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DISCUSSION GUIDE

Surpassing Certainty

BY JANET MOCK

Quotes

- Hawaii's community of trans women was vast, diverse, and deeply resourceful. The girls knew how to navigate ignorance, harassment, poverty, and various systemic hurdles to fulfill their needs. (page 12)
- I was still shy with my body then, especially in the company of other women. I felt that I didn't measure up, and this failure on my part made me feel illegitimate. However, in the company of men, with their coarse hands, broad shoulders, and protective biceps, I was generous in my nakedness.. (page 13)
- There are undocumented thousands who have transitioned and lived some form of *stealth*, some going as far as severing any ties with anyone who may have known them before they transitioned. Stealth requires trans people to blend in at all costs, including breaking away from their places of becoming, leaving behind those who knew them when, isolating themselves, and strategically hiding or recreating their histories. Many hid and continue to hide because they were taught that being openly trans was impossible -- even dangerous. (page 16-17)
- Dancing in the club gave me greater confidence in my body, particularly enabling me to appreciate the aesthetics of my vagina. (page 17)
- I wasted so much of my youth measuring myself against things outside myself. (page 17)
- Years after I left the club, I started noticing even more empowering displays of strippers, most often helmed by women in the mainstream. Women like Rihanna (the "Pour It Up" music video) and former dancers Black Chyna, Cardi B, and Amber Rose ("That was the best time of my life!" Rose told *Cosmopolitan* magazine. "I was young, beautiful, I was onstage, I wasn't really ashamed of my body. I made lifelong friends." Women like Beyonce, who sang an ode to dancers with "6 Inch" on her iconic album *Lemonade* (*She works for the money...And she worth every dollar*).

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- But no matter how many celebratory images of strippers I sought, there was still commentary that aimed to shame dancers. Chris Rock's voice rings loudly in my ears. The comedian has been unrelenting when it comes to degrading dancers. His bits have gone on to become stripper sound-bite legend. In his 2004 comedy special *Never Scared*, Rock says one surefire signal of failed fatherhood is the sight of your daughter on a pole: *Sometimes I am walking with my daughter. I'm talking to my daughter. I look at her. I'm pushing her in the stroller. And sometimes I pick her up and I just stare at her and I realize my only job in life is to keep her off the pole. Keep my baby off the pole! I mean, the don't grade fathers, but if your daughter is a stripper you fucked up.* (page 17)
- Not all women working in strip clubs were pushed there because of some parental failure, and only a patriarchal society would claim a woman's profession --respectable or not -- reflects on the man who did or didn't raise her. Our culture is obsessed with raising perfect little girls who are virginal and virtuous and respectable in their womanhood, girls who do not dance on poles, trade sex for money, or THOT around town seeking pleasure. Choice and circumstance led the women I worked with to the club. We were all driven by a desire to take charge of ourselves and to take care of our families. These women took responsibility for their lives, their bodies, and their babies in a culture that offers limited resources or opportunities to women living in low-income communities of color. (page 19)
- Women displaying themselves publicly can be seen in art galleries, on the silver screen, and on cable television, but it is the woman under the glare of neon lights who is singled out and told that she should be ashamed of herself. What's so corrupt about baring your own body to support yourself? Racialized sexism only further exacerbates this double standard, which gives white women like Dita Von Teese greater freedom to profit from their nakedness and achieve mainstream success but limits the opportunities for women dancing in clubs in the hoods of America. A white woman splashing around naked in a

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- ...human-size martini glass to entertain rich people is worthy of applause and magazine spreads, but a black or Latina woman trying to make a living doing the exact same thing with a pole is dismissed as a ho unworthy of protection, care, and respect. (page 20)
- In *Never Scared*, Rock continues to belittle women who view stripping as a transitional job during college: *What I got a problem with is the stripper myth. The stripper myth is: "I'm stripping to pay my tuition." No, you're not. There's no strippers in college. There's no clear heels in biology. Shit, man, I didn't know they had a college that took one-dollar bills. And if they got so many strippers in college, how come I never got a girl that sat on my lap and said, "If I was you, I would diversify my portfolio."* (page 20)
- Most strippers I know were not paying for tuition; they were paying to survive in a world that shamed them for monetizing their sexuality, something our culture demands to be available and free. (page 20)
- I relished being swooned over with dollar bills. It was a no-brainer to take my clothes off in exchange for money. (page 21)
- Beautiful no last. Be smart, girl. Make money. Save. Love can wait. (page 32)
- *Who would stand beside you --in public-- and call you theirs?* (page 37)
- The discovery that *no one* trips and falls into the arms of the love of their life was a truth I resisted. (page 38)
- I didn't want to join the twenty-plus trans women killed annually in the United States -- the second most dangerous country behind Brazil to be trans, according to the Trans Murder Monitoring (TMM) project. (page 38-39)
- My story was mine, and I felt a person had to earn the privilege of hearing it. (page 39)
- The only resources available to trans women in Hawaii dealt with healthcare, HIV/AIDS, and substance abuse. There were no resources that supported trans women in intimate partnerships with cis straight men. There still aren't, so we continue to do this work. (page 40)

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- Hair is political and personal. The way we wear our hair is a statement we make about ourselves. (page 44)
- I knew that love was more than a statement. It was an action that required accountability. (page 44)
- He deserved to know me. (page 44)
- I wasn't exacting with my language, because saying that I was transsexual would have qualified my womanhood. (page 45)
- It confirmed something I have already known all too well: we are inconvenient women to love. (page 53)
- Black womanhood was not centered or celebrated in Hawaii. As in the rest of the United States, we were all but invisible except for tokenized consumption in film, television, and music. (page 60)
- ...I did not calculate the impact of being a black woman in social spaces that valued the white male gaze. No matter how I moisturized my curls, how tight my body, how bright my smile, I was largely overlooked in a racist, patriarchal culture that placed the beauty of thin, white, blond women on a pedestal. Whoever was closest to that ideal was seen and sought. All others were ignored. (page 60)
- The fact that some black men felt compelled to stake a claim on my body spoke to the belief that black women *belonged* to black men, that we should remain available and faithful regardless of whether they sought us in partnership. If a black woman found partnership outside the bounds of blackness, she was a sellout. If a blackman did the same, he had "made it," as expressed by Kanye West, who rapped in "Gold Digger," *When you get on, he'll leave your ass for a white girl.* (page 64)
- A white cis man, who was taught that he should seek partnership with a white cis woman, choosing me felt transgressive. Our relationship was a resounding *fuck you* to the systems of desire embedded in us. (page 65)

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- Just as quickly as someone enters, they can leave. People make mistakes. They disappoint. And you're left with yourself. Being alone is unbearable when you've enjoyed a reprieve with togetherness. I believed in the power of companionship. What I did not know then was that no one can heal you. You must learn to be your own company, your own cure. You cannot retreat into someone else for fulfillment. (page 73)
- I might not have been old enough to legally consume those cranberry vodkas, but I had lived long enough to know that being someone's side chick wasn't something I ever wanted on my romantic resume. It triggered me in too many ways: the secret part, the second-fiddle-to-a-white-girl part, the lack-girl-mistress part. (page 77)
- Lust and infatuation and temptation could talk you into nearly anything. (page 77)
- I understood that consent for him was not me expressing my desire to have sex. He felt he *deserved* to have my body because I had come to his room and he desired me. Walking past the threshold of his room was consent enough. Saying yes or no didn't matter. (page 84)
- We have continuity in our bodies, which hold experiences that never leave us, experiences our bodies conceal so we can keep going. (page 87)
- I blamed myself for leaving him with blue balls all those times in the library. I blamed myself for being so needy, for seeking the company of another that night. I blamed myself for not saying *no* loudly enough, for not deepening my voice in a commanding way. I blamed myself for pursuing my sweater on his bed. I blamed myself for not screaming, scratching, punching, kicking, *resisting*. (page 88)
- During some of my most turbulent years grappling with my identity and my body, my mother was largely absent. I wanted her to support me, which she did by not getting in the way, but she wasn't *there*. This enabled me to do what I wanted as a young person with a mother who let me lead the way, because she didn't necessarily have the answers or solutions to an experience that was unfamiliar territory. Unbeknowningly, her absence

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- ...instilled in me a fierce independence, teaching me that my life was mine. I was solely responsible for it. (page 94)
- Love is also a belief, a leap of faith that you take with someone else, one that is only made all the more perilous with distance. Distance at first feels overwhelming. You cry and miss, and you don't know how you'll cope without your beloved. Then you realize that you can get through a day, then a week, then a month. Routine becomes your savior, enabling you to halt all the missing and to do without. (page 95)
- "Pretty girls are never that damn nice *and* funny..." (page 103)
- I came from sticky-white-rice-and-pork-eating-people who had never had any words of wisdom or firsthand experience to pass on to me as I navigated my way through unknown terrain. There were no familial networks for me to tap into, no educational trust to rely on, no tangible examples of success to look to. I was too afraid to seek help because I was too afraid of being pitied. (page 104)
- "Remember, good writers always pull from their lives..." (page 105)
- *Married* felt like a monstropolous thing, something all-encompassing that bound us in ways that felt irreversible. (page 109)
- I was empowered by the image of the solitary single girl in the big city who had fled her small town, her family, and her husband and had shed her past and her previous selves to create herself anew. (page 116)
- I was built to rely on myself and didn't know how to ask for help or recognize that I *could* ask for help. (page 118)
- Sometimes we find ourselves back where we were, struggling to stitch together seemingly disparate parts of our selves and our narratives, wondering how we ended up here -- again. (page 118)

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- I resisted creating work that reflected my experience. I had fought so hard to survive, persevere, and ultimately escape my past. I turned the lens out so I didn't have to deal with what was within. (page 129)
- Pretending felt safest. I believed it was the only way I could make it. I stripped myself of backstory and connection and flattened myself, distilled myself, made myself smaller and easier to contain and digest. I pretended that color, class, gender, and all the intersections of my identity and experience *othered* me and did not exist. And the funny thing was that my classmates, roommates, and neighbors were pleased to pretend, too. It made it easier on all of us to believe a postracial, postfeminist, postoppression fantasy, especially in a well intentioned liberal New York City. (page 130)
- I never took issue with the commonplace display of naked female bodies in the office, but I did wonder if these silent female forms shaped the way my male colleagues viewed my own young woman's body. Eventually, the novelty of bare breasts wore off, and I realized that we were just a bunch of journalists, working in cubicles and trying to make a deadline. (page 140)
- There was no universal experiences... (page 147)
- It was not revolutionary to be the only one in the space -- that was tokenism. Change comes when the only brings in many more with her. (page 168)
- "You are the kind of black girl who will make white people comfortable. I am not that girl, and that's the truth. Knowing *that* makes me better. It armors me as I walk into these damn rooms, where I am underestimated, expected to hang my head low and walk around bitter. I refuse. *Refuse* to give them what they want. No, ma'am." (page 168)
- I was taught to believe that as long as I got an education, gained experience, worked twice as hard, I could gain access. I could be let in. It would take me years to realize that no matter how swirly, curly, and tan I was, I was still black, and my blackness was overwhelmingly seen as inferior, suspect, other. I would have to be overqualified in order

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- ...to be seen, interviewed, considered, and hired--and offered half as much. Despite the hurdles, the girls of the Brown Bag Lunch crew were vital to my education and my becoming as a young black woman. They affirmed me, challenged me, and filled me with a greater mission than merely making it through the door. They filled me with an urgency to get on staff and begin influencing editorial content and enacting change. (page 168-169)
- We spoke in code, because that is what we had learned to do in order to navigate these spaces. (page 178)
- I was told that if I worked hard and did good work, I'd succeed, but corporate America showed otherwise. There was this constant pressure to prove myself, but the moment I did as I was told, "leaned in," asked for what I was worth, or showed confidence, I was labeled a diva. Yet if I didn't excel, I would be overlooked. (page 178)
- I did not have the luxury to sulk, though. I could not wallow. I could not let my bitterness affect the quality of my work. Doing so would only make it harder for those coming after me. Being the only in the space, I knew my performance would be seen as representative of us all. It was unfair yet true. (page 201)
- I could not let my paycheck or my title dictate my self-worth. I could not gain my value from the work I did in this cubicle for this company. (page 201)
- Mental health in communities of color is not a topic spoken about openly, especially in a culture that often pathologizes us. We are more likely to struggle with mental health issues in silence, more likely to go untreated because of shame and stigma. Many people of color wrongly see mental health not so much as a health problem but as a personal weakness, something that a little prayer can heal. But we need more than faith to get us through; we need professional help too. Just as we seek specialists for heart disease, diabetes, and HIV/AIDS, we need mental health professionals to help us. Grappling with systemic racism, microaggressions, and being the only in spaces doesn't help either. (page 205)

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- Hearing myself enabled me to heal myself. For so much of my life, I believed that my silence would protect me, that by keeping my circle small, by holding my truth close, by being cautious of others, I would be able to remain safe. But all it did was isolate me and leave me with delusions. I imagined that the people who cared about me would no longer love me if I spoke my truth. But I had to be open and honest with myself, and that began with telling myself the truth... (page 206)
- "All artists, if they are to survive, are forced, at last, to tell the whole story, to vomit the anguish up," James Baldwin said. (page 212)
- Gratitude is a practice that recognizes one's smallness and interconnectedness. (page 225)