggiatrice, peripatetica, prostituta, putta, (ragazza) squillo, squaldrina, taccheggiatrice, troia, vacca, zoccola*, call girl (Treccani 2003). Note that *strappona* (Preface) is not included in this list. There are in fact many more synonyms to be retrieved from the wide range of dialects and languages spoken across Italy.
9. This equivalence can be found among the *accezioni particolari* (particular meanings; under point 'e') of the term 'woman' listed by the 'Treccani' Italian Encyclopedia of Science, Letters, and Arts, next to 'streetwalker' and 'prostitute' (Treccani n.d.).
10. The practice of 'slut-shaming' consists of 'deliberate efforts to discredit people by associating them with sexual deviancy, especially sexual immodesty and promiscuity' (Sweeney 2017, 1579). This notion partly resonates and partly diverges from the whore stigma. Melissa Gira Grant argued that what is lost in the shift from 'whore

- stigma to slut shaming is the centrality of the people most harmed by this form of discrimination. ... *Slut* may seem to broaden the tent of those affected, but it makes the whore invisible' (Grant 2014, 77).
11. Saartjie Baartman, an indentured servant, was brought from the British Cape Colony to Europe to display her purportedly 'abnormal' sexual organs under the 'stage name' of 'Hottentot Venus' (Gilman 1985; Magubane 2011). For a contemporary reading of her 'illegible will', see Hershini Bhana Young (2017).
  12. As discussed for recreational pole dancing, feminist media and cultural studies scholars who have researched women's engagement with (neo)burlesque have primarily discussed it along the sexual objectification/empowerment binary. Some scholars consider women's enjoyment of this activity as a manifestation of their internalized oppression (Siebler 2014), while others offer more nuanced interpretations (Regehr 2012); for example, acknowledging its body-inclusivity and positivity (Ferreday 2008) and/or its queering possibilities (Dodds 2013).
  13. The term 'sex work' was coined in 1978 by sex worker and activist Carol Leigh, member of the new-born organization COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), as part of the struggle to recognize prostitution as a legitimate service work (Chapkis 1997, 70).
  14. Here and in the rest of the book I use the term 'prostitute' either to underline its deployment in a stigmatizing discourse – as in this specific case – or for reasons of historical congruity, to describe specifically *women* who used to sell sex before the term 'sex worker' was coined. I discuss the gendering of the 'prostitute' subject later in the book (Chapter 1). In all other circumstances, I use the term 'sex worker' or 'sex working (person)' whenever referring to adults who consensually perform sex acts in exchange for money.
  15. Elina Ihamäki (2013) used the concept of sexscape to study a Russian countryside border town where Finnish male tourists travel for sex tourism purposes, driven by their racialized desire for Russian-speaking women. Eileen Yuk-Ha Tsang (2019) used it in her ethnography of a class-based section of commercial sex venues in Dongguan, China. The edited volume by Paul Maginn and Christine Steinmetz (2014) consists of a series of case studies set mainly in Western countries; however, it does not explicitly engage with Brennan's objection to using 'sexscape' for commercial sex venues in economically 'developed' countries.
  16. While I look at recreational pole dance as a leisure (pleasure) practice, I interviewed mostly women working in this sexscape as instructors and/or entrepreneurs.
  17. Note that Italians use the generic term 'disco(teca)' (from discotheque) to refer to the venues that in English usage correspond to 'night club'.
  18. There is a male equivalent for this occupation, i.e. *ragazzi imagine*, but the latter typically work in LGBTQI+ venues mainly to attend to male customers' entertainment.
  19. In fact, the outreach unit did not go to the areas of male prostitution. The overwhelming majority of the volunteers were women, and as Porpora Marcasciano – president of *Movimento Identità Trans* (Trans Identity Movement, MIT), with street sex work experience – explained to me during her interview, 'You cannot send a woman operator to contact a male street sex worker because the relationship gets completely warped ... Handing him a condom is like a statement that you are seeing him there, that he is prostituting himself, that he is selling sex to other men. ... So, men do offer sexual services, but they feel guilty about it, and so the relationship [with their customers] frequently turns violent. As Pier Paolo Pasolini said, in our cultural system, a man selling homosexual services feels the need to stress that it is not true [that he is doing it/that he is gay].' On the tension between male sex work



and masculinity formations, see also Victor Minichiello, John Scott and Denton Callander (2013, 264).

20. 'Intervista shock di Terry De Nicolò, escort ospite di Berlusconi' (Shocking interview with Terry de Nicolò, escort [who was a] guest of Berlusconi), 16 September 2011. The original interview is no longer available on YouTube. It can be found on some private web pages and social media accounts by searching for this title. However, all those that I have checked for the purpose of providing a link for the reader's easy reference contain highly stigmatizing language – hence my choice not to provide any.
21. The works of Alisse Waterston (2014) and Barbara Rylko-Bauer (2014) engage with their father and mother's biographies, respectively, narrating how their lives were profoundly disrupted by antisemitism, racism, Nazism and the Holocaust in Europe and transformed through migration and exile on the other side of the Atlantic. Christine Walley's ethnographic account of deindustrialization, unemployment and class inequality in the United States (2015) revolves around her father – a steel factory worker who lost his job to this epochal economic transformation. Susan Slyomovics' anthropological and legal discussion on the relationship between violence, economic reparations and the law (2015) starts from the diverging views of her mother and grandmother, who survived Nazi concentration camps and extermination centres.