San Francisco’s soul has gone missing. Its radical communities have disappeared, and its urban memories have been endangered. This durational performance of disappearance has been ongoing since the first dot-com boom and bust of the late 1990s. In 2000, the San Francisco writer Rebecca Solnit referred to San Francisco as a “hollow city” when she first documented and reflected on the beginning phase of the growing cultural technocracy signaling its demise. Erotic Resistance: The Struggle for the Soul of San Francisco continues to tell the story to which she and many other San Francisco writers and artists have contributed since the early 2000s. When I first moved to the city in 1998, I became aware of the conversations surrounding gentrification and the dot-com boom, but I was not as drastically affected by those changes, which many San Francisco artists and activists were discussing at the time. As a newcomer, I was grateful for and excited about the artist communities and queer communities of color that greeted me upon my arrival to the City by the Bay and that supported me as I launched my career as a San Francisco–based performance artist.

Fast-forward a decade. As the 2010s approached, more and more Google buses began to appear as more and more artists began to...
disappear, making the city hollower and hollower with each year that passed. By the end of the decade, the city that I had moved to twenty years prior was unrecognizable to me. So I left in 2020, as the pandemic took hold, along with the many people who took part in the exoduses from other big US cities during that time. My departure took place several years after I completed the research I had conducted from 2014 to 2017 to capture a sense of the city’s soul across time and space by examining its erotic performance cultures. The prelude to this book in the form of field notes documents the beginning of my journey as a researcher and artist committed to the preservation of San Francisco’s cultural and erotic memory.

Erotic Resistance: The Struggle for the Soul of San Francisco is an homage to the city and those who have grieved its cultural demise. In the 2010s, longtime San Franciscans, along with former residents and visitors who returned that same decade, equally commented on the accelerating, growing disappearance of the city’s unique character, which has repeatedly been referred to as its “soul.” The concept of the “soul” has been debated at length in various academic disciplines; however, I have chosen this word in the book’s subtitle to reflect its vernacular usage among San Franciscans who have been discussing its loss for decades. Metaphorically related to the vernacular usage of soul is its popular connotation regarding the emotional and intellectual energy associated with music, art, and performance, more specifically, in the context of African American culture. When I first arrived in San Francisco, the city felt like a work of art, music, and performance that still retained its legendary bohemian, emotional, and intellectual energy. Gradually, this energy dissipated. I examine this dissipation and loss through the lens of eroticism, with the help of the perspectives of dancers and artists who performed in strip clubs, burlesque theaters, and the city’s performance and visual art scenes. My primary focus is on women who were active in these milieus from the 1960s through the 1990s, some of whom performed well into the twenty-first century. I trace the concept of erotic resistance across these time periods as transformative acts of cultural memory, art activism, sex-positive feminism, and queer of color critique. I foreground the voices of women whose very existence and “bodies of evidence”—in the form of their corporeality, their live performances, and their performance archives—resignify
Erotic resistance can be defined as activism and eroticism tethered to one another. It is the “erotic as power” as the foundation for integrity and self-love, in the face of whorephobia and homophobia. It manifests in the bodies and spirits of the women celebrated in this book, and in the remains of the city that live on in the hearts of those who remember its sensual soul. In this way, the book is also an act of memory preservation regarding the city’s foundational role in the erotic entertainment industry and, by extension, the sex industry in the United States.

San Francisco historians have documented the earliest migrations of women to the city at its inception during the Gold Rush of the 1840s. The first women to arrive in the City by the Bay were prostitutes from other parts of the country, as well as Asia, Latin America, and Europe. While miners looked for gold, these women entrepreneurs followed suit, seeking to profit from the by-products of the Gold Rush. Though often hidden from view in official narratives about the city, these pioneering women and the emergence of the sex industry are crucial components of the history of early San Francisco. The tech boom of the early twenty-first century has often been described as a modern-day Gold Rush; however, with the rise of technology and artificial intelligence, our embodied intelligence has diminished. As such, the concept of erotic resistance is also a direct challenge to the complacency in and celebration of the cultural technocracy, which is manifested by the growing presence and domination of artificial intelligence in all aspects of life—particularly in the Bay Area, the region considered the tech capital of the country. I have intentionally chosen to document erotic, and therefore deeply embodied, performance cultures as a radical act and invitation to return to the body at a time when human civilization’s disconnection from embodiment has reached its peak. As I finish writing this book in 2022, we are still recovering from the pandemic, during which time humans were socialized into fearing each other, rejecting touch, hiding their faces from one another, and, by extension, disengaging from the power of the human gaze. During the pandemic, we had to rely on technologies like Zoom, which helped us stay connected during the lockdown, but at the expense of haptic engagement with the gaze and the rest of the body. As the cliché goes, “The eyes are the windows to the soul.” Some would argue that “embodiment” and the “soul” are what differentiate humans from artificial intelligence, though
brogrammers and fanatics of virtual reality might beg to differ. For that reason, I celebrate the power of “body and soul” as it is embedded in the art practices and human geographies of San Francisco. I recount memories of these phenomena pertaining to the city’s erotic soul as inspiration for readers to reconnect to their own bodies, to the bodies of others, and to the body of San Francisco. For this reason, I have structured this book as a body that beckons you to reconnect to your own: the opening field notes function as the hands (method), the interlude as the head (autotheory), and the closing field notes as the heart (affect).

The cultural technocracy has affected both the people and the geography of San Francisco. In the 2010s, the technocracy was symbolized by the city’s drastically transformed skyline, with the Salesforce Tower serving as one example of what Henri Lefebvre would characterize as an “arrogant and phallocratic use of space.” In response to the arrogant uses of space that symbolize the changes that occurred well into the 2010s, this book begins to map out the shared and alternative uses of space decades prior, when legendary burlesquers, strippers, male hustlers, female impersonators, and transgenders congregated to form communities, to celebrate free love, to contest free love (which, more often than not, was heterosexual and white, as suggested by some of my research participants), and to do their part in launching movements for LGBT people and sex workers. Often these spaces—strip clubs, adult theaters, peep-show theaters, and gay after-hours venues—were not visible to the public eye. They existed underground (literally) or in spaces with no windows, a characteristic typical of strip clubs. These less visible, internal, and perhaps vulvic uses of spaces allowed for metamorphoses of identities and transgressions of accepted behaviors that provided the impetus for the social and cultural transformations characterizing San Francisco in the 1960s and ’70s. Such spaces—which contrast with the excessively visible, invasive structures that currently confront us—and the people who performed in them during the years from the 1960s to the 2010s—provide the setting and context for Erotic Resistance: The Struggle for the Soul of San Francisco.

This book highlights the stories of two generations of legendary burlesquers, strippers, artists, and activists who worked in San Francisco’s strip club industry from the 1960s to the 2010s. By generation, I refer to women who are roughly of the same age and/or performed during the
same decades. Many of my research participants are women of color and/or queer, though I have also excavated stories of trans women who were pioneers in the industry during a time when topless entertainment venues had been legalized in the country for the first time—in San Francisco—while cross-dressing continued to be criminalized.¹⁰ Transgender and cisgender women of various races who worked in the industry in the 1960s and ’70s stood up against picketers protesting the clubs of North Beach as well as against police harassment for cross-dressing in other parts of the city like the Tenderloin. North Beach had been home to queer and artist cultures—notably, the Beat Poets—in the preceding decade and, together with its equally illicit neighboring district, Chinatown, had also formed the heart of the city’s historic red-light district in the previous century—the Barbary Coast.¹¹ In her book Wide-Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965, historian Nan Boyd argues that a significant part of why San Francisco became known as the queer capital in the mid- to late twentieth century was that queerness was woven into the city’s fabric from its founding, as evidenced by the queer performance cultures that were prevalent during the Barbary Coast era.¹² The pioneering women of the 1960s and ’70s that this book covers, like many of their predecessors during the Barbary Coast era, asserted their right to choose to perform their exquisite combination of erotics, aesthetics, and politics. As well, queer women and women of color activists and artists who danced in the 1980s and ’90s demanded their rights as laborers in major legal battles, and they succeeded in unionizing the industry for the first time in US history. In my conversations with these women, they discuss their intersecting practices of performance, art, and activism, which I analyze as enactments of erotic resistance.

In writing this book about the visual and performance cultures of these women and the times and spaces in which they intervened, I have engaged in my own form of scholarly erotic resistance. The stigma that continues to be attached to the women who work in this industry trickles down and spreads to other sectors—including academia, in which scholarship about the sex industry is also stigmatized, a fact for which I was prepared by the various “academic pornographers” who preceded me.¹³ To be more precise, I situate this work within the field of “feminist pornography studies” pioneered by scholars such as Celine Parreñas Shimizu and Mireille
Miller-Young, to which I return in chapter 1, while positioning myself in the lineage of other “academic pornographers.” Parreñas Shimizu, along with Miller-Young and several others who edited the anthology *The Feminist Porn Book* decades after the height of the feminist sex wars of the 1980s, argues that it is important to account for the ways that pornography can be a form of expression and labor in which women and racial and sexual minorities produce power and pleasure. These authors respond to questions concerning the pleasures and dangers of female sexuality—a topic that has been frequently debated among feminists since the 1970s and that I address in this book through the lenses of visual culture and performance studies.

**THE FEMINIST SEX WARS, IN BRIEF**

In 1982, the Feminist IX Conference “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” at Barnard explored the complex relationship between sexual pleasure and sexual danger in women’s lives and in feminist theory. It is considered one of the historic moments that signaled the beginning of the feminist sex wars. This conference was met with protests from antipornography feminists from the organization Women Against Pornography (WAP), established in New York in 1976, who claimed they were being excluded, as reported by Carol Vance in her epilogue to the published anthology of essays presented at the conference, *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality* (1984). Prior to this conference, women from WAP had collaborated with antipornography feminists from Women Against Violence in Pornography and Media (WAVPM), established in San Francisco in 1977, through conferences and the exchange of ideas and strategies for protesting against strip clubs and peep shows from Times Square to North Beach, other forms of pornography, and related events. Shortly thereafter, Samois, the first lesbian BDSM feminist organization, was founded in San Francisco in 1978 by writer Pat Califia and feminist scholar Gayle Rubin, who was a featured presenter at the Barnard conference.

In her contribution to *Pleasure and Danger*, Vance discusses the need for more developed analyses of the symbolic context of practices and phenomena related to sex, such as pornography, s/m, and butch/femme role
play—all of which are examples of the complexity of sexuality that challenge feminists to approach it as an intersection of the political, the social, the economic, the historical, and the personal. Citing Rubin’s work challenging cultural systems of sexual hierarchies in which some people are engaged in privileged acts while others of the sexual “lower orders” suffer from stigma, Vance critiques these systems because they undermine sexual diversity and keep sexual nonconformity invisible. She encourages feminists to insist that women are sexual subjects, actors, and agents with complex histories and urges them to organize for pleasure: “Feminism must increase women’s pleasure and joy, not just decrease our misery. . . . To persist amid frustrations and obstacles, feminism must reach deeply into women’s pleasure and draw on this energy.”

Feminist crusaders against pornography, the most notable of whom were Catherine MacKinnon and Andrea Dworkin (a founding member of New York WAP), argued that practices such as those discussed by Vance and Rubin (pornography, s/m, butch-femme roles, etc.) were harmful to women. In Dworkin’s book *Pornography: Men Possessing Women*, she employs various definitions throughout that support her claim regarding the dehumanization and sadism that characterize pornography: “This book asks how power, sadism, and dehumanization work in pornography—against women, for men—to establish the sexual and social subordination of women to men.” One such definition is grounded in her return to the word’s etymology, *pornē* (which, in ancient Greece, referred to the “cheapest and lowest class of whore”). For Dworkin, pornography is not a “description of the erotic” or a form of writing about sex, but rather a “graphic depiction of women as vile whores.” Dworkin and MacKinnon played crucial roles in ensuring the passage of antipornography legislation in various cities, the progression of which is well documented in Lisa Duggan and Nan Hunter’s collection of essays *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, published in 1995. In one of the essays that appears in *Public Sex*, Pat Califia comments on the antipornography feminist movement led by Dworkin and MacKinnon, describing the legislation they wrote, which first passed in Minneapolis in 1985, with other cities following suit. The legislation defined porn as sex discrimination and outlawed it as a violation of women’s civil rights. In another essay on the Meese Commission under the Reagan administration, which in 1986
called for a mandate to overturn the 1970 Presidential Commission on Pornography’s finding that there is no evidence of a link between sexually explicit materials and delinquent or criminal behavior, Califia argues that despite the many flaws in pornography, banning it would only worsen the situation. Such bans would make it more difficult for people to obtain porn and would exclude those in the industry who are making alternative, nonsexist porn.22

The feminist debates concerning the pleasures and dangers of exploring female sexuality through various practices such as s/m and porn also addressed other forms of sexual labor. In her introduction to a special edition of Social Text that examined the sex trade in the early '90s, Anne McClintock advocates for prostitution politics from the perspective of prostitutes. The edition includes essays by sex workers as a way to break with academic conventions in which prostitutes are frequently spoken for by antiporn feminists, academics, the state, and the media. Citing claims by public officials who consider them the most dangerous people in society, precisely because they interfere with male control of cash and commodities, McClintock states that the intention of the special edition is to “collectively explore the difficult frescos of power, profit, and pleasure that crisscross the commercial sexual body.”23 She challenges anti-sex work feminists who claim that supporting sex worker rights is the same as supporting men’s indiscriminate access to women’s sexuality. Sex workers argue the opposite, as evidenced by the prostitution movement in which they demanded the right to exchange services on their own terms rather than those of the state, police, pimps, and male managers. McClintock suggests that social contexts must change to challenge “whore stigma” which exacerbates public misconceptions about sex work that do not account for the myriad types of sex work worldwide.

Around the same time that the special edition of Social Text was published, Wendy Chapkis also advocated for a more complex approach to feminist prostitution politics. She conducted her research in the Bay Area and in the Netherlands in the early '90s, when prostitution, pornography, and other forms of commercial sex were still points of contention within feminism. Though she aligned herself with politicized sex workers and other sex radicals, she was invested in trying to resolve the conflicts that arose during the '80s sex wars. Rather than completely discount radical
feminists (i.e., antiporn feminists like Dworkin and McKinnon) or sex radical feminists (i.e., anticensorship feminists and sex-positive feminists like Vance, Califia, and Rubin), or views concerning the abolition and prohibition of prostitution, she presents a hybrid perspective in her book *Live Sex Acts: Women Performing Erotic Labor* (1997), which draws strengths from each of these conflicting positions. Chapkis offers her insight into the debates about legalization versus decriminalization in her comparative study of sex work in the Netherlands and in the Bay Area during the same decade in which some of my research participants performed. She suggests that new policies need to prioritize workers’ concerns (rather than the concerns of third parties, i.e., pimps, male managers, and the police or state) in order to safeguard their rights. As well, she discusses issues concerning the performance of sexual and emotional labor, which is a topic of this book.

Another book that examines the topic of emotional labor in sex work is *Playing the Whore: The Work of Sex Work* (2014), by Melissa Gira Grant. Grant had previously worked at the Lusty Lady in San Francisco, which I discuss at length in chapters 3 and 4. She asserts that the sex worker’s continual negotiation of varying levels of intimacy is evidence that this type of work is a complex form of labor rather than merely the selling of one’s body at the physical level, as it is often simplistically portrayed. She elaborates on various reasons behind the rise of online sexual commerce, one of them being the gentrification of red-light districts. In yet another updated study, *Porn Work: Sex, Labor, and Late Capitalism* (2021), Heather Berg focuses specifically on the labor of porn workers to reiterate what authors like Grant and many others have stated—that is, the importance of recognizing that sex work is work: “Porn workers resist the idea that pleasure is a frivolous distraction from the material conditions of work. Instead, pleasure is a working condition.” Using labor theory to make sense of sex work, Berg argues that porn work must be read dialectically, particularly with regard to the contradictory viewpoints she encountered among her research participants.

To conclude this brief overview of the many scholars who have contributed to the feminist sex war debates since the ’80s, I turn to another example from the 2010s of a philosopher who argues against women’s sexual labor, in order to illustrate that these debates are still a work in progress. In her book *Why Some Things Should Not Be for Sale*, Debra
Satz uses political theory to argue that prostitution is wrong because it perpetuates gender inequality. In her conclusion to the chapter “Markets in Women’s Sexual Labor,” she reiterates her assertion that we should be troubled by prostitution (which she considers a “noxious market”) and should invest our energy into alternative models of egalitarian relations between men and women. Though she acknowledges the possibility that in different cultural contexts prostitution might not have such negative effects as perpetuating gender inequality, she argues that feminists who advocate for prostitution “have minimized the cultural stereotypes that surround contemporary prostitution and exaggerated their own power to shape the practice.” In her dismissal of these feminists, she is likely referring to women like Margo St. James, who founded the first sex workers’ advocacy organization, COYOTE (Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics), in San Francisco in 1973—the first of its kind in the country—several years prior to the establishment of WAP and WAVPM. To Satz’s credit, however, in her discussion of whether prostitution should be legalized or decriminalized, she states that part of the problem lies in the fact that consumers of prostitution are prosecuted at a significantly lower rate than prostitutes, thus demonstrating the problematic double standard that exists with regard to consumers and providers of sexual commerce. Nevertheless, when presenting future directions for investigating prostitution’s negative effects on female prostitutes and women in general, she calls on more research concerning attitudes about prostitution. She provides a list of various configurations of people that should be considered (i.e., men who visit prostitutes, men who do not visit prostitutes, and women who are not prostitutes, among others) to examine the impact of their specific attitudes toward prostitution; however, nowhere on this list are prostitutes themselves. On the basis of their omission from the list of people to be considered in future directions for this research, it appears as though their attitudes about their own work are not a priority for Satz, much less a factor. Nevertheless, I would hope that antiporn political theorists, philosophers, or scholars from other fields undertaking future research about sexual commerce consider accounting for the opinions of those who work in the industry, rather than take for granted the stigma that exists. This lack of attention on the part of scholars like Satz perpetuates the stigma attached to people who work in the sex industry and dismisses any possi-