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“Am I Sexy Yet?”: Contextualizing the Movement of Exotic Dance and Its Effects on Female Dancers’ Self-image and Sexual Expression

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**“Am I Sexy Yet?”: Contextualizing the Movement of Exotic Dance and Its Effects on
Female Dancers’ Self-image and Sexual Expression**

**By
Maximanova Greenberg**

Submitted to Scripps College in Partial Fulfillment of the Degree of Bachelor of Arts

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Professor Davis
Professor Branfman**

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ABSTRACT

“Am I Sexy Yet?': Contextualizing the Movement of Exotic Dance and Its Effects on Female Dancers' Self-image and Sexual Expression” looks at exotic dancing in three contexts—a pole fitness studio, a strip club, and a college dance concert—and how the movement is experienced by the dancers in each space. It questions how the movement changes meaning for the dancers, audience, and mainstream culture based on the context and location, even with similar content. Specifically, it analyzes how the experiences of the dancers affect their self confidence, sexuality, and sexual expression. Then, it applies Audre Lorde's “Uses of the Erotic” to their experiences to show how this movement can be looked at through a different lens as deeper, more freeing, and more transgressive than it is usually thought to be.

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Introduction

Purpose and Problem

Women and girls have complicated relationships with themselves in terms of confidence, sexual expression, and body image. A large cause of this is the social pressures that women face through constantly sexualized media, pornography, and beauty ideals that encourage women to be sexy, contrasted with subsequent shaming of women who follow these messages. Exotic dancing, as currently understood, is a dance form that brings these norms to the forefront because it is an explicit sexual performance that is demanded by society even as the dancers are stigmatized. It has now spread into all aspects of media and many different facets of our culture as normalized movement for women, yet is still, to some extent, considered “dirty” or “bad”. The discussions in broader culture do not focus, however, on the dancers’ experiences, but on policing who should be dancing and who should be watching, celebrating certain dancers and shaming others.

In this thesis, I explore the dancers’ personal experiences of this movement in three contexts and look at how it changes meaning in each location based on the dancers’ purpose, audience perception, social context, and cultural attitude towards exotic dancing. I work through how the tone and implicit messages of the same movement changes in the different contexts and affects dancers’ experiences in each context, as exotic dancing can both work to reclaim being sexy and reinforce existing views and demands on women’s appearance and sexuality. I am specifically interested in how dancers’ experiences may change their body image, confidence, sexual expression, and ideas of what is “sexy”, and

how those experiences can be used to help them find the erotic, as defined by Audre Lorde, and transgress norms.

Within feminist discourse, there is ample writing on strip clubs and the relationship between dancers and audience members. My work therefore draws upon existing research on empowerment, agency, and objectification, which asserts that there is no clear dichotomy between objectification and empowerment, and instead it exists on a spectrum. The fact that exotic dancing has become so pervasive in popular culture and is referenced in mainstream television, movies, music videos and songs, dancing, websites (like BuzzFeed, Reddit, etc), magazines, and newspapers, means that this is now an integral part of our culture. It has permeated culture, while simultaneously staying “private” and “taboo”. This thesis is relevant to all women, not just dancers, because they are under a constant barrage of exotic dance through media that influences how they perceive themselves and what is sexy.

Exotic dancing in strip clubs has been written about extensively, and so with this thesis, I wish to expand upon the wealth of literature by looking at the style of dance in different contexts that have not been explored fully: a pole fitness studio and an elite college dance concert. My interest in the subject was sparked after reading about sex work in classes, reading popular media about strip clubs, and working for the owner of Flirty Girl Fitness studio in Chicago. I was uncomfortable and increasingly conflicted about my opinions on strip clubs when I became aware of Flirty Girl as the owner’s nanny. The idea of stripping bothered me at the time, even with my supposed belief in sex positivity, but I understood the cost benefits of it as a profession. The idea of pole fitness

turns the common excuse of the dancers being desperate for money or even attention on its head, as it is for private recreation alone. The lack of the performance aspect in the classes confuses people, as it did for me, and makes people excuse and belittle women's participation in the classes with things like "they're just bored housewives" or "they do it to keep their husbands/boyfriends interested." Even in the popular film *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, released in 2011, the male heartthrob played by Ryan Gosling says, "The war between the sexes is over. We won the second women started doing pole dancing for exercise."

Although it is a female experience, it always comes back to men; somehow women are only doing it to gain male attention, or if they think they are doing it for themselves, then they have been tricked by popular liberal feminist discourse into thinking it is empowering, when men are actually gaining from it. With all of these conflicting messages, I decided to study exotic dance in the pole fitness studio and the strip club, and to choreograph an exotic dance for the dance concert as part of my thesis requirement. In each context, I wanted to focus on the dancers' experiences of the movement compared to the audience's and broader culture's view of the movement. With the idea that movement is always coded and contextualized by time, location, purpose, and politics, and gender, race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality, I explore how exotic dancing is experienced, viewed, and functions in each context.

Complicating and Defining "Exotic Dance"

The term "exotic dance" can be considered problematic because of its connotations and broad definition. Exotic dance is used to refer to striptease, pole dance,

burlesque, peep shows, belly dance, and other foreign (i.e. non-Western) dance forms. As the term comes out of Orientalism and sexual taboo, exotic dance was used first to refer to mainly Eastern dances such as belly dance and traditional South and East Asian dance forms. Orientalism, “defined by Edward Said as the process of the West defining itself as a superior civilization by constructing itself in opposition to an ‘exotic’ but inferior ‘Orient’” is, as Andrea Smith argues, “a third pillar of white supremacy” used to justify the United States “being in a constant state of war” (Smith 68). The term exotic was created through the lens of Orientalism and within colonial histories to construct the Other as exciting, taboo, dangerous, and threatening to Western power.

Specifically, the female Other has been historically hyper-sexualized and sought-after by Western men as a part of their wars with the East. The exotic signifies a kind of desirability and sexuality that is unfamiliar and seemingly off-limits to Western men, which makes it that much more desirable. In addition, Third World women are constructed under “a homogenous notion of oppression” in which the West sees them as “sexually constrained...ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, [and] victimized.” This is placed in “contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of western women as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities, and the ‘freedom to make their own decisions,’” as Chandra Mohanty argues in “Under Western Eyes” (65). The dichotomy implicit in the term “exotic” is of the empowered Western woman and the oppressed Third World woman, who is simultaneously pitied and longed for by Westerners. As women of color continue to be exoticized and hyper-sexualized, I was conscious about interviewing

women of various races and ethnicities. While it is not a part of my focus, the dancer's bodies are being viewed and perceived in certain ways based on their gender, race, ethnicity, class, and ability, which affects their experiences of this dance style and how they are seen by the audience and public.

The current definition of exotic dance, which is not based on traditional Eastern forms of dance, comes out of the meaning and connotations of the "exotic" and is a continuation of the us/them ideologies and structures. Therefore, by using the term "exotic" to describe this style of dancing, it draws in Western men, constructs the dancers as sexually deviant, mysterious, and seductive Others, and maintains the moral discomfort tied with this dance form by invoking the foreign, hyper-sexualized woman. While the current definition of exotic dance is not necessarily describing the same movements of exotic dance in the historical context, "sexy" dancing draws on the same ideas and structures that are present in the "exotic" and both are defined as deviant and Other. Exotic dance now refers to pole dancing, lap dancing, stripping, generally "sexy" dancing, booty shaking and twerking, and certain forms of jazz and hip hop that focus on sexual movements. While it may include a wide array of movements, they are all deemed to be explicitly or suggestively sexual, although as explained in later chapters, the dancers may have a different definition of what is sexy and what the movement means.

Due to its relation to Orientalism, hyper-sexualization, and fetishization, the term "exotic dance" is problematic and merits complication, contextualization, and recognition of its historical and current context. I use this term, however, because that is what it is referred to in the current scholarship and that is how many exotic dancers refer to

themselves. Exotic dance includes the word “dance” in the title, as opposed to stripping or striptease, which relates it more clearly to the other contexts of this study. Stripping is limiting in that it only specifically refers to taking off one’s clothes, not necessarily lap, pole, or other types of dancing under the umbrella of exotic dance, and has negative moral judgements attached to it as well. While dancers may refer to themselves as many other things such as polers, pole dancers, strippers, performers, or dancers, this term is used in the academic literature, and so it provided a concise identifier of the dance style discussed in this thesis.

My theoretical framework, fleshed out in the following chapter, is based on finding a “theory of maybe” that attempts to combine queer theory’s transgression of norms, which does not recognize subjectivity, and pro-sex feminist theory’s empowerment through personal liberation, which ignores larger structural systems. I argue that Audre Lorde’s “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power” brings together both theoretical frameworks and provides a way to reclaim female sexuality through experience while transgressing sociopolitical norms. With this in mind, I analyze each of the contexts through the lens of the erotic, while building upon existing sources on professional exotic dance, pole fitness, and feminist dance in each chapter. The erotic is defined by Audre Lorde as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling” and is confused “with its opposite, the pornographic” which “represents the suppression of true feeling” (53). The erotic is about women accessing their deepest feelings and using it as a powerful source against oppression and towards personal expression and

satisfaction. Throughout this thesis, I will explore the ways that exotic dance can be used by women to get in touch with the erotic and how the context of the movement affects their experiences, their access to the erotic, and the transgressive potential of the movement in greater society.

Methods

I conducted interview surveys with dancers from each of the three contexts—strip club, fitness studio, and college dance concert—with varying degrees of success. During the interviews, I planned on asking the same questions so that I would be able to compare their answers in the different locations and contexts. I addressed most of the questions, although in different orders and with varying follow-up questions, in each interview. The questions addressed the way that dancers feel about their bodies, sexuality, and self-esteem while they are dancing and how they perceive their relationship to the audience. I audio recorded the interviews done with the dancers from my piece and the participants at Flirty Girl, and I took notes of my conversations at Flirty Girl because of the music playing loudly in the studio.¹ I have changed all of the names of all the dancers I interviewed and ensured that their recordings and personal information are kept confidential.² I attempted to get a range of participants in each context in terms of age, race, ethnicity, body type, and experience; at Flirty Girl, that meant purposefully approaching a wide range of women when asking them to participate, and for my dance, it meant casting women with different backgrounds. For my interviews with professional

¹ In quotes, I omitted “like,” “umm,” and other filler words when they did not change the meaning.

² Due to concerns of confidentiality, no pictures, program, or any identifying information is included in this thesis. Video of the dance pieces choreographed for the project is only available to the dance department faculty, choreographer, and dancers in the piece. The names of the strip clubs have also been changed or omitted.

exotic dancers, I had less control over who I was able to interview, which I will discuss in that chapter.

My positionality as a young white woman from a privileged, educated background allowed me into certain locations and into relationships of familiarity and trust with some informants, and kept me from accessing others and from gaining the familiar relationships needed to gain data. Considering the location, setting, and social culture of the three contexts, they each entailed a radically different relationship with the informants. The dancers in my piece were much more informed about the project than those in the other contexts, as they were being updated on my process and research throughout the choreography of the dance. With this privileged knowledge and familiarity with me, their answers to the questions may have been influenced.

In the Flirty Girl Fitness location, I already had a working relationship with the owner, so I was able to easily contact her and get permission to conduct interviews on the premises. I did not have any problems getting women to volunteer to interview with me, partially because I am a young white woman who is educated, friendly, dances, and passes as heterosexual and middle-class. My positionality in this situation and my connection to the studio gave me a considerable amount of power and privilege in the location, and made me seem trustworthy enough for them to share some intimate details about their lives and experiences. While it was still nerve-wracking to approach strangers, the women were highly responsive and many were excited to be asked to participate. While they did not have the prior knowledge that the dancers in my piece had, I had time

and a chance to talk to them about the research and answer any questions they had. Many of them wanted more information and expressed interest in reading the final product.

The most difficult location for me to enter was the strip club because I did not have a personal connection with a club or a dancer. I called and went to many clubs in the greater Los Angeles area, with little success. My positionality put me in a strange situation of being eligible to work in the club and therefore less credible as a scholar and researcher, and yet a privileged outsider, making me suspicious and threatening to the club's business and atmosphere. I was turned away almost immediately by many club owners and managers, because they did not trust researchers in their club, did not want me interfering with business, wanted to protect the workers' rights, or simply did not trust me as a college-age woman trying to enter the space of the club. When I finally was able to enter a club and interview some of the women, the manager and a dancer told me I would not be able to understand without trying it and that I really had to try dancing. I responded that I had an injury, but with further pressure, I said that I would think about it. This made me hyper-aware of the fact that I was a young woman and was therefore crossing the boundary between researcher and participant observer, even without purposefully doing so. Furthermore, as I thought it would serve me better to tell them I was majoring in Dance instead of Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies, I also revealed that I was already a dancer who was somewhat comfortable with my body and movement, which reinforced my position as a possible exotic dancer and not a "serious" academic.

In addition, the manager was highly controlling over the interviews, asserting his opinions and dismissing some of my questions. The manager and dancers did not want me to record the interviews, so I took notes instead. Getting the access necessary to have meaningful conversations and gain the trust of the dancers was nearly impossible, due to my outsider status and to my positionality as a young white woman who was seen as simultaneously privileged and elite, suspicious and untrustworthy, and vulnerable, naïve, non-credible, and easily dismissible. Also, the logistical issues of time and transportation made it difficult for me to repeatedly drive to clubs to be turned away or told to come back at another time, or to farther clubs. If I had auditioned and become a dancer, it would have been much easier to conduct interviews and gain inside knowledge. However, I was not a participant observer in any of the contexts, partially because of my injury and subsequent inability to dance, and partially as a choice to focus on other dancer's experiences, not my own.

During some of my visits to clubs, my boyfriend accompanied me to provide transportation, safety, and a male presence, to help counteract some of the barriers to access that I was coming up against. This seemed to help me gain entrance to the clubs, as some clubs do not let women in by themselves, but his presence also reinforced the gendered structure of the club, where female dancers are "protected" and organized by predominately male managers and bouncers. Overall, the experiences of being in the club were simultaneously uncomfortable and difficult because of the barriers to entrance and my strange position as young white female researcher/dancer, and remarkably ordinary in

terms of the atmosphere of the club in which the shock and dismay I expected to experience was non-existent.

What's Next

In the following chapters, I delve into the experiences of the dancers in each context and how the context shapes their experiences of this movement, even with similar content. The next chapter discusses the existing literature on exotic dance, predominately in the context of the strip club, with a few sources on pole dance fitness. Due to the recent popularization of pole dance fitness, it has not been written about in depth, and the discussions happening on the topic are not yet as nuanced, complex, and deep as the literature on strip clubs. Specifically, there is an understanding in the current writing on professional exotic dance that the dancing is both objectifying and empowering, often simultaneously, and the need to go beyond that simple dichotomy in order to understand the experiences of exotic dancers and further feminist analyses. However, in the small selection of pole dance fitness literature, there is still a dichotomous analysis that searches for a clear definition of whether the dance is objectifying or empowering. Since the literature has not been explored fully compared to literature on professional exotic dance, this thesis seeks to further the research, analysis, and dialogue on the topic, and encourage further scholarship in the field of pole dance fitness.

“‘It’s not how you look, it’s how you feel’: Persona, Identity, and Satisfaction in the Strip Club” focuses on the strip club as a sight and context of exotic dancing, using interviews with professional exotic dancers as well as published ethnographies to highlight the dancers’ experiences in the club. Since there is a plethora of literature on the

experiences and complexities of exotic dancers in strip clubs, this chapter is shorter than the others, which explore the less-studied contexts and how they relate to and yet differ greatly from the strip club context. I analyze the way exotic dance can be used to access the erotic and through that, explore the possibility of exotic dance as transgressive. I attempt to determine whether they may or may not be aligning themselves with the erotic and working through the possibility for that alignment in a location that is not usually thought to encourage deep feeling.

Moving to pole fitness, I discuss the experiences of women who take classes at Flirty Girl Fitness, while describing the context, location, and their positionalities in “‘Being sexy means you own your body’: Finding the Erotic at Flirty Girl Fitness”. Looking at the advertising and marketing used by the studio, I argue that the studio’s image promotes a narrow view of pro-sex feminism that encourages individual empowerment sold through images and rhetoric that reinforce beauty ideals, fitness regimens, and traditional notions of sexiness and women’s sexuality. However, the actual experiences of the dancers suggest a much closer relationship with the erotic. Analyzing their experiences in dialogue with the erotic, I argue that they can access the erotic through this movement, especially because of the all-female, judgement-free environment of the studio. Through looking at the real experiences of these women, the erotic potential of the studio is found in opposition to the image that their marketing sells to the public.

The final chapter, “‘Y’all are sluts, by the way’: Negotiating Judgement, Sexual Expression, and Art-Making in the College Dance Concert Setting,” focuses on the dance pieces I choreographed as part of the movement portion of this thesis. It details the

experience of choreographing the dance, the institutional barriers, and the judgements that the dancers faced. After describing the choreographic and production choices that I made for the final piece and the intent behind them, it moves through the dancers' experiences doing exotic dance in the college concert setting, and whether it can be used to access the erotic and transgress norms. I use feminist dance theory to analyze the process of making dance, the relationship of this dance form to modern and classical dance forms and dance institutions, and the ways in which the audience and dancer interact to complicate the subject/object relationship in dance.

The conclusion brings together all the contexts to address how the same movements are read differently or similarly in the contexts and the socio-political, and always gendered, raced, and classed implications of those readings. I bring together all the contexts and experiences in order to show the way that the movement travels through each location, without attempting to essentialize or homogenize the various dancers' experiences. I argue that the erotic has different possibilities for transgression, liberation, and empowerment in each context, but can be applied to each context in meaningful ways that help complicate the way that people view exotic dance and hopefully provide a deeper understanding of the dancers' experiences.

Literature Review

Scholars have written significantly about exotic dancing in strip clubs and have begun writing about pole dance fitness classes, both of which this thesis builds upon. Older debates on exotic dancing were based mainly on determining whether exotic dance and sex work more broadly is harmful/objectifying or empowering/liberating for women. The scholarship that I discuss here complicates that binary and our understanding of sex work, because more recent feminist scholars found the previous debates to be limiting, reductive, and unproductive. In order to connect and situate the three contexts of my research—the strip club, the pole fitness studio, and the college dance concert—I will review the most recent and relevant literature written about exotic dance. Since no one has compared the three contexts before, my research aims to find out the experiences of the dancers in each context and the ways in which the location changes the meaning and perceptions behind the movement. Through the lens of the erotic, I question whether transgression is possible within the contexts, based on the combination of the dancers' embodiment of the movement and the audiences'/public's perception of it. It is an important intervention in the field because there has been extensive scholarship on exotic dance within the club, but not nearly enough on how it permeates our culture in many different contexts. I argue that the inherent messages, location, and experience of the movement come together in complex ways to determine how exotic dance may be used to access the erotic and work against underlying systems of oppression.

Theoretical Framework

My theoretical framework is based on combining notions of sex positivity and queerness as a way to recognize and identify positive female sexual expression, with the possibility of transgressing traditional gender roles and intersecting systems of oppression. In Elisa Glick's article, "Sex Positive: Feminism, Queer Theory, and the Politics of Transgression," she problematizes the limitations that may be present in pro-sex feminist and queer theories when applied to sex work and sex positivity. Going a step further in "Theorizing Maybe: A Feminist/Queer Theory Convergence", Carisa R. Showden recognizes parts of pro-sex feminism and queer theory that can work together to create a combined theory of sex positivity that includes liberating personal experience and larger forms of transgression. Working with the two theories together and applying it to my argument, it is possible to see how sex positivity is about both the dancers' experiences or the potential transgression in the message it sends to the audience and public gaze. One possible way to bridge the gap, by combining theory and the practices and experiences of women, is through Audre Lorde's idea of the "erotic" as a sight of both transgression and personal expression and fulfillment that she lays out beautifully in her "Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power."

Providing a base understanding of each theory, Glick compares the pro-sex feminist interest in the personal empowerment of women and queer theory's focus on transgression through larger expressions of sexuality. She argues that both are missing an important part of the pro-sex debates, the focus on "political and material effects of pro-sexuality" (Glick, 19). She problematizes pro-sex feminism for being focused mainly on

personal liberation and queer theory for being focused on the cultural subversion of norms. She says that pro-sex feminists “claim that dominant configurations of power do not prevent women from exercising agency,” which allows for sites of resistance. Pro-sex feminists see resistance in personal sexual expression and choice, so that in the context of dancers in a club who choose to perform sex work, they are “liberated” because they are enacting control over their sexual expression, and their liberation is resistance. However, this ignores larger social constructions and systems of power and oppression which are always present and determine the cultural meaning or the messages in the dancing that can negatively affect women. If the dancers have a positive experience that is empowering, transformative, or simply enjoyable, does that constitute resistance because they are exercising choice and expressing female sexuality, or are they still acting under gendered institutions and therefore reaffirming traditional ideas of female sexuality? While there is no single answer to that question, this simple view falls short of fully addressing the many factors at play.

Contrastingly, queer theory, which Glick bases on Judith Butler, has the fundamental tenet of “transformation through resignification” using “the political resistance generated by ‘cultural practices’ rather than ‘subjects’” (Glick 35, 36). She argues that this takes away a person’s subjectivity and makes it unclear how to succeed at resistance individually or how to go against already-ingrained norms. In the context of my argument, queer theory addresses the potential resistance in the movement itself or the context of the performance more than the dancers’ experiences. Glick challenges the idealization of “the subversive potential of transgressive practices that dislocate and

displace the dominant” (24). Specifically, can subjects and cultural practices resist while being within the dominant framework that is present in society, or do they have to move outside of that, and is that possible? If the dancers are moving within the dominant framework, does that mean it cannot be transgressive and transformative? She presents the ways in which each theory tends to leave something out, viewing transgression as either subjective or cultural. Therefore, it is useful to find a compromise between the two pro-sex theories to answer the problem of transgression under the systems already in place that takes into consideration the individual and broader messages.

Showden picks up from there, offering a theory that combines the two. While Showden sees radical (anti-sex) feminist theories as a theory of “no” (because they see sex as harmful for women in all forms under patriarchy) and queer theory as a theory of “yes” (because they see all forms of queer sex as transgressive), she proposes a theory of “maybe” which combines pro-sex feminism and queer theory. Ultimately her vision of “sex-positive queer feminist theory claims, on the one hand, a more modest view of the future – one where ‘freedom’ isn’t attainable, but degrees of openness and agency are – and, on the other hand, a more expansive one, where ‘freedom’ is defined in myriad ways within a complex notion of equality in difference” (Showden 19). Similar to Glick, she notes the ways in which queer theory does not offer any specific way to resist, so that sexuality/sex acts is separate from identity, and in which feminist theory relies on personal liberation, so that sexuality/sex acts is inseparable from identity. By bringing them together, she combines the broader notion of transgressing against norms with an understanding of the way that identity can be formed by sex and also formed by social

structures that cannot be ignored or avoided. This theory makes it possible to understand exotic dancing as personally empowering (or not) and culturally subversive (or not), while still existing within an oppressive heteropatriarchal structure *and* being a possible site of resistance. It is the intersection and overlapping of these factors that make up the theory of maybe, which does not seek clear answers, but allows for many possibilities. The complexities of the dancers' subjectivities and positionalities within each context are determined by the gendered, classed, racialized structures present in the club, yet there can be room for transgression and resistance within the movement and their experiences.

While Glick and Showden offer a new way to think about sex positive theory, Audre Lorde's theory of the erotic provides a way to navigate and put into action Showden's theory of maybe. Her view of the erotic is a place within women that they can access for deeper feeling, experience, and expression of themselves; a transformative and transgressive sex-positive practice that subverts norms and resists systems of oppression. She provides the bridge in the gap to which Glick and Showden refer, bringing together the personal liberation of women with the resistance to cultural norms through access of the erotic. The erotic is "a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane" (Lorde 53), which women have been taught, conditioned, and forced to sever access from under patriarchy. The erotic has been confused with pornography, which "emphasizes sensation without feeling," and is therefore not tapping into the deeper well of the erotic and all of its possibilities (Lorde 54). The erotic is about "how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing" and depends on the "celebration of the erotic in all our endeavors" (Lorde 54, 55). The erotic is a place where women experience their

feelings and live more fully, so accessing it works to dismantle traditional notions of female sexuality and expression, in all aspects of their lives. However, if the dancers tap into the erotic, does that change the view that the audience has of their performance to a sight of resistance of social norms and oppressive structures, or is the perceived message different from the dancers' experience? Moreover, if the erotic is present within women and is a deeply personal experience, does that fall into the limitations of pro-sex feminist theory as it focuses on the personal? How can it be used by dancers to subvert cultural practices as well, in accordance with the theory of maybe? With these questions in mind, I look at how dancers interact with and experience exotic dancing in relation to Lorde's erotic, and the potential that using the erotic has for resistance and transgression of norms and systems of oppression as well as personal empowerment and fulfillment.

Inside the Strip Club

The strip club in particular has been a site of vast scholarship from all different disciplines, focusing on a variety of specific subtopics including the subject/object tension in the club, the benefits/tolls/stigma of stripping, the setting of the club, relationships within the club, and how dancing relates to the body. The overarching focus in most of the recent literature, however, is complicating and problematizing the binary of empowerment/objectification that occurred in earlier debates. Most scholars writing about professional exotic dance in the past ten years or so have come to an understanding that it can be empowering *and* objectifying, liberating *and* degrading, and can be all of these things at once, or be somewhere in the middle. As an important intervention into sex work made in recent years, it followed the feminist sex debates during the second

wave, in which the radical/anti-sex feminists and sex-positive/liberation feminists strongly disagreed about issues of sex work and women's sexuality. Since my writing is building upon the existing literature, my research and argument will be based on this understanding—that exotic dance cannot be thought of in binaristic terms and must include the real and complex experiences of exotic dancers. Here I lay out scholars' analyses about exotic dance, focusing on the main subtopics that they discuss, how my thesis builds off of this knowledge, and adding new viewpoints to the conversation.

Subject/Object

Coming from the opposing ideas that selling your body has to be objectifying and that dancers are asserting their subjectivity by choosing to do sex work, the issue of dancers being both subjects and objects is at the forefront of the literature on exotic dance. In recent scholarship, this divide between subject/object is complicated, with an understanding that they are both subjects and objects in the exchange of stripping, as are their customers, and that their positions can be both at once. For instance, R. Danielle Egan constructs a nuanced view of the subjectivity that exotic dancers experience and their relationships to regular customers in *Dancing for Dollars and Paying for Love: the Relationships between Exotic Dancers and Their Regulars*. She argues throughout the book that dancers can be objects and subjects at the same time in the club, and have an awareness of these changing dynamics, situated within the entanglement of “eroticism, gender, and capitalism” (Egan 26). Similarly, Bernadette Barton's book, *Stripped: Inside the Lives of Exotic Dancers*, calls for feminists from both sides to compromise by understanding the different aspects of the sex industry, saying that they are both right to

some degree because while women may choose to participate, affirming their agency, they may still have negative experiences and be objectified by their customers (164). While Alexandra G. Murphy asserts that dancers have a complex relationship to power which does not follow the limited binary of object/subject in “The Dialectical Gaze: Exploring the Subject-Object Tension in the Performances of Women who Strip” she takes it a step further to say that sexuality is always a factor in women’s work, so sex work should not be considered a deviant profession. Her main argument, is that “expressions of power through performance complicate the subject-object tension; it is a dialectic rather than a dichotomy” (Murphy 308). These scholars agree that exotic dancers should be thought of as subjects and objects in their work with customers, but have different ways of thinking through it.

Egan attempts to unpack the relationships between exotic dancers and regulars by looking through a Foucauldian lens to explain the dancers’ fluid subjectivities, and a Lacanian lens to explain the relationship that dancers have to desire and the imaginary. The way that she thinks about power, location, and context in the strip club influences and undergirds my research. While Barton does not discuss the relationships with regulars as much as Egan, they agree that dancers have to be seen as both objects and subjects because of their position as the watchers and the watched. Murphy asserts that dancers’ navigate between object and subject as they perform different roles of femininity in the club and outside of it, where dancers “devise creative discursive tactics that simultaneously enable their own active subjectivity yet allow them to appear in the proper form, that of the passively observed” (314). All three scholars stress the

purposefulness and awareness behind the dancers' choices, deflecting the stereotype that sex workers are ignorant victims, which takes away their agency and subjectivity. Even if they change their behavior to meet the needs of customers and managers, "participating in self-regulation...does not completely strip dancers of their subjectivity or agency" (Murphy 321). My interviews aim to keep the dancers' subjectivities and agency a priority, while I contextualize the locations to acknowledge the way that dancer's bodies can be perceived by the audience in different ways. Based upon the ideas set up by current scholars that there is a "dialectic" between subject and object, any attempt at understanding the experiences of exotic dancers must be grounded in a recognition of their agency and subjectivity within oppressive structures (Murphy 308).

Benefits/Tolls and Stigma

After agreeing on the complicated position of subject/object that dancers occupy and embody, scholars move in different directions. Murphy asserts that women's sexualities are self- or outwardly-regulated based on notions of proper femininity every day, so this work is not different, just more exaggerated because of the type of labor. My argument comes from a similar viewpoint that women are taught and encouraged to be "sexy" in all of society, so the strip club is not an isolated location of exotic dance, but one of the more obvious locations that determines/(re)inscribes a certain type of female sexuality. Not only is women's sexuality controlled throughout society in different ways, but the images of the strip club have disseminated to mainstream media so that the regulations inside and outside the club are commingle and influence each other. Egan, as an exotic dancer herself, acknowledges the stigmas surrounding the profession and the

difficulties in navigating relationships outside the workplace because of the secrets that dancers' have to keep and the stress of that burden. The dancers face different types of stigma in the three contexts, but there is an overarching stigma attached to movement that expresses women's sexuality that influences the dancer's experiences and the movement's transgressive possibilities.

Contrasting Murphy's argument, Barton's asserts that while many dancers find positive aspects in their jobs such as flexible hours, high wages, and autonomy, they reach a point when it starts to negatively affect their mental health, self-esteem, and body image. Through interviews, Barton found that "early-career dancers" had mostly positive experiences of dancing, while "those feelings of empowerment and excitement changed, unfortunately, in relation to the length of time they danced and to the greater number of negative events they experienced while working" (52). This argument seems to over-generalize the experiences of dancers to fit into a stereotypical model of the empowered, yet wounded dancer. While Egan also discusses the negative aspects, she insists that there are bad and good days, although people outside the profession tend to focus on the bad. Barton elaborates on her argument in her article "Managing the Toll of Stripping: Boundary Setting among Exotic Dancers," which draws upon her research for the book by going into the specific ways that dancers separate their identities from their dance personas and distance themselves from customers and other dancers to protect themselves. Although Barton does not agree with anti-sex feminists about abolishing sex work, she does hope to decrease women's involvement in sex work by instituting better economic conditions for women. While it is important to acknowledge the systems of

power and oppression that influence women's occupational choices, these factors can also contribute to sex work being lucrative and feasible for many women. There are other reasons that women want to be exotic dancers that are not recognized in that rhetoric, such as the experiences of sexual expression, body positivity, and confidence, which is the focus of my research.

The other contexts—pole dance fitness and a college dance concert—are examples of the way that exotic dance is deeply related to all women's lives through our culture and of the gendered, sexualized performances that women do on a daily basis. Through this view, I question the stigmas they face and the benefits/tolls of dancing for women in each context. In the site of the strip club, the societal expectations for women to conform to the beauty ideal are maximized and utilized for profit, so it provides an example of the struggle between fitting into the standards and healthy identity formation that all women face in society.

Setting/Location

The location and atmosphere of the club, another focus of the current literature, is a key aspect of the dancers' experiences and my comparative analyses of the contexts. Scholars acknowledge the importance of contextualizing the setting of their research and note that many factors change in each club, region, and state that influence the dancers' and customers' experiences. Especially relevant to my thesis is Egan's discussion of the cartographies of strip clubs—the way that space is used differently to regulate the dancers, influence the customers, and resist the management. Egan maps the architecture of the strip club through the layout, surveillance, and procedures, and the body

technologies adopted by the dancers, which contextualizes the specificities of the strip club location.

Similarly, in the introduction of R. Danielle Egan, Katherine Frank, and Merri Lisa Johnson's collection of essays on exotic dance, *Flesh for Fantasy*, they outline the different characteristics of strip clubs as sites of capitalist exchange and intense legal scrutiny. While the specific movements, nudity, and proximity of the dancers might be determined by the dancers, customers, and managers, "changes in the services offered inside the clubs also shift with social and economic changes, technological innovations, and the legal climate" (Egan, Frank, Johnson xxi). Even with the variety of these environments, Barton insists that all strip clubs are inherently volatile and harmful for women, basing this on time rather than space. She has a more conservative view of strip clubs in the recent feminist literature, which generally "acknowledge[s] the paradoxes of simultaneously being subject to and subversive toward existing systems of power" (Egan et al. xv). Barton seems to be essentializing dancer's experiences without recognizing the specificities of clubs and her perceptions as a researcher. I aim to acknowledge the many differences between clubs, the uniqueness of each dancer's experience, and my positionality in contextualizing the strip club setting, yet I focus on differentiating between the contexts more than within the clubs.

Bodies/Identity

Even within existing discussions of embodiment, subjectivity, and identity in exotic dance, there needs to be more of a focus on dancers' actual bodies and experiences while dancing. I aim to address these ideas throughout, especially by using feminist

dance theory in the final chapter, and encourage further interdisciplinary focus on this area. One author, Jennifer K. Wesley, discusses the body as a site of identity formation through body technologies in “Exotic Dancing and the Negotiation of Identity: The Multiple Uses of Body Technologies.” She attempts to complicate ideas of exotic dancers’ identity formation through body technologies—changes that women make to their bodies and appearances. Wesley notes the wide array of reasons that dancers use body technologies and asserts that “women are not passive recipients of or are limited to one-dimensional identity meanings, but instead engage body technologies for multiple reasons” and that “women’s active choices about their bodies and identities might be constrained by the contexts in which they participate” (Wesely 647). Looking at exotic dance from this perspective provides insight into the ways that dancers embody their work and how it informs their identities, yet recognizes the control and awareness that they have throughout this process. Dancers are active subjects in control of their bodies, yet alter their bodies for reasons that may include the objectification of certain body parts. Since Murphy made comparisons between the pressures on female dancers and non-dancers in society, she would likely agree that women in every career express different femininities through their bodies. The dancers in all three contexts may employ similar body technologies, but most likely on different scales based on the expectations and demands of each location.

Relationships

Exotic dancers’ experiences are influenced by their interactions with other dancers, customers, managers, outside family and friends, and society. Scholars have

written largely about dancers and their regulars (men who frequent a strip club to see the same dancer and may believe they are in a relationship), their relationships with men and women outside the club, and friendships with fellow dancers. For Barton, “the battlefield of the sex industry encourages women to develop female solidarity and critique social inequality” (Barton 130). Because of the “volatile environment” of the strip club, Barton argues that “dancers develop close, supportive relationships” that are “crucial in managing the toll of stripping” (131, 132). The relationships between dancers in the fitness studio and dancers in the college dance concert are also supportive and encouraging, and do not have the pressure of competing for paid dances and regular customers.

In addition, the dancers’ relationship to customers requires a mixture of emotional and sexual labor in a fantasy of what Egan calls the “whorish wife” (36). Their work involves performances of counterfeit intimacy with the regulars that can make working in a club social and enjoyable, but also lead to stress because of the customers’ attachment to the dancers. Additionally, Murphy argues that the performances of dancers’ daily lives—the secrets they must keep from family, friends, and partners—can be more difficult than the relationships inside the club. For many of the dancers, much of the negative aspects of their job come from the stigma attached to the profession and the feelings of guilt and shame that they have from direct or perceived judgement. I discuss the similar experiences that dancers in the college dance concert felt in my final chapter.

Problematizing the Binary

Thus far, most scholarship talks about the dancers enjoying their work (at least at some point), and the shifting power dynamics that allow the dancers to be both objects of the male gaze and subjects who control their relationships with the men and resist traditional gender roles and oppressive power structures. Unlike older feminist sex debates, the current literature complicates the binaries of empowerment/objectification and agency/victimization as constant interactions and compromises to form a more nuanced view of exotic dance and sex work. Egan is one of many scholars on exotic dancing who argues that while the club is a space based on male privilege, dancing can be liberating, lucrative, confidence and self-esteem building, and fun, and it can also be objectifying, upsetting, emotionally draining, and frustrating. Most importantly, exotic dance “is neither inherently feminist nor inherently oppressive. Rather, it is carried out under certain political, economic, and ideological conditions that must be explored, challenged, and revisioned” (Egan et al xv). Current scholars seem to agree that the older debates essentialize and limit the complex lives of actual dancers. As Egan says of her experience, “between the binaries offered by radical feminist friends and libertarian colleagues, were the experiences of exotic dancers” (76). The older debates between pro-sex liberation feminists and radical feminists are talked about by recent scholars as being too simplistic, forcing the dancer to choose either the role of the victim or the liberated woman when in reality the experiences are some mixture of both.

In addition, the literature stresses the dancers’ consciousness and awareness of the environment in which they are working and the gendered, raced, and classed structures at

play in their work. The dancers are no longer seen as acting under false consciousness or being unaware of their positions—as either ignorantly complicit in their oppression or blissfully overlooking the power dynamics at play. While most scholarship discusses the past views of exotic dancers and old debates between feminists, the discourse has shifted into talking about the nuanced ways in which dancers negotiate their identities, relationships, labor, and sexualities as sex workers within oppressive structures. My thesis comes into this discourse at a time when it is accepted in academia that exotic dancers have complex relationships to movement, their bodies and identities, and their audience, which I aim to build upon.

Exotic Dance Research

Due to the popularity of writing about sex work and exotic dance in particular, there have been many essays written about doing the research. They discuss feminist reflexivity and methods of researching sex work with depth and focus, providing supplements to the methods sections in each article or book. I briefly include some of these articles here because they offer insight into the research that has been done and new avenues to be explored.

Diving into the problems with studying sex work, Teela Sanders’ “Sexing Up the Subject: Methodological Nuances in Researching the Female Sex Industry,” stresses the importance of reflexivity in researching sex work. She argues for “small scale, ethnographic research, especially collaborative in nature, into the sex industry that is concentrated both in time and space” (Sanders 464). While there has been scholarship on the sex industry for decades, this form of research—reflexive, personal, collaborative,

and specific—is especially useful in learning more about the individual experiences of sex workers and about the intricacies of the field. Sanders furthers the argument in recent literature of the importance of acknowledging the complexities and the gray areas of sex work and offers a comprehensive description of how to discuss that while being reflexive. I aimed to use the principles of reflexivity and careful ethnographic research in Sanders’ article as a guide for my research.

Taking a different focus, Katherine Frank’s article “Thinking Critically about Strip Club Research” critiques the idea that exotic dance has not been researched enough and the lack of reflexive discussions of power, arguing that the idea and interest behind the research itself reflects the social atmosphere in which they work. The purpose of Frank’s article is “to analyze this concern with power and agency as an example of how researchers are also part of the cultural milieu they study, of how theoretical influences and political concerns intermingle with cultural beliefs and assumptions about sex work” (507). She suggests asking new questions in the field such as personal relationships, influences outside the club, restrictive legislation, community stigmatization of clubs, and clubs as a site of business transactions. Frank is calling on herself and fellow researchers, many of whom I have mentioned, to expand outside their current work which still mainly focuses on complicating the power and agency binary of empowerment/objectification. This thesis works to ask new questions by comparing the movement experiences of exotic dancing in a strip club, a fitness studio, and a college dance concert and analyzing the dancers’ relationship to the erotic within each. I aim to take a new approach that builds upon on the current arguments, but asks different

questions and compares the strip club to other contexts where the movement is performed in order to further understand exotic dance's relationship to broader culture.

Inside Pole Dance Fitness Classes

Pole dance fitness is a new phenomenon that is being debated in popular news sources and advertised in media, creating a flurry of discourse without much scholarship. In fact, of the few articles and Masters' theses written about it, many of them focus on people's perception of pole fitness or the ways in which it is advertised to women, such as in "Spinning the pole: A discursive analysis of the websites of recreational pole dancing studios" by Ngaire Donaghue, Tim Kurz, and Kally Whitehead, and *Reading Pole-Fitness in Canadian Media: Women and Exercise in an Era of Raunch* by Nicola Kim Potopsingh. The connections between pole fitness and exotic dance have been lightly discussed focusing on notions of gender and sexuality at play in both and the difference in motivations and purpose of exotic dancers and pole fitness participants. However, the ways in which dancers experience the movement in this context compared to strip clubs (or a college dance show) has not been looked at in depth. While there is some writing on women's participation and experiences doing pole fitness classes, there is room for much more in the field on every subtopic. Here I give a brief review of the work that has been done on the topic and the ways in which this thesis might add to the body of work. The main concern in the small amount of scholarship on pole dance fitness still surrounds the question of whether pole fitness classes are objectifying or empowering, its negative connections to stripping, the women's reasons for taking classes, and relationships within the generally all-female class environment.

Situated within anti- versus pro-sex feminist debates and feminine expression within sports, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment* by Samantha Holland sets out to deconstruct the social and political implications and motivations behind pole dance classes. She argues that pole dance can be a way for women to transgress prescribed feminine roles, find personal satisfaction and empowerment, build self-esteem and form friendships with other women in a comfortable community environment, yet pole still remains in the “hegemonic discourses about the gendered body and women’s experiences of physicality” (Holland, 38). Holland’s argument goes along well with my analysis in chapter three and influenced the way I think about pole fitness. Holland argues that, “despite these lingering attitudes, pole classes do offer alternatives, a way to embody alternative ideologies such as strength and coordination, and sexuality, and this remains an important possibility, one that has its limitations, but one which offers to women the pleasures of resistance” (38). Holland provides a look at pole dance fitness that acknowledges some of the complexities and aligns more closely with the writing on exotic dance, unlike other scholars, whose arguments rely heavily on the simple binary.

While citing both positive effects and the re-inscription of gender norms, Meghan Hamilton creates a division between the empowering aspects and the objectification that she sees as inevitable in *The Poles Are In: Exploring Women’s Sexual Identities and the Rising Popularity of Pole-Dancing Fitness*. Hamilton asserts that pole dance “can be viewed as empowering or objectifying depending on an individual's perspective” and that she aims to determine “which position holds more merit when describing pole-dancing fitness from the participants' perspective and, ultimately, which position offers a more

accurate portrayal of how the sexualization of western culture impacts women's identity” (Hamilton 7). Her study relies on a binary where one option must be “true,” even if it is dependent on personal preference, instead of accepting the more complex and nuanced space in between. Similarly, one of the few articles about pole fitness classes, “‘Empowerment’ and the Pole: A Discursive Investigation of the Reinvention of Pole Dancing as a Recreational Activity” by Kally Whitehead and Tim Kurz attempts to gather popular opinions about pole and how it is situated within larger debates of traditional gender roles and heteropatriarchal social structures. The assumptions that the informants and researchers have of stripping are mainly based on simple ideas of objectification and disempowerment instead of the nuanced arguments of scholarship on exotic dance in strip clubs previously mentioned. The literature has not quite begun to complexly understand women’s positions; it is as if the scholarship has gone backwards to a simplified binary, ignoring the recent scholarship on professional exotic dance that has worked to problematize those reductive views.

Some scholars, class participants, and mainstream media use different tactics and rhetoric to separate pole dance fitness from professional exotic dance in order to make it a non-deviant and therefore non-stigmatized practice. The aim is different in fitness classes than in professional exotic dancing, which is performed for a mainly male audience and motivated by monetary compensation, “often making their work exploitive and objectifying” according to Hamilton (5). The distancing occurs in many different ways, exemplified by Holland: using the terms “pole” and “polers,” focusing on the physical aspects of pole and its ties to sports and other exercise methods, and

understanding that “pole classes are...run by women for women...with a stated aim to ‘empower women with confidence’” (99). Similarly, Kurz and Whitehead’s study sets up a dichotomy between dancing in a strip club and pole dancing for exercise that is supported by the results of their research. They argue that the strip club is pornographic, whereas recreational pole dance is not, and that the purpose of stripping is for male sexual arousal whereas the purposes for pole fitness classes are exercise, personal enjoyment, and empowerment.

Some participants distance pole fitness from professional exotic dance as a way to reclaim it through rebranding it as art. This is problematic because it defines recreational pole as art and exotic dance as non-artistic, discrediting the similarity in movement experiences and performance aspects, as Hamilton does. She says that “pole-dancing fitness is not performance based,” and that “pole-dancing studios and classes are not meant to be training facilities for women to work as exotic dancers” in an attempt to completely disconnect the origins of the movement from its recreational practice (Hamilton 3,4). Hamilton also excludes the history of pole dance fitness coming out of exotic dance in her study because they “are located within completely different contexts,” which goes against the premise of this thesis and serves to erase the deeper meanings of the movement that come from its history (5). This separation is tenuous at best because of the cultural connotations inscribed in the movement and the fact that the movement is taken directly from the strip club setting, not to mention professional exotic dancers also teach and take classes in studios. Clearly, the separation has to be made by participants and some scholars because of the stigma attached to the profession and the widespread

belief that exotic dance is objectifying, victimizing, and harmful to women. Even the scholarship that is closely tied to exotic dance does not have the understanding of exotic dance as occupying a complicated place somewhere between the binary of objectification/empowerment.

While the argument and premise behind my research aligns with scholarship on exotic dance rather than with the limited resources on pole dance fitness, one aspect of Kurz and Whitehead's influences this thesis. They make a distinction between the "individual activity, [which] can be constructed as empowering through the extent to which it affords women the opportunity to exercise a form of 'choice' and 'control'" and "provide a vehicle for women to resist hegemonic notions of femininity as passive and modest," and the fact that it "may reinforce societal notions of both masculine and feminine sexuality as a result of encouraging women to construct themselves as erotic objects" (Kurz and Whitehead 241). More simply, they assert that the practice of the activity may be different on a societal level than it is on an individual level. They found that "participants...attempted...to construct the act of pole dancing itself as essentially politically neutral, with the ideological palatability of pole dancing as being determined by the context in which the activity was performed." (Kurz and Whitehead 240). The idea that it can be politically neutral and entirely based on context conflicts with my argument that the experience of the dancer may be contextually based, but the audience has preconceived notions of the movement's meaning. However, their participants were not women who take the classes, but outsiders talking about how they view the classes, so the "audience"/public may in fact be seeing it differently than the participants. The literature

on pole dance fitness is brand new and therefore has much more complexity to contend with and many more studies to undertake and interventions to make; I hope this thesis works towards those goals.

Conclusion

The literature review is meant to outline the scholarship in the fields of professional exotic dance and pole dance fitness and show how my argument and research fits into it. While the discussions focus mostly on balances of power, choice, and control through the binaries of empowerment/objectification and subject/object, my thesis is grounded in these ideas and attempts to take them in a new direction. I focus on dancers' experiences in each of the three contexts and whether it promotes the dancers' use of the erotic, as well as the possibility for transgression against norms and systems of oppression. Scholars have paved the way for further interventions into the field of exotic dance, which has permeated our culture in ways that make it impossible to think of it as an isolated experience and force us to look at the connections it has with all female expressions of sexuality.

“It’s not how you look, it’s how you feel”: Persona, Identity, and Satisfaction in the Strip Club

Getting In

Before this project, I had never been to a strip club. I was nervous about going into the club and as a result, scheduled it as my last research site. When I began trying to gain access to a club, I quickly discovered that it would be even more difficult than I thought to get a chance to talk to any of the dancers. I went to the closest club first, where I was turned away immediately and told to go to a chain club because they were more corporate and would be more likely to allow a study there. As I went to the first club with a female friend, we could not even enter, because you had to have at least one male in your party to get in. After that discouraging experience, I called many clubs in nearby cities in the greater Los Angeles area. They had mixed responses, with some saying no, telling me to call back to talk to specific managers, saying to come in person during certain hours, and simply not answering. As I mentioned earlier, my boyfriend offered to come with me so that I would have a man with me in case the clubs had similar rules as the first one, for safety, and for transportation since I do not have a car. While I did not want to feel dependent on having a man with me, it did allow me to be let into the club without certain suspicion (single women are often suspected of being sex workers) and to feel safer knowing I had someone with me. I asked him to wait in the car while I conducted an interview, so that it was private and confidential.

When I went to the clubs, I had to go at odd times when they were not busy, so that I was not interfering with business. It was difficult for me to even get to talk to the

head manager. For example, I would call ahead and ask to talk to a manager and the staff person would say to come in at a certain time, at which point I would be told he was in a meeting; or I would go in and the door staff would tell me to call at a certain time, but when I would call, the manager was not there. The miscommunication made it difficult, if not impossible, for me to even have the chance to talk to a manager about being approved to come into the club, much less to talk to the dancers themselves and I would not be able to talk to the dancers without getting approval from the club. Because of my lack of transportation, I was already limited in the times I could go to the clubs. When I did talk to managers, many refused right away, saying things like “we don’t do that here” or “this is a business” or “I know what you’re doing and I’m not interested”. I had to try to convince them that I was not looking to write something that criticized their clubs, evaluated the psychology of the dancers, or exploited them in any way. I said that I was a dancer researching how the dancers felt while dancing, and chose to leave out my Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies lens, as I sensed that would make them immediately reluctant to let me in. Some of them let me leave the study information sheet there or come into the club just to watch the dancing, but would not let me interview any dancers.

The managers and doormen, unlike at the first club, were all friendly and professional, and offered us free drinks, and sometimes free cover charges. One club’s head manager was a woman, but the managers were predominately white men. They had a protective attitude towards the dancers and were immediately defensive of them and their business, blurring the lines between protecting their employees and protecting their

monetary resources. While they were polite to me, they were assertive about their control over the dancers, club, and atmosphere, and were reluctant to allow a stranger in for purposes other than watching. The bouncers, security, DJs, and support staff were all men, many of them men of color. They were very friendly to me, holding doors open, listening to my project description, talking to managers for me, and greeting me familiarly at the club I had been to multiple times. Many acted as though they were hopeful that the manager would let me in to do my interviews and apologized if I was not allowed. The clubs in the LA area do not serve alcohol, because it is illegal (as well as touching) to offer with fully nude dancers, and rowdy drunk men are thrown out of the clubs. In general, the atmosphere made me feel less unsafe and uncomfortable than I thought it would, although I was not expecting to have so much trouble getting permission to talk to the dancers. I had been worried about gaining the dancers' trust enough to talk to me, not about the club managers not letting me in.

Finally, one club let me inside and agreed to let me talk to the dancers. However, the manager was skeptical that I would get any valuable information from certain dancers, and told me to come back at certain times when their were "girls" there that would give me "good" answers. He seemed to doubt the intelligence of many of the dancers (all of whom were referred to and referred to themselves as "girls") and wanted me to be able to talk to the smartest and most experienced dancers. I agreed to come back whenever he said I could. I interviewed one dancer there, but the manager would not leave us alone to talk. He said he had to be present during the interview and only left shortly for a few times. During the interview, he interjected and answered my questions

for the dancer many times, and critiqued what I was asking, saying I was not going to get anything for my paper with those questions. In addition, he kept saying I could not understand anything about the club without dancing and encouraged me repeatedly to try dancing somewhere. At times his tone was condescending and controlling, at others he was friendly and respectful. There was a sense of power and control over all the women in the club that spread to me as well, because I am a young woman who could easily be a dancer. It was clear in his criticism of my questions and interjections during the interview that he thought he had a better idea of what to ask and answer than either of us did. Since it was not the type of setting to go into detail about the arguments that I was making or the research I had done on the topic already, I just listened to his suggestions and said that I would think about auditioning to dance somewhere, although I had a knee injury that prevented me from dancing at the moment.

When I came back for another interview at the time he told me to come, I was just beginning to ask the dancer questions when the Vice President of the company came in unexpectedly and the manager rushed me out, saying he didn't know that he was coming and that he was sorry but he had not told him about this and did not know how he would react. He apologized for making me drive all the way out and then leave right away, and told me to call him next week. When I called, I got the same run-around that I had in my initial experiences contacting clubs, saying he was in a meeting, I should call back, etc. I was not able to return to the club because of transportation, time, and the approaching deadline. While I was happy to be let into the club, the manager selected the women I

interviewed; monitored, interjected, and critiqued the questions during our interviews; and would only let me come in at certain times, which were not very reliable.

The experience of not being able to talk to the dancers without becoming a dancer highlighted the privacy and exclusivity of the context. The club is meant for dancers, managers, and customers who can afford it, and kept away from public scrutiny and access. I would have been granted access much quicker as a dancer than as a researcher, because as a young white woman, I was not seen as reputable and serious enough of an academic, yet I was still seen as a threatening outsider. I straddled the line between vulnerable/naïve and threatening/suspicious and between scholar (read as male) and dancer (read as female). While I was not offended by the suggestions to try dancing, I wondered what his response would be to a male researcher; would it be to try being a bouncer, customer, or manager? Would they be less able to access the club because they would be thought of as trying to exploit the dancers or would they be taken more seriously? How did the fact that I came with a man change their opinion of me, did it reaffirm my qualifications or show a lack of independence and control? Since the hierarchy of the club gave the male managers power over dancers, did it reaffirm those structures to come with a man and not alone?

On the dancers' side, I felt that they were skeptical of me as a researcher, and assumed that I had a negative view of them and their job that was based on stereotypical views of stripping. In the clubs, the dancers mostly ignored me or smiled back at me, and I wondered if they were confused as to why I was there since I was not dressed in party clothes as an audience member might be. Women are not the normal patrons of strip

clubs, (although one of the clubs I called offered a discounted Ladies' Night), and based on my research, popular articles, interviews, experience with the college dance concert, and casual conversations with people about my thesis, women tend to be disapproving of strip clubs and to dislike or pity strippers. If I had been a dancer, I could have gained their trust and respect, but as a woman coming in from academia, they were understandably suspicious of me, my assumptions, and my intentions.

My other interview with a professional exotic dancer came from Flirty Girl Fitness, and happened by chance. I was asking women in the dressing room to interview with me, and she accepted. At first, she was confused and thought I was doing a survey of the business, getting feedback from participants. I explained that I was not and asked her if she was still willing to do it, and she agreed and told me that she was a professional dancer and that no one in the studio knew except one of the instructors. She talked about her experiences dancing in both the club and the studio, providing an interesting comparison of the two contexts from someone who is familiar with both. She was less defensive and guarded in the interview than the other dancers, probably because of the location and context, although she did seem to want to keep her job as a dancer relatively private in the studio setting.

The other interviews I use in this chapter come from ethnographies that scholars have conducted in the field. They come from various locations around the country and different years, although all are fairly recent. With this variation in location, it is important to note that the contexts and situations in each club differ widely, but due to the lack of ethnographic data that I could collect, I use these as some indication of dancers'

experiences. This is not to say that all dancers have the same experiences or that all clubs are the same, only that they serve the purpose of comparing the contexts of a strip club to the other two contexts, as the clubs are more alike than the other two in how they operate and outside attitudes towards them. Since I was not asking the questions in these cases, I picked out quotes that related the most to the themes that I touched on in my interviews.

Body Image

During an interview in a club, I asked Lacy how she felt about her body and she responded, “Any girl that doesn’t feel comfortable, she doesn’t do this...Well, I think my body’s awesome, that’s why I work here, every girl here is confident about their bodies.” Her answer and tone revealed what should have been obvious to me: clearly, women who dance need a certain amount of positivity about their bodies to be able to feel comfortable exposing it to strangers. Lacy later clarified that “women might not be in the best shape, but it’s the attitude. It’s not how you look, it’s how you feel, not what she’s wearing.” This confirmed that dancers needed to be confident with their bodies more so than having the “perfect” body. When I went to the clubs, I was surprised at the many different body types represented; they were very diverse and reflected Lacy’s valuing of attitude over appearance.

Dancers may need to have a certain amount of confidence about their bodies, but they still have doubts sometimes, as most women do. As Lacy put it, “everybody has their insecurities, cause you’re so exposed—you find out what they are and what they’re not. In a year, they’ve got it, but each girl is different.” However, body image can become especially low on “bad nights” when they are not making a lot of money:

“If you’re working and you’ve put a costume on, you can feel good about yourself, and you go out and sit for a few hours and you’re not getting any dances. Then you go back in the change room and you put another costume on. And the longer you don’t make money, the more times you change [laughter]. And the more makeup, you keep fussing with yourself.... So then you’re not smiling anymore. And then you look bitchy so you’re not, so even more you’re not going to make money. And it’s just like a snowball effect. It just gets worse and worse. And you get feeling like you’re fat, you start feeling like you are ugly.” - Rachel (Bruckert 78).

“It’s so odd because I was really traumatized by it initially...I felt really bad about myself...I cried every night on the way home and I didn’t make any money and it wasn’t...I felt like it was just horrible like...it was just this bad thing and it made me bad or something...When you are making good money you feel good and generally have a good time.” - Marie (Egan 82)

“I just can’t explain it to other people...they can’t understand that some nights suck and I hate it and feel horrible...I mean really horrible...like there was this one night where I made no money...I was on stage and some guy told me I need to lose weight and that I was ugly...and I felt horrible...it just got to me...I felt like...maybe a whore, but not in a good way...not like when we usually talk about it...I just felt bad. So I went to my Mom’s and woke her up and cried. She hugged me and made me feel better...Well then she was like ‘Quit! This job is bad for you.’ and I tried to tell her that most of the time I really like my job and most of the men aren’t assholes.” - Serenity (Egan 83, 84)

Body image becomes tied to monetary gain in some instances, and in others, it is affected by rude customers that directly attack their appearance. The context of the strip club heightens the pressure that women are under everyday to look attractive and fit into the beauty ideal, because they are making money off of it. This is not to say that other contexts do not put just as much, or more, pressure on women to look a certain way. The effects of dancing on body image depend on the night, customers, money earned, and their confidence when they arrive at work, yet they are a self-selected group of women who already have a positive body image. Although it is operating under normative standards of beauty, the women are still able to feel good about their bodies in this type of dance, which may help them access erotic.

Confidence

Similarly to body image, it is necessary for dancers to be confident in order to do the job. According to Lacy, dancers are “usually aggressive, a-type personality, go-getter, you’re in control, in charge, know yourself” who have “always been confident about your body” and just have “normal insecurities of women”. To be able to dance nude, “it takes a certain type of confidence; this type of environment is no place for a girl who isn’t confident” (Lacy). Other dancers felt the same way:

“I’m always confident, cause I mean I can’t get money if I’m not (laughs). I have to at least look that way. I always do...they can always tell if you look like you don’t know. So even if I don’t think I can do it I still have to pretend like I’m not nervous.” - Denise (Flirty Girl)

“That shit has to come across...you have to be confident and be the slut...it feels weird saying it...but it’s true. If you’re shy or hesitant or worried or pissed off or desperate for money, man....men pick that up.” - Serenity (Egan 42)

Denise points out the separation between true feelings and her persona as a dancer; dancers must always look confident to make money, but that doesn’t necessarily mean they are always confident on the inside. Especially since their income depends on this performance, the way they are feeling when they go into the club turns into a cyclical confidence builder or breaker. Also, due to the separation of their dance persona from their identity for many dancers, confidence may or may not spread to other areas of their lives:

“I had to learn to integrate the good qualities of Ariel [her dancer persona] into my life, the good things about her—having self esteem, feeling good about myself, feeling intelligent, smart, beautiful.” - April (Barton 87)

While the need to be confident to dance naked is a pre-determining factor for these women, many dancers in ethnographies talked about gaining more confidence through dancing:

“Ya, it’s given me self confidence. It’s taught me a lot...Because things happen and if I feel uncomfortable with it—I stop it. Whereas before I would have done it ‘cause that’s what I was expected to do. So I’m more confident...It’s what I say that goes. I am the boss. It’s up to me. Before, I was very naïve, I was a very very naïve girl, very gullible. Now I’m cold-hearted, a lot stronger emotionally, physically, mentally.” - Debbie (Bruckert 82)

“Dancing too is my way of...being brave. I’m not afraid of saying to a customer or anybody, ‘You fuckin’ assholes made me this way...like look at me but you can’t fuckin’ have me.’ Fuckin’ right!” - Sally (Bruckert 121)

“Dancing has given me wisdom. It’s given me strength. It’s shown me the tough times and the good times. It’s helped me a lot. It’s helped me grow up.” - Sally (Bruckert 158)

“It’s confidence and that’s what dancing has given me. Before I always thought I was ugly and I was always feeling bad about myself, I was hesitant and felt bad. Well, no more! I walk into a club and I know I look good. I don’t feel bad about being a dancer anymore. There is nothing wrong with it.” - Trena (Egan 62)

“I really get off on it...It’s so weird...I love the clothes oh my god! I mean I’ve always been like a total...girly girl...I like makeup. I like doing my hair. I like dressing up...I’ve always loved high heels...I love the clothes I wear! They are so awesome they are gorgeous...glittery and bucklely, tight and sexy and damn I look good! I just love it [laughing]!...To be the belle of the ball it’s so different for me. Like I spent my whole life wanting people to like me and chasing after men who didn’t want me...and now everyone wants me...you know it may be Turd Mountain, but I am Queen Shit.” - Marie (Egan 87, 88)

Dancing puts the women in a situation where they gain confidence from the skills they learn and the work they do, the attention they get from customers, and the movement itself. For Marie, the sheer enjoyment of the costumes and the attention that she gets gives her confidence that she never had before. Although she characterizes the strip club as “Turd Mountain,” she is still “Queen Shit” and the “belle of the ball”. The women learn to take charge of their situation and control the customers, giving them confidence

because they feel they have the power in the situation. This is different than interpretations of the strip club from mainstream culture, certain feminists, and many of the dancers in the other two contexts. The fact that sexuality is recognized as labor and paid for makes people assume the customers have all the power, yet as in any financial transaction, there is a balance between supply and demand.

However, within this financial exchange if they are not able to make money, that can take away some of their confidence. This makes some dancers' confidence dependent upon money, similar to body image:

“Well, my self esteem became tied to how much money I made. And my emotional state as well. So, on days where I wouldn't make money, I felt really bad about myself and I got depressed. On days I made a lot of money, I felt really powerful and on top of the world. That sucked. My worth was tied into being how sexually desirable I am. I find that reflected in my life and my personal relationships.” - Kelly (Barton 91)

“When you are just on...and nothing can mess with that...it's when I can go to work, forget about all of my school work and have fun (laughing). I never know...if a good night comes from making a lot of money or vice-versa...you know?...I don't know if I'm making cake because I am in a good mood and having fun or if it's the cake that makes me feel good.” - Hope (Egan 86)

“When I am having fun and making great money doing it...it's when you are in the zone.” - Serenity (Egan 86, 87)

The good nights, when they are “on” reinforces their confidence, which leads to more money, whereas on bad nights their lack of confidence leads to less money and less confidence. The relationship to monetary gain defines their change in confidence, a distinct feature that makes this context differ from the other two, where money is not involved. This makes its relationship to the erotic complicated, but still possible. Through their work they are able to feel powerful, wise, in control, and satisfied, all of which are part of the erotic. It may not happen every night and it may depend on male attention and

payment, which reinforce standard ideas of beauty and sexiness, but when they are “on,” they can access the erotic and use that for power against those ideals and the structures that create them.

Sexiness, Sexuality, Sexual Expression

When I asked the women I interview about their definition of sexy and how it has changed from dancing, they agreed that exotic dance is not about feeling sexy for them. For Jacqueline, working in a sexual atmosphere made her desensitized to it, so that she was going through the motions for customers, not feeling it herself. For Lacy, the movement did not connect to her idea of sexy:

“I usually don’t [feel sexy]. I want to say maybe it’s probably because of my profession I just I don’t care anymore. But I just do whatever I think they want to see...whatever I think someone wants to see, whoever the customer is...I’ve lost interest in that. Okay well, I need to do this because that’s going to be what they want...yeah, I don’t care anymore.” - Jacqueline (Flirty Girl)

“Who cares? Outside of here, I have my hair up, no makeup...girls don’t work here to feel sexy [they work here for] college, kids, etc. [It’s] not tied to being sexy, those girls came into the club for the wrong reasons. Girls who think they need it to be sexy, they don’t last long because the patrons are looking for company, they’re not here for sexy girls. They’re here for something they don’t get at home.” - Lacy (Club)

Contrary to popular notions of the strip club, the movement of exotic dance itself is not sexual for many women. Often it does not match with the dancer’s definition of “sexy,” have anything to do with her real sexuality, or relate to sex in her mind.

“Being sexy is not sexual—[it can be your] voice or little looks that you give, all kind of ways that aren’t sexual.” - Lacy (Club)

“It’s just whatever I think they’re going to want to see that’s basically all it is to me now...[I]make it more artistic or make it more raunchy, it depends, it’s only that. That’s it.” - Jacqueline (Flirty Girl)

“They want to have you...you know...and it’s not always having something sexual.” - Marie (Egan 109)

“You manipulate your body in a certain way and you throw a sexual aspect to it,”
“I think about doing laundry or watch the TV.” - Debbie (Bruckert 71, 72)
“You don’t feel sexual. See, that’s the thing. Not one time that I ever danced did I
get even minutely turned on...I did not feel anything. You detached yourself from
it.” - April (Barton 103)

This is not true for everyone, but for many dancers in the strip club, since they separate themselves from their persona, the movement has nothing to do with their sexuality. They are performing sexuality to convince the customers and make money, not experiencing personal sexual expression through dancing. Others, however, feel that dancing gives them sexual pleasure and is not always separate from their sexuality:

“When it’s good and I’m having a good night. I just am. And also a lot of it’s about me. It’s not totally acting. I mean I don’t...I may when I’m in the backroom appear surprised when I’m performing pleasure you know when I’m pretending that I’m really getting off on it and there are times when I really am getting off on it.” - Marie (Egan 91)
“I didn’t used to like it [lap dancing] but then I learned to rub the right way giving me more pleasure and I started to also get high on watching the men. Man they are so vulnerable...it’s like, I am powerful...they are hit by the force and they are yours.” - Stacy (Egan 113)

Marie talks about “not totally acting,” indicating that there is a more complex relationship between the dancers’ persona and their true identities than simply being either “real” or “fake”. Some women are able to get pleasure from dancing as a part of their personal experience, even though they are performing desire and sexuality through their persona. Stacy talks about getting “high” from watching customers because they are “vulnerable,” which turns around the common conception that men are there to see vulnerable women, and shows the presence of the women’s desire and gaze as well.

Going further than sexual pleasure, some dancers feel that it has opened up their sexuality and allowed them to explore it more, since the club is already a sexually charged atmosphere:

“I’m experimenting right now. So it’s opened my mind to different things. I mean, I would never ever ever in a million years would I ever think about touching another woman, when I was growing up. Now there are certain women I would love to go to bed with. I would. You know it’s opened my mind to new...it’s expanded my way of thinking.” - Debbie (Bruckert 91)

“Dancing encourages exploration and coming into your sexuality. I think, on a whole, we’re all bisexual. It allows dancers to look a little more closely at that. I think a larger percentage are bisexual because they have had a chance to explore their sexuality more. They’ve had to deal with their sexuality more than a lot of other people do. It’s a natural thing; it’s a great thing.” - Jenna (Barton 121)

“To be a sex worker you have to be comfortable with your sexuality. And it’s a highly sexual environment, and you are surrounded by gorgeous women, I think sex workers definitely explore their sexuality.” - Kelly (Barton 121)

The context of the club, since it is already considered taboo/deviant by many outsiders, allows some women to explore their sexuality more fully through dancing. On the other side, there are women who feel that their work has bled into other parts of their lives, tying sexuality to labor over emotional relationships.

“It’s hard when you’re doing this type of work because it’s sexualized and you’re using your body in that capacity. For some people, they take their work home in that respect, and you’re used to doing this performance for men...and because you’re using your physical body, you just don’t feel like being touched.” - Joscelyn (Barton 104)

“I am scared that I won’t be able to have sex without thinking of it as a performance. Sometimes when he and I are together I start cocking my head and reassuring him and I get this plastic smile on my face and then I get freaked out. I am treating him like a customer! Or maybe I am treating my customers too much like lovers! What part of my sexuality is left?” - Danielle (Egan 61)

“I am like worried that now I will never be able to think of a relationship outside of exchange. You know what I mean? It’s like before I used to think I could be with someone and it was mutual. And now I swear to god what I think is when am I going to get out of this, because I am not going to give it out for free.” - Marie (Egan 61).

In addition, many lesbians in Barton's ethnography talked about it being easier for them because they did not think of the customers as possible sexual partners. While it is different for every dancer, tying sexuality to labor and the work environment in some cases takes away the pleasure in sexual relationships with people outside of the club.

As with other forms of sex work, exotic dancing can be more about emotional support than about sexual services. Within the realm of intimate labor, it demands both emotional and physical intimacy, but it is mostly one sided, with the dancers getting monetary support, not emotional or physical support.

“So much about this that's not sexual that they're not getting at home... They talk about their wives and how beautiful they are, it's not about the dancing, they need someone to listen, to help...Lots of listening and relationships—we're therapists all day long.” - Lacy (Club)

“I should probably have my Ph.D. In psychology by now for all the problems I've listened to and all the advice I've given.” - Rachel (Bruckert 88)

“Men are such takers of sexual energy. When I'm there, I expect that; that's what the job is about. I'm giving a side of my sexuality to these men...sometimes it's sexual, sometimes it's more motherly, but I always feel like I'm giving, giving, giving. I'm receiving money for it, but I wonder if it's worth the trade-off. I think I'm worth more than what I make there.” - Beatrice (Barton 104)

The dancers are not in an equal relationship in terms of the exchange of intimacy, because they must maintain their personal distance from customers, especially regulars who are “in love” with them. The men may not realize that the women do not feel the same connection that they do, because it is their job to convince them that they are special and feel loved in order to get paid. Through this emotional labor, the women may hide their true feelings or produce feelings for the benefit of their clients, which distances themselves from their dancer self. Still, there is a complex relationship between the dancers' “real” and “fake” feelings that is not as clear-cut as it may seem.

Conclusion

Although the strip club would conceivably be included in “the pornographic,” which “emphasizes sensation without feeling,” many dancers use exotic dance “as a source of power and information,” which is in line with Lorde’s erotic. While the dancers use the movement at times to gain confidence, body image, and explore sexuality, they may not connect the work they do with their “strongest feelings” and “sense of self” (Lorde 54). When dancers divide themselves from their personas and therefore separate themselves from their feelings, they are not utilizing the erotic’s main focus to “feel in the doing” (Lorde 54). Yet, these women are not totally disconnected from their personas and have complex relationships with their dancer selves that involve negotiating their feelings within their performance. Many of the dancers feel deeply while dancing and are more open to expressing their sexuality, more confident in themselves, or more in touch with their bodies because of it. Another aspect of the erotic is the “capacity for feeling” and “the knowledge that such satisfaction is possible” (Lorde 57). There are many times when dancers find a deep satisfaction in their work, just as there are times when they do not feel satisfied with their work, or times when it is just a job for them.

This context differs from the others in that this is labor, not recreation, which changes their focus during the dancing; however, that does not mean that they are devoid of feeling and unable to access the erotic. Similar to the other contexts, women do not necessarily connect this style of dance to deep feeling or sexual expression, while others do. When dancers shut down their feelings to protect themselves, the dancing is not helping them access the erotic, but there is a balance of themselves and their personas for

many that still allow them to feel fully while dancing. Importantly, many of them feel joy and satisfaction while dancing that keeps them in the profession, which aligns well with Lorde's assertion that the erotic not be "relegated to the bedroom alone" (57). While women "are taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of our lives other than sex," exotic dancers, when they use their dancing to access the erotic through deep feeling and self-expression, are bringing the erotic into their work. Therefore, because there is a complex relationship between exotic dancers' personas and identities, and between exotic dance and sexual expression, they have a complicated relationship to the erotic which is dependent on their openness to feeling while dancing.

As they work through experiencing the erotic, the dancers are transgressing the normal boundaries set up to control and contain female sexuality. As many of the dancers said, they feel in control and that they have power over the customers through dancing, going against normative patriarchal power structures. In fully exploring and expressing themselves through the erotic, exotic dance in this context has the potential to be more than Lorde's definition of the pornographic. The dancers' experiences break down the idea that professional dancers are miserable and desperate for work and show that they can be fully satisfied with their lives while dancing. While they are under pressure to conform to standard ideas of beauty and sexiness that may re-inscribe those norms, they participate in transgressing norms of female sexuality by claiming it for themselves, wielding power over it, and using it for their own purposes, not just the pleasure of men.

“Being sexy means you own your body”: Finding the Erotic at Flirty Girl Fitness

Flirty Girl Fitness® is an all-female fitness studio with locations in Chicago and Toronto that offers classes in pole dance/tricks, lap/chair dance, Zumba, cardio, and weight training. Along with these classes, they offer private parties with a full bar, a nail salon, waxing services, a weight room, a treadmill room, and a beauty station. Inside the Flirty Girl Fitness Studio lobby it is bright white with glittery white marble floors, pink LED lights decorating the nail and drink bars, and their logo of a butterfly scattered about. The lobby also houses the nail bar and spa pedicure chairs, decorative pink, silver, black, and white furniture and a small area of merchandise. The entryway includes a valet parking staff of mainly men, who are the only men in the building. Once you enter the hallway, there are two main classrooms (one with permanent poles, one without), which each have pink lighting, lasers, and a disco ball. The loud music playing throughout the studio, along with the lights and shiny, glittery decor, set the mood of the studio as a feminine, fun space while simultaneously creating a “sexy” club vibe.

Participants and Environment

I conducted twelve interviews at Flirty Girl Fitness in Chicago with women who were in their 20s-30s from various racial and ethnic backgrounds, who lived in different neighborhoods, had different body types and dance experience levels, and spoke different languages. Although all of the interviews were conducted in English, language barriers did pose some problems in terms of certain definitions and concepts in multiple interviews. I asked the women if they took mostly the dance classes—as opposed to strength training/cardio—especially pole, lap, and chair dance, and how much experience

they had dancing at the studio before asking them to do an interview with me; since it was the beginning of a new session, many women were just taking their first classes, so I only interviewed people who had more experiences to reflect upon. The interviews were conducted at the studio in a corner that was still public.

The women I interviewed, met, and saw were comprised of many races, ethnicities, ages, weights, experience levels, and nationalities. It did seem to be a comfortable space for all types of women, despite what their advertising campaigns depict as the type of women who go there—very thin, young, made-up, white, light-skinned, or racially ambiguous women. According to the women I interviewed and my own observations, the gym is populated by diverse women of “all shapes and sizes” (Elena), and is “more open to different walks of life than people like to think it is” (Tori). Notably, the women I interviewed were all heterosexual, or at least were not openly out to me. I would have liked to know the women’s socioeconomic backgrounds, but I felt uncomfortable asking in this setting. The neighborhood and price of the classes suggest that many women who take classes there are middle to upper-class, but some mentioned how expensive the classes are and living far away from the studio. I did not ask and do not want to make assumptions as to this aspect of diversity.

The space is located within a very specific context; while it does not exist in a cultural vacuum, it is private, all-female, and caters to women specifically, which makes it a safe space to explore exotic dance movement and reap the benefits of that movement with no risk or judgement. As Monica said, “The environment makes you feel comfortable, safe, and like I can just kind of be free and do whatever I need to and not be

as self-conscious.” The overwhelming reason that Flirty Girl stands out to women is the all-female atmosphere, because “you don’t have to worry about that creepy guy at the gym” (Elena) or guys that “creepily stare at you” (Monica). Jill concluded that she would not “feel comfortable doing all these sexy moves [when] there’s men watching” and Amy said “I’ve never felt safer than I have at Flirty Girl...It’s just nice to be in a space without men for a while.” The all-female environment is one of the main reasons women feel comfortable at the studio, because it allows them to do these movements freely without being watched or judged, and separates it from most other settings, including the strip club and dance concert. A majority of the women responded that their audience is themselves, with a few mentioning an imaginary audience of cheering partners, friends and family, but that no one else in class was watching them. Although they are still in public and among strangers, they do not feel they are performing for anyone in the room because they are only with other women with the same intent.

Many of the women mentioned the fact that dancing was a much more fun way to exercise, and that they would rather spend the extra money to do fun, yet fulfilling workouts through dance than go to a regular gym and do boring, monotonous workouts on a treadmill. The women I interviewed were looking for a more interesting, engaging, joyful, and safe space to work out, different from regular gyms which are “very intimidating and [where] women tend to lose their self-confidence” (Jennifer).

Additionally, many of the women had been dancers previously in classical dance forms such as ballet, jazz, and modern, yet they (and the non-experienced dancers) liked that everyone was welcome here and felt that it made it safer for everyone. In classical dance

studios, many women felt “watched and judged” (Elena) because there is “more pressure on technique” (Jennifer), compared to the fun and supportive environment in this studio. Danielle went even further, saying, “I thought that I would lose the interest in dancing, but this place kind of made me find myself, my other side of myself and then get me back to the passion of dancing.” Flirty Girl also offers social aspects that are appealing to many women, because of this judgment-free atmosphere. Nancy said that “People who take pole dance...all know each other” and that she “made friends here and [is] also planning on taking [her] friends here.” The atmosphere of the lobby and locker room feeds into the idea of it as a social space, as the bar, manicure and pedicure stations, and open seating create a fancy, spa-like space instead of a gym.

This environment does not come from nowhere; the staff and instructors create a specific kind of encouraging, happy, fun, friendly, “girl-friend” culture. While I would not say that it is fake, it is consciously created by the workers, and presumably by the owner and creator of the gym. Jill specified that “it really always depends on the instructors, when I come here and why I come here.” The very carefully planned atmosphere is also aided by the lights, music, and design elements. As Cassy said, “Being able to turn the lights down and have the colored lights spin puts you in the element” and others referenced the design setting a sexy, sensual mood. The “vibe” can turn from upscale spa to nightclub with the push of a button, which many women appreciate and think that it adds to the experience. While the dancers enjoy the lighting and club feeling, they do not want to associate it with stripping, which reflects the odd relationship between pole dance fitness and professional exotic dancing. They are doing many of the

same movements, wearing little clothing, and dancing to similar music and lighting, but it is perceived as a separate experience, mostly because of the atmosphere, location, and context created at Flirty Girl.

In fact, many women made it clear that they were not strippers and that it frustrated them that people conflated what they were doing—pole dance for *exercise*—with pole dancing and stripping for *money*. Labor and monetary gain provide the main reasons for this distancing. Yet, many dancers talked about some of the push-back against pole dance fitness, including the trouble that studios have in certain neighborhoods, both there and other places. Danielle told me that in Hong Kong, residents find it immoral and that pole dance studios are hidden in locations that are hard to find. She was happy that the studio could exist out in the open in Chicago. Yet she was still worried, saying, “if my friends in school found out I have this side, I’m done—I can’t.” Danielle brought up the hypocrisy that allows for this sort of sexuality to be displayed in public in music videos and other media, and simultaneously judged and stigmatized by outside observers. Speaking to the connection to professional exotic dance, Jill mentioned starting pole dance before it was popular and being asked “are you gonna be an exotic dancer?” to which she responded that she just did it for the workout. For Tori, “The more I have done pole dancing, the less ashamed I am to say that I am a pole dancer” so when people ask if she is a stripper, she takes it as “a cue to engage a conversation about what I actually do and what it is.” Similarly, Amy said, “I’m very hesitant to tell people where I go for my gym” because they will ask “are you learning to be a stripper?” she responded that:

“There are different kinds of pole dancing, of course it can be sexy but then there’s also athletic, there’s also artistic, it’s a fitness type of—any pole dancer is

in the best shape of their lives so it's kind of unfortunate that the immediate thought that I'm here is that I'm learning how to be a slut, the slut shaming thing it really gets to me...We don't associate this kind of dancing with self confidence, we associate it with other things." - Amy

To some extent, these women are continuing an image of stripping as a deviant profession by separating themselves from professional exotic dancers. As Amy said, there are different "types" of pole dance, and pole dance fitness and competitive pole dance have worked to separate themselves from stripping, in part to legitimize the work that they do and allow it to be a part of mainstream culture. While individuals who do pole dance might not think of professional exotic dancers in a negative way, the industry as a whole and many individuals consciously define their positions in opposition to strippers. They are actively trying to de-contextualize the movement from its original purpose and location—an act which is difficult, maybe impossible. While they have succeeded in utilizing the movement for their own purposes, the movement itself has not shaken off its connotation of the strip club or sexiness in the public view. Their reclamation of pole dance as a challenging exercise and art form attempts to separate it from the stigma, but instead separates it from the dancers themselves, who are then further invisibilized and stigmatized. While there may be potential for the mainstreaming of this dance style to reduce stigma against professional exotic dancers, it has not yet succeeded.

As part of this mainstreaming, the studio advertises themselves as a gym that offers classes that make women "love working out" and "feel more confident and sexy within – Flirty Girls are happier, healthier, and more empowered women" (chicago.flirtygirlfitness.com). Through this rhetoric, they market Flirty Girl as a space that is for not only physical wellness, but mental, emotional, and psychological

wellness. While the practice of pole dance fitness is contested as a feminist practice in the few academic writings and many popular articles on the topic, the idea of individual empowerment through women's sexual expression is supported by pro-sex feminists. The fact that the dancing takes place in an all-female space and is marketed as a self esteem booster fits into what Elisa Glick says is pro-sex feminists' "quest for politically correct 'feminist sexuality' (that is, a sexuality purified of male sexual violence and aggression)" where "certain sexual practices are valorized for their liberatory or destabilizing potential" (21). From this view, the women taking classes are liberating themselves by expressing their sexuality free from men's influence and violence, which allows them to reclaim their sexual expression—itsself a transgression of social norms. There is a difference in practice, however, as the women are not engaging in any sexual practices, instead their liberation is connected to health and confidence, not directly tied to sex. While the movement may be considered sexy, the dancers are moving past direct sexual acts into other aspects of life—more similar to Lorde's erotic. The liberatory potential of exotic dance is not literal sexual acts, but the ability to explore different forms of expression and feeling through movement which have more to do with mind-body connection through dance than with sex.

However, while the setting is free from men's literal gaze, Flirty Girl still follows the ideals of what is stereotypically "sexy" in its branding, images, and rhetoric. Some writers argue that Flirty Girl and other pole fitness studios are encouraging women to fit into unattainable beauty standards and reproducing oppressive gender roles. For example, in Nicola Kim Potopsingh's "Reading Pole-Fitness in Canadian Media," she criticizes the

way that the websites of pole fitness studios and the media use the discourse of “health,” defining it in terms of stereotypical notions of feeling “young, feminine and sexy” and focusing on being attractive and desirable outwardly, instead of feeling sexy inside (31). She quotes the owner of Flirty Girl, Kerry Knee, as saying “no one ever teaches women how to be sexy,” criticizing her for her use of the word “be” instead of “feel,” which, as I argue later in this chapter, is not necessarily how women experience the classes (Potopsingh 32). Meghan Hamilton’s “The Poles Are In” argues that the focus on appearance and heterosexuality in the classes is oppressive to women because they are expected to fit into certain ideals of beauty and sexuality. These are valid critiques of the industry of pole dance that merit questions about the influence of patriarchal notions of sexuality and beauty on what women see as sexy, attractive, and healthy. However, the research done in this thesis focuses on the participants’ experiences and their personal definitions of sexiness, which depend on confidence rather than outer appearance. There was a distinction in the interviews between the sexy that comes from within and an outer appearance of “hotness.” Although Potopsingh interprets Kerry Knee’s quote to mean that being sexy is an outer expression, women’s experiences suggest that there is a difference between shallowly looking sexy and *being* sexy, which is a feeling of confidence that exudes from people. While these essays provide a certain view of pole dance fitness, they are based on a less nuanced argument that stays within the objectifying/empowering binary. This thesis comes from an understanding that the binary is essentializing, and goes ahead to focus on women’s personal experiences dancing as a way to access the erotic and possibly transgress norms, even within restrictive, oppressive structures.

The privileged assumptions behind the rhetoric of pro-sex feminist empowerment through self-expression act ahistorically and apolitically, erasing inequalities that control certain sexualities. As discussed in the Literature Review, this female personal empowerment does not necessarily lead to a destabilization or redefinition of norms, because it is tied to privileges of certain women based on race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and nationality. One woman's liberatory sexual experience does not necessarily change other women's experiences of intersectional oppression. Donaghue et al argue that pole dance fitness is "immersed in the postfeminist sensibility in which the body is located as both the source of authentic self-expression and the means to power" (454). However, that is true for the right types of bodies, defined as "young, heterosexual, white, western, able-bodied" (Donaghue et al 455). The liberation and empowerment that may or may not come from pole fitness classes relies on a one-dimensional view of gendered oppression, disconnected from intersectional feminist theory. However, taking into account the problems with the rhetoric used on the websites and media coverage of pole fitness classes, the actual experiences of the diverse group of women suggest that there are personal benefits of the classes that do not apply to just one limited group of women.

While the language used to market pole fitness to women is inextricably tied to traditional notions of desirability, beauty, and sexiness, and while the use of "empowerment" falls into the pitfalls of apolitical personal (white) female liberation, the experiences of the women I interviewed at Flirty Girl reveal that there are personal experiential gains for diverse women. The interviews with women suggest that while they are dancing this style in a location and context that exists within oppressive structures,

many women interviewed had been able to access the erotic through dance, moving past the pro-sex feminist rhetoric used by advertisements. There is a separation then, between the marketing of the studio and the dance style, and the real experiences, which are critical to this project and to other feminist work that discusses the effects of exotic dancing for women. Even if the studio and pole dance fitness as a style are stuck in the white feminist pro-sex liberation rhetoric, the dancers, women of various backgrounds, are having valuable experiences that may help them access the erotic in other aspects of their lives.

Confidence, Body Image, and Feelings While Dancing

“This place is amazing. I feel like sometimes because I hear a lot of people over here, they don’t have self-confidence at all, after they take the classes, they start to build up their personality from here, and then I see people will come in like really shy, and then time by time, you take classes together, you find that actually they shine more and more every time...You find that they are being peppier and more confident, especially when they climb on the pole.” - Danielle

During my interviews, I asked the women how they felt while dancing, how they felt about their bodies while dancing, what self confidence means to them and if they have experienced changes in self confidence doing this type of movement. Overall, the women I interviewed had positive experiences dancing that helped them build confidence and feel better about their bodies, although they each had different individual experiences. Many women talked about the importance of making and reaching goals in the classes, especially in pole tricks classes, and how much they wanted to be proficient at this style of dance. Maria feels “accomplished,” and Kaitlin feels “productive,” like she has “achieved something” after class. Others mentioned feeling “insecure,” (Elena) “awkward,” and “self-conscious” (Cassy) when they did not master the correct

movements or felt that they did not look good doing them. For many women, most of whom are working professionals, the studio serves as a space away from work, school, and other pressured environments. For instance, Nancy makes the distinction that she's "doing something that's not work, so it's my life," which makes her happy. Dancing, for Jill, is "the only outlet I have for stress relief" and for Amy, "I wish there were a job where I'm not sitting at a desk all day...I am the truest me whenever I dance." Similarly, Danielle feels that she has "two faces,"—one in school, and one dancing in this style—"so, this is kind of another way I develop myself." This type of dancing stimulates a part of themselves that is stifled, prohibited, or judged in other settings, giving them the opportunity to experience self-expression and satisfaction.

Not only does dance provide the women with an outlet away from work and school, but it also allows them to discover and enhance certain sides of themselves that are not appropriate in those other settings. They see their dancer side as their "real" lives and selves, and take ownership of this time to experience and express themselves. Dancing makes Tori feel "like a GODDESS" and Maria "just feel really free," while Amy feels "like a supermodel." The strength of their reactions spoke to the power that exotic movement can have for women, within "sexiness" and in other ways outside of sexual acts and sexuality. While they did not necessarily categorize their feelings as aligning with the erotic, many of the attributes they are describing having gained through dancing this style are shared with the theory of the erotic. For example, Tori said, "I don't worry about any flaws...it's the one place I can go and the rest of the world is just there. I can really get inside myself and be happy—it's my thing." Her positive feelings while

dancing allow it to be a unifying mind and body experience, as Tori mentions, a place where women can be inside themselves.

Many of the women who are highly experienced dancers are already confident with their body images and feel good about their bodies while dancing. This feeling of body-confidence seems to be one reason why they enjoy dancing, and conversely, their experience dancing is a main reason they are not self-conscious of their bodies in that setting. While there is a sense of increased body image during their dancing experience, there is also the extra pressure of being in a dance environment, although many women noted the huge difference they felt in comfort there versus at a more conventional dance studio. Many women still had insecurities such as not looking “cute” doing the movements (Elena), needing to “work harder” or “not eat as much” (Jill), not feeling like a “part of this group [of dancers]” (Maria) and comparing themselves to instructors. Maria discusses not feeling like a “part of this group,” presumably because dancers are assumed to have a fit/thin body type which she does not have. The fact that many of the women still worry about dieting, working out harder, looking “cute,” and comparing themselves to the instructor or other dancers highlights the fact that the studio is still a space that operates within mainstream frameworks of what a “dancer” or the body of one looks like, and how to be attractive. While some women may be more comfortable and used to that environment because of their history in classical dance forms and use the movement as something that adds to their body-confidence, less experienced dancers tend to feel more of the burden of this restrictive framework.

Confidence, for most of the women, had to do with personal fulfillment, comfort, security, and acceptance. Key aspects of confidence for the women were “being happy with myself,” “personal accomplishments” (Elena), no “self doubt,” being “adventurous” (Maria), being “secure in your own skin” (Tori), “not having to pretend who I’m not” (Jill), not apologizing for “who you are,” being “satisfied” (Cassy), and a “celebration of your good qualities” (Amy). The women’s focus on owning, not doubting, and being comfortable with themselves, free of other’s judgement, accentuates women’s independence and decision-making abilities. They recognize that others might judge them and that it is necessary to disregard them. These definitions of confidence become important as a way to define sexy, and as I argue, the erotic. As will be discussed later in this chapter, the women defined sexy in two ways—in terms of inner confidence and outer appearance—and said that they gained confidence from dancing. Therefore, their definitions of confidence become part of their definitions of sexiness, which, in its internal form, fits into the erotic.

Furthering this point, many women I interviewed stated that confidence is key to life and that their experiences at Flirty Girl help them gain confidence and be more comfortable with themselves, their body, and new movements. In fact, this confidence spreads outside of Flirty Girl and helps with daily life struggles, self image, and positive outlook—especially about working out. Even though workouts are part of the beauty ideal, they have found a way to enjoy working out that makes them feel better about themselves instead of bored, tired, or lazy. On the importance of confidence, Jennifer said “It’s very important because without self-confidence it’s hard to lead a normal life. You

don't feel the same, you don't treat your body the same. I guess it's one of the most important things, especially for a woman." Tori seemed to agree that "it's important for women to have a space where they can go and think and just be happy with themselves, just exist for themselves and just shut out all the other things." While there is a notable focus on the importance of confidence and sexiness for women, they also clearly state the necessity for confidence in normal life and how the confidence built at Flirty Girl in the comfort of that space can be taken into the outside world in helpful ways. The focus on women as having a special need for confidence, and for sexual expression (as seen in the next section) also resembles Lorde's idea of the erotic as a place within women that is unique for them and has been stifled by men. Their focus on women especially benefitting from confidence reflects the idea that it has previously been oppressed in women and is important for life fulfillment.

In fact, many women talked about how much it has helped their lives outside of class in meaningful, helpful, and various ways:

"I think that it just helps...me with my self esteem and not feeling so insecure. So I think that it shows itself in other areas...I just feel really good about myself in the classes, so I do think the classes really help...It's kind of hard if you feel great for it not to transfer into other areas...For me the raise in my self-esteem and self-confidence, I think that [Flirty Girl is] just an investment." - Maria

"Being able to do random dance classes just sort of feeds into me being more sure of myself in other settings, you know whether it be at work, or socially or volunteer things that I do...as I said it spreads. You just sort of feel better about yourself...If I can do one thing, I can do something else." - Monica

"You take out the challenge and you overcome it, that's when you become more confident." - Nancy

"In actuality my self-confidence outside of this space is very...brittle...I'm very judgmental of myself. I'm my worst critic...but when I'm here, when I'm dancing, for some reason my self confidence just soars...it's very freeing. I definitely felt this place is giving me that...Becoming a member here has actually helped

outside, my confidence is becoming less brittle the more often I come back.” - Amy

“I feel like I’m better at this than what I do at my day job.” - Jill

“I am not afraid of losing [my boyfriend], I know I have the confidence that he won’t go away and I am in charge...This is something that I can get from dancing and I think that if I lose the passion for dancing, I will not make such a risky decision.” - Danielle

Many women who dance here find that it allows them to be more confident in seemingly unrelated actions and decisions, including at work and in interpersonal relationships.

Maria mentions it being an “investment,” suggesting that one of the things these women pay for in the classes is self-confidence. Confidence here comes from acquiring new skills, meeting personal goals, and being able to express themselves without judgement or doubt, qualities that they discussed in their personal definitions. Again, this later becomes an important part of their internal definition of sexiness. The positive effects on confidence cannot be overlooked in terms of the possibility for transgressive aspects for women. The gains from dancing in this space spreads to other parts of their lives, and is a tool that they can use to push against norms and boundaries. Some of them already feel they are pushing boundaries by just participating in this sexual dance form, and they are reaffirmed by the confidence that they get from classes.

However, Danielle’s answer shed some light on the competition between women that is part of and encouraged by society’s patriarchal framework: “part of the confidence I am getting from here [is] because I know I can do a lot things that the other girls cannot do.” She gains confidence from being more talented, possibly more sexy, and therefore “better” than other women. While there are many positive constructions of confidence and body image in the context of exotic dance at Flirty Girl, the studio still exists within

and helps to shape mainstream culture's constructions of women, and simultaneously promotes pro-sex feminists' idea of personal empowerment through individual liberation. Elena showed more of the pressures on women to compete with each other for attention and her reclamation of it: "before I would try to show other people [that I can dance sexy] and now I'm more of a—I do it because I want to." While she may still be invested in the mainstream ideal of sexy, she has moved from searching for others' approval to doing it for herself and feeling confident in her ability to be sexy. Similarly to Elena, Cassy's desire to look sexy while dancing in the clubs led her to this style of dance, but she is still awaiting results:

"I don't think it has changed my self-confidence yet, but I hope that it will change my self-confidence as far as being sexy. I have never been a sexy person. I'm the quirky kid sister, fun...I am hoping it will make me more confident in a sexual setting. Like if I'm with a man—I'm not self-conscious or shy or anything—but just be more confident in my sexuality...I'm much more confident in the dance studio than in a club...that's what I'm hoping for. It hasn't changed yet." - Cassy

The desire to be sexy could arguably be a part of the limiting patriarchal framework that tries to control women's sexuality, but Cassy's motive is to redefine her ability to express herself sexually in public, reclaiming her sexual identity. She wants to be in more control of her sexuality and the way that people view her, as a sexual adult, rather than a "quirky kid sister." While her intentions could also be described more shallowly as wanting to look sexier, they go further than that because she is doing it for herself and pushing against stereotypes and constructions of her that push her into one side of herself.

Many women talked about finding other versions of themselves through dance, showing that this dance style is opening up a side of these women that they were previously unable to access in ways other than actual sex, as women "are taught to

separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of [their] lives other than sex” (Lorde 55). The experiences the women refer to as feeling sexy or confident, may be them accessing the erotic, although they might not use that specific language. While the studio is operating within normative structures of female beauty and patriarchal influence, there are still personal gains for the women that move into other parts of their lives, making it an important resource for accessing the erotic and the possibility for transgressing norms.

Sexy, Sexuality, and Sexual Expression

“In the classroom setting, it’s definitely more about feeling sexy than turning somebody else on.” - Tori

Within the term “sexy” there are many definitions that can expose the ways in which sexuality is censored, controlled, and accepted in different contexts. Two distinct categories of “sexy” came up in my interviews: a personal sexy that was tied to actions, self-confidence, overall aura/carriage, and feeling comfortable with one’s own sexuality, and an external, shallow, appearance-driven image of “hotness” that is shown in media or referred to in mainstream culture. The internal sexiness goes back to the definitions and experiences of confidence in the last section and taps into the erotic, while the external sexiness goes back to normative standards of appearance and attractiveness, and caters to the male gaze.

The women’s own interpretation of sexy was mostly based on feeling confident, determined, and comfortable with themselves. Almost everyone mentioned confidence in their personal definitions of sexy. More specifically, they also mentioned things like “girls that get out there and speak up and give their opinions” (Elena), being able to “handle things easier” and to “speak about what I am thinking” (Danielle), “carrying

yourself like you belong there and like you know what you're doing" (Monica), and "not really caring what other people think" (Kaitlin). These definitions have much more to do with confidence, accomplishments, and actions than with looks. Other women directly stated the difference between the two definitions of sexy, saying "it's not necessarily what you look like but how you move," (Cassy), that "anybody, whoever is confident about themselves, I think are sexy, no matter what size and weight you are (sic)" (Jill) and that "you can turn heads without being a super model and I think that's very sexy" (Monica). Nancy laid out clearly that "there is an external appearance part, but there's also an internal confidence part, 'cause when you feel sexy, you're sexy...The internal part is something that you can work on." There is a distinct separation between just looking sexy, which fits into the beauty ideal (of which they are all aware) and of being sexy, which anyone can be through being sure of themselves. Interestingly, while they are working out to look a certain way, the thing "you can work on" is confidence, not becoming a supermodel, as a few mentioned. There seems to be an understanding among these women that anyone can be sexy and that the standard images of "sexy" women do not relate to the real life experiences of women, even though they are going to this gym to work out and maintain a certain physical appearance. Devaluing common conceptions of sexiness replaces them with women's everyday confidence, based on accomplishments and personal fulfillment rather than outward praise. This can be seen as an empowering and transgressive stance in itself. In the previous section, the dancers talked about how their experiences doing this type of dance has added to their confidence; since confidence is the main aspect of sexiness in the internal definition, this dance style has added to their

sexiness in subversive ways that allow for self-expression and a reclaiming of what is “sexy.” Many of their experiences go past becoming more sexy into the exploration of the erotic, which based on feeling and goes into realms other than sex.

Some women had more specific answers as to what “sexy” is that have to do with personality qualities not tied to external sexiness. Jennifer explains that “if you walk into a room and you feel like the smartest person in the room, that could be sexy.” Tori’s immediate response, “to feel like a succubus,” was very internal and experiential; she talked about becoming a “being of sexuality that could draw sexiness and sexuality from every angle, and it doesn’t have to be for the benefit of somebody else.” This suggests using sexiness to control or feed off of others as another way of reclaiming and expressing her sexiness, and taking control of it. Amy said, “being sexy I think has a lot to do with owning yourself...I feel like the culture owns your body, media owns your body or whatever, but being sexy means you own your body...I feel like you have to like work up to get to that point.” She stresses the control and *ownership* over one’s own body, going along with pro-sex feminist sexual liberation, but moving into the realm of Lorde’s erotic by transgressing normal views and behaviors of sexiness and bringing it outside of sex, into their everyday lives.

There are still external pressures to be sexy and an idea that sexiness makes people more likable. For instance, many of the women mentioned dancing for their boyfriends and husbands at home, looking good for them, and being desirable to them. There is still a version of sexy that the women are aware of that has to do with normative beauty standards, male expectations of women, and a narrow definition based on looks.

This is being driven into the psyches of women so deeply, that it usually defines what we deem “sexy.” Images of normative sexiness are certainly reproduced in advertisements for Flirty Girl, yet the experiences of the women in classes say something else. While the rhetoric used by Flirty Girl does not encourage the erotic, doing the movement in this safe space has given many of these women more confidence, which adds to their diverse, broader expressions of sexuality and allows them to access the erotic.

Furthermore, when I asked how important it is to be sexy, the lines between the two definitions of sexy blurred for many of the women, exposing their knowledge of an expectation in society for women to look sexy. Danielle is a good example of this confusion and conflation between the definitions:

“Actually [being sexy is] not really important, because I kind of think that girls should be smart, like when you ask me to choose from smart and sexy, I would try to say that I want to make it a balance between them. But if I really need to choose, I would rather a girl be smart than sexy because I really believe if you are smart, some part of you can show the sexiness, so I think if you are asking me I think that sexy comes second to the smart.” - Danielle

While the question was how important they think sexy is, Danielle reverted to the popular idea that sexiness is somehow in opposition to intelligence, although the internal definitions of sexy included being smart. She recognizes this when she says “some part of you can show the sexiness,” going back to the internal definition of sexiness that is more similar to the erotic than the external definition that the word “sexy” connotes.

Many of the responses towed the line between internal sexiness for themselves and external sexiness for a partner:

“I think you do need it though because as a girl...I think it is really important... Cause I mean if you don’t feel like you’re sexy, then in the cliché thing, that’s the whole sexy thing about being a woman...you should try to be hot every so often

[Me: for themselves?] for themselves, yeah, because I don't know, it feels nice just to look pretty and feel like turning heads and making your guy happy." - Elena

"I do think that it's somewhat important as a woman, to feel that not only you can be, but that you *are* sexy and I feel that for a lot of women you are fully on or there's no sexy whatsoever...I think it's more important for self to feel that you are sexy...I mean there's a part of you that wants a guy to think 'oh my god, she's so sexy.'" - Maria (emphasis added)

"I think it's extremely important. Extremely, extremely, extremely important because otherwise how do you keep the attention of the opposite sex?" - Cassy

"I think it is important because I mean I've seen people that are insecure that they don't feel sexy and then people, sometimes their significant other would take advantage of them, because they don't have that confidence and they are in that relationship for the wrong reasons." - Jill

"I'm not sure being sexy is all that important, I think that being self confident is important and then sexiness comes from that so it might be a necessary consequence, but I'm not sure that being sexy is all that required. My husband would probably say it's pretty nice, but...(laughs)." - Monica

There seems to be an understanding that men will like you more if you are sexy, which will make you like yourself more, *and* conversely, that you will like yourself more if you feel sexy, and that men will like that. While both understandings are still concerned with the male gaze, these women have for the most part taken up a mainstream, individualistic version of the pro-sex feminist idea of liberation. It is about being sexy for yourself, to make yourself feel better, with the bonus of "making your guy happy," but because of the multiple definitions of sexy, the lines between feeling sexy internally and just looking "hot" are blurred. Interestingly, the focus on sexiness being especially important for women also straddles this line. Is it important for women because society says that women should look a certain way, or because of the pressures and scrutiny put on women, is it important for women to feel internally sexy and good about themselves? The erotic is also focused solely on women and therefore takes place within this complex structure. Lorde distinguishes it by saying it has been used as a tool against women to

keep them less powerful than men in society. Yet, if their dancing focuses on feeling and is used as “a source of power and information,” then it is within the erotic, whether it involves their partners or not. However, it moves into the pornographic when this feeling is lost, in that case becoming only about pleasing someone else or looking a certain way. This line is not always clear, as seen in the women’s interviews.

As for the deep experiences that some women have had from dancing, Maria opened up about how it has affected her outside the studio:

“It’s here and then it’s outside of here. Here it’s definitely helped in my sexual expression and just being a woman and just doing some pretty provocative moves and being okay with that. And I think outside of here it effects my sexuality. I feel more of a woman when I’m out in social settings because I kind of feel like I come here and I have this bucket and it gets filled and when I go out into the real world and then you pull from that bucket and then it’s like (crying)...just something as simple as picking out an outfit, you know, and I think that it’s like ‘oh man, I could totally rock that’... I think that it just helps...me with my self esteem and not feeling so insecure.” - Maria

For Maria, this movement has made her feel stronger, like “more of a woman,” sexier, happier, and more confident. However, some women see more connections to their personal and outside lives than others, reflecting the importance of sexuality that outsiders assign to this dance style. For instance, Nancy said that she does not “think about being sexy” while pole dancing, especially while doing pole tricks. The outside perspectives of media and even friends and family who talk about pole fitness has attached certain connotations to the movement that are not there for every woman who takes the classes. Importantly, the women who do see it as an outlet for sexual expression are able to do that in the same space, while other women can focus on other aspects of why they enjoy the classes, which may be different feelings that are still within the erotic.

Tori and Amy, who both felt emotionally and sexually liberated by pole dancing, put a lot of importance on being sexy in their own way:

“Going by my definition, I think it’s very important. I mean it’s not the most important thing in the world, but we don’t really think about how much our own personal confidence affects the rest of our lives” - Tori

“I feel it’s vitally important just because I don’t feel like women feel like they own themselves, I feel like they feel other people do, like psychologically, mentally, emotionally speaking...building self confidence becomes a lot and so I feel like sexy and feeling sexy is the first step towards understanding your body and that you shouldn’t be ashamed of it because you own it—you own it—and you should feel good about that and it shouldn’t be a source of, again, shame or depression or hurt.” - Amy

The ownership Amy talks about is integral to the erotic because full ownership of yourself and your emotions brings women power and through that, opens them up to greater knowledge and transgression. They are recognizing the internal definition of sexy that closely resembles the erotic and acknowledging how important it is for women, as Lorde asserts. These women have a clear idea of their definition of “sexy” that does not have to do with the external sexiness and understand why it is powerful and important for all women. Amy went on to explain the intimacy that can come from this movement:

“Once you feel comfortable with yourself sexually, I feel like this weird intimacy opens up not just with your significant other, but with other people, like you’re more open to understanding them. . . Intimate not just in a sexual way, it’s very interesting, like you’re just more open to just empathizing with people. I definitely feel more empathetic and open to people, I’m not as shy as I used to be and I find myself genuinely interested [in people]...I feel like sexuality and sexual expression can foster this kind of intimacy that can demonstrate itself in different ways...because once you own your body, you’re out of this, you’re out of yourself mentally, now you’re in your body. And so now that you’re not troubled up here in this space, suddenly you can devote it to other people and you’re not just focused on yourself.” - Amy

Amy's response addressed the idea of "intimacy" in other places, which is an integral part of the erotic and living a more fulfilling life. Throughout her interview, she talked about the deeper aspects and effects of sexual expression, in ways that explained and touched on the erotic in beautiful and inspiring ways. The intimacy and understanding of others that Amy talks about touches on how "the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers and which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference" (Lorde 56). From Amy's language, she sounds like she is accessing the erotic through this movement in many ways that are not solely sexual and involve connecting with herself and others through a mind/body movement experience.

Conclusion

The women interviewed had complex ideas about what being "sexy" is that interwove the pro-sex feminist idea of personal liberation with mainstream culture's messages of "proper" female sexuality. Therefore, although many of them defined sexiness as personal and tied closely to self-confidence and self love—which is much closer to Lorde's erotic—they had an understanding of an outside view of sexy that is tied to looks and the male gaze. Exotic dance movement, even being done in a location that is set up to foster women's personal experiences comfortably, is not entirely separate from the systems of oppression that put pressures and expectations on women. Although many said that the confidence they built up from the movement in this space travelled with them into their outside lives, it cannot be expected to change the entire discourse or lived

experiences of women's sexuality, especially as the studio itself is furthering a limited image of women.

However, it is important when looking into this context to realize the benefits that women feel while taking classes at Flirty Girl and how they can be thought of as embodying the erotic in some ways. For instance, as Amy said, it gives women a chance to reclaim ownership over their bodies, and as many women mentioned, it provides a space where it is okay to be sexy for themselves and explore another side or part of themselves. The confidence and connections to their bodies that many women feel are also aspects of the erotic. The ways in which they talked about using their confidence from exotic dancing to further other goals and flourish in other areas, as well as the way that they defined "sexy" internally, are a part of the expansion of the erotic into everyday life, not just sex. While some women felt that this was a special space where they could access that part of themselves, others saw it as a challenging, fun way to work out. Furthermore, those who might be experiencing being in touch with the erotic might not be aware of Lorde's definition of the erotic, making it difficult to put something onto them with which they are not directly identifying.

While Flirty Girl clearly does not espouse transgression in their advertising, marketing, or image, the experiences of the women in the classes and their interactions with people outside, who may be judgmental and stigmatizing, does have the potential for transgression. Many of them feel that they are doing something daring and empowering by doing this "taboo" dance form and reclaiming it for themselves. They are pushing against normative ideas of female sexuality existing within the virgin/whore dichotomy

by doing a dance style that is tied with a deviant occupation while being students, professionals, mothers, and wives. In attempting to reclaim pole dance for themselves, they are pushing against its stigmatization in the public realm and ideas of women's sexuality more broadly. Again, because this context is so specific, the ways in which this affects stigmatization of professional exotic dance or women's sexuality more broadly, outside of this context, merits further study and debate.

Flirty Girl is a safe space for diverse women to explore and express their sexuality through movement, and a complex space that necessitates further observation and analysis, without simply dismissing it as objectifying and harmful to women. It may not be specifically working to subvert norms and outwardly change images of female sexuality, but the experiences of women who take classes suggest that many women are embracing or working with the erotic through emotional exploration, which complicates traditional ideas of female sexuality. Additionally, the safety and comfort that the space provides is an alternative to a regular coed gym and a traditional dance studio. The experiences of joy and enthusiasm of the women I interviewed reinforced the idea that there is value in this type of movement for individuals and that, in this specific context, their exploration can further goals of tapping into the erotic. While Flirty Girl might not be a perfect example of fostering the erotic, it allows and supports much more work towards those goals than it seems to from the outside, or for which other people give them credit.

“Y’all are sluts, by the way”: Negotiating Judgement, Sexual Expression, and Art-Making in the College Dance Concert Setting

“I do think this is the safest space we can get, but even still it’s not safe.” - Lauren

For the choreographic requirement of this thesis, I choreographed a piece in the fall Pomona College and Scripps College joint dance concert, *In The Works*, and the spring Scripps College dance concert, *Scripps Dances*. In this chapter, I go through some of the theory behind dance-making as a feminist endeavor and a tool for social change. Then, I detail the process of making the piece for the fall concert, including commentary from the dancers in the piece. I move through the interviews I did with dancers and how it affected their experience of body image, self-confidence, and sexuality as related to Lorde’s erotic. Throughout, I compare this context to the other two contexts in the hope of showing the differences and similarities between the dancers’ experiences in each and how they are affected by their location and position. I argue that the experiences of the dancers in this piece differed during rehearsals and the performances and showings, where the rehearsals gave them space to access the erotic, while the performances and showings forced them to re-evaluate their self confidence, sexiness, and body image because of the reactions of others, resulting in less freedom for some of them to enjoy the movement.

Inside the College Dance Concert

Thinking about the making of dance and the work that this piece aims to do in terms of being possibly transgressive and liberating, the ways in which we view dancers

and female bodies come to the forefront. Much of the original feminist dance theory of the second wave of feminism in the US was about the male gaze, based off of film theory's original conception of it but adapted for dance, which said that the spectator's possessive gaze is "male" and the passive performer is the "female" (Daly 296).

However, as more contemporary writers argue, there is a main difference between film and dance as art forms: the audience watches the dancer, but the dancer looks back and watches the audience, and is physically present and mobile, blurring the lines between seer and seen, object and subject. As Ann Daly points out in *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture*, "In the effort to theorize alternatives to the male gaze, we need to think a lot more about performative presence...[the dancer] can participate in a give-and-take with the audience" (297). Under the simple binary of subject/object, with the idea that the spectator/subject has all of the power under patriarchal society, it becomes a "no-win situation" where the choreographer is expected "to topple a power structure that we have theorized as monolithic" and their work is therefore "condemned as a reinforcement of the patriarchal status quo despite any transgressive behavior" (Daly 307). This leaves no room for any dance or performance art to serve as a way to subvert norms, transgress boundaries, or challenge power structures, which is limiting and disjointed from the potential and practice of dance and performance art.

A better question, posed by Daly, is: due to the "schism between cultural or aesthetic representations of Woman and the lives of real women...How can women represent themselves onstage without being co-opted by the conventions and expectations of the male gaze?" (Daly 300). What are the contexts, locations, and conditions for

dances that push boundaries and subvert norms? This question is important in any dance piece, but particularly relevant to this piece and to exotic dance styles in general. It seems her answer to this question is that “we can recognize the social structures and practice through which a woman negotiated her art while also acknowledging her agency...We can recognize her agency and still recognize the social structures that gave rise to the conditions of that agency” (Daly 332). This allows for a recognition that no dance work is made in a vacuum free of social structures and powerful conventions, but that “the arts are not merely *reflective* of social relations but are *productive* of social relations” (Daly 308). There is room for agency, choice, and subjectivity in dance which, combined with the presence and movement of the dancers, can give dancers and choreographers the power to subvert norms and transgress social structures. Similarly, Jane C. Desmond writes that “Dance is both a product (particular dances realized in production) and a process (dancing, and the historical conditions of possibility for the production and reception of such texts and processes, as well as their articulation in systems of value)” (2).

In a dance theory similar to Lorde’s erotic, Julia Kristeva uses the term “‘chora’ (from the Greek for enclosed space, womb)’ as a way to describe the semiotic realm, defining it as ‘an invisible and formless being which receives all things and in some mysterious way partakes of the intelligible, and is most incomprehensible.’” If used to rupture the symbolic, she argue that it can start a revolution through the “production of a different kind of subject, one capable of bringing about new social relations” (Daly 308). This theory of the chora, specific to women because of its comparison to the womb

and pre-symbolically defined beings, describes the same qualities and possibilities of the erotic in a different way. Daly uses Kristeva's theory to rethink dance as being a part of the semiotic realm, or the chora, as something which is "intelligible in its unintelligibility" and "consequently poses a threat to the ordered realm of the symbolic." although "the symbolic is to some degree engaged" (309). While dance exists within the symbolic in terms of codified movements and meanings that define dance in specific ways, it is a nonverbal art form that uses the body to express itself, which lies in the semiotic realm, making it, like all other art forms according to Kristeva, acting within both realms. Put differently, "looking at dance demands that we begin to find ways to talk about preoccupation, sensation, emotion, and expressivity which lapse neither into the pretended objectivity of scientism nor the transcendent figurations of a unified 'self'" (Desmond 3). This is to say that dance has the ability to go past the logical, the symbolic, the scientific into the erotic, semiotic, feeling, experiencing parts of humanity while still being understandable, relatable, which is in itself transgressing masculinist norms of understanding. While tying this realm to women reveals the "tensions between maintaining a politically effective sense of a category of 'women' while skirting the quicksand of bodily essentialism," it is important to remember that patriarchal structure has created the idea that the emotional is feminine and therefore less reliable and important (Desmond 7). The female body, which has been controlled and repressed, "may threaten to erupt and challenge the established order" (Woolf 82, 83). As Lorde and many feminist dance theorists argue, women's power comes from the "natural" and "feminine"

ways of being and thinking that they are taught to suppress to gain power in the male-dominated world.

Ann Cooper Albright argues that there is a “slippage...between a somatic identity (the experience of one’s physicality) and a cultural one (how one’s body—skin, gender, ability, age, etc.—renders meaning in society)” that is explored in much contemporary dance. Many modern and postmodern dances “focus on the negotiation between how ones defines one’s body in face of how that body is defined by society” (Albright 4). In these pieces, the dancers’ kinesthetic presence, focused on their living, moving bodies, disrupts the function of the gaze as a source of voyeuristic power and narrow cultural definition. They are showing how exotic dancers are perceived in society and complicating that through lived experience. In “The Female Dancer and the Male Gaze,” Susan Manning argues, in reference to early modern dance,

“Whereas the representational frames reiterated and updated preexistent images of gender and ethnicity, the kinesthetic dimension introduced a new image of the female body in motion that was without precedent” (164).

In terms of this dance, the women’s reclaiming of their bodies and sexualities comes through because the gaze is complicated through their movement and set changes, yet it still occurs within the social structures and categories that it pushes against, as in the quotes read by the dancers about common stereotypes. Applied to exotic dance in general, while the movement operates within patriarchal power structures that reinforce gendered and racialized stereotypes and ideals, the fact that the dancer is kinesthetically present, using their bodies in purposeful ways, and looking back at the spectator disrupts the male gaze.

As a choreographer and feminist ethnographer, I am also interested in “the relationships between the public display of bodily motion and the articulation of social categories of identity, of their transmission, transformation, perception, and enactment” (Desmond 3). Why is it that the same movements of exotic dance can be performed in different clothing or a different location and mean something both to the dancer and to the audience or popular culture? Yet, within those contradictions, the movement’s stigma is still attached to all women who do the movement, because of its original context, the strip club. Our culture categorizes women based on their expressions of sexuality and how well they fit into a certain mode of appropriateness, yet does not question the women’s actual experiences. This thesis aims to uncover the arbitrary identity categories that our society assigns to exotic dancers and to refocus on dancers’ actual experiences of their identities and the potential that this movement has to help them develop that identity through the erotic. Using Desmond’s argument for “increased attention to movement as a primary, not a secondary, social text, one of immense importance and tremendous challenge,” the pieces aim to use the very movement that is deemed problematic and turn the audience’s misconceptions on their head (49). They ask the audience to “see their bodies as a source of cultural identity—a physical presence that moves with and through its gendered, racial, and social meanings” (Albright xxvi). The movement itself is a “social text” and one that can be used in beneficial ways for women to access the erotic, but also to complicate the audience’s view of the dancers.

Fall Concert

The process of creating a dance for the Pomona/Scripps In the Works fall dance concert was frustrating and challenging at times because of the institutional hierarchies and expectations within academia, but also extremely rewarding and educational because of these struggles. At the usual choreographers meeting with all of the dance professors at the beginning of the fall semester, when I brought up the topic of my piece—exotic dancing—and casually asked how they felt about nudity onstage, there was immediate skepticism, concern, and disbelief towards the project and attire from certain professors and students. Right away, it seemed that people in the dance department were uncomfortable with the piece and having it in this show. After auditions and the first month of rehearsals, we had our first showing. The piece at that time had many disconnected sections, relating to the different contexts and aspects of exotic dance. A few of the professors said that they were offended by the movement and did not like seeing women objectified onstage, and that it was cheap and trashy. As a dancer Carmella pointed out,

“There was eye-rolling and kind of not so happy looks toward each other when they were watching us even in the beginning the first showing we had to do for them. I just wish they knew how much we had to work towards really conveying a sense of confidence towards the audience and that it was difficult, it just kind of sucked for our confidence to be met with the rolling of eyes and just like judgment and stuff I think especially coming from them, I think I expected it more from an audience than the people involved in the department.” - Carmella

Another dancer, Haley said that “the monthly check-ins...were a painfully self-conscious experience...just watching their faces and just knowing that they were unhappy about it and judging.” As for feedback, the professors questioned the message I was sending to

the audience, and said that it was not clear whether I was critiquing this movement, asking questions, or revealing tensions. Brenda Dixon Gottschild critiques the dance world's "naturalized conventions of valuation" saying, "'One of the easiest ways to disempower others...is to measure them by a standard which ignores their chosen aesthetic frame of reference and its particular criteria'" (Desmond 11). Many dance faculty did not consider the dance to be a form of concert dance, yet they critiqued and judged it based on that criteria. Instead of recognizing the aesthetic of exotic dance and commenting on certain movements or spacing that could have made the piece more visually effective, they were concerned with the message that the movement and clothing—or more likely, the message that including the dance in their concert—sent to the audience.

They wanted me to be clear about my message, so I went back to my advisor for Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies (FGSS), and talked to her about what I wanted to say. I realized that for the contexts to be compared, I needed the dancers in my piece to do exotic dance movement without any sort of context or critique, and then interview them about it, just as I was going to do for the other two contexts. At this point, I went to my dance advisor and told her that I needed to just have my dancers do the movement, without any context or critique, as part of my research. While my advisor understood the importance of this as research, the other professors would not be as accepting, she told me. I got a letter from my FGSS advisor that explained the importance of this part of the process to the research and she argued that there was no reason for this type of movement to be censored in a college environment. This letter was given to one of the other

professors and my dance advisor spoke personally with the other dance professors of both Pomona and Scripps. They agreed to let it stay in the show, but there needed to be a special program note and a warning that the audience could leave during this piece and stand outside.

I agreed to these conditions and continued choreographing until the next showing. At this showing, they were dancing on ballet bars, used instead of poles, and wearing sports bras and spandex shorts. The faculty were clearly not pleased with the dance and made negative comments towards both the choreography and to the dancers. The profanity in the music was brought up as unacceptable, and they were concerned with what the dancers would be wearing in the performance. There was discussion of the program note, warning the audience, and where to put it in the concert. The dance faculty did not discuss particular movements, formations, or other choreographic elements as with usual feedback; instead they focused on the content of the piece being overly sexual, making the audience (and them) uncomfortable, and concern with the message that it was sending about women, the dancers, and exotic dance. As one dancer Lauren said,

“Throughout the entire process, every time we ran it or performed it, they would give comments to every single other dance and say good job to individual dancers, I never once received that validation, so there were times when I was like, wait are we in this show? Am I a dancer too, or are we just a circus side show act right after intermission for fun? There was nothing about the way the faculty treated us that made me feel like we were dancers, no notes, no like ‘move the formation to the left’ or maybe ‘clean this section up’, you know, it’s not that they had to say, ‘you were really sexy when you did that’ I didn’t want that, you know just like nothing, no validation. That’s probably where my anxiety stemmed from, thinking maybe I’m not as safe as I thought I was, maybe I don’t want people to know I’m in this dance...if our own faculty’s not excited about us or not even making us feel okay about it, then how am I supposed to think that people would accept me outside of the dance world.” - Lauren

Another dancer Angie said, “After we had done those showings, and I was thinking about the topic more...I felt like they shouldn’t have made us uncomfortable for dancing this way.”

After the showing, we finished the piece, and decided to have an informal showing for the dancers’ friends in the studio during normal rehearsal time. They wanted to practice dancing this style in front of people and in high heels, and were excited to show their close friends what they had been working on and talking about all semester. There was only one male present at this informal showing, although there was no decision against having men present. I introduced the piece as an open rehearsal and said that they could ask questions and make comments afterwards. When the dance ended, the audience clapped, but was very quiet and did not ask many questions or make many comments, and there was a palpable tension and awkwardness in the room. After the audience left, the dancers and I had a discussion about how they felt about the showing. They were shocked at how uncomfortable it was, considering it was their close friends and an intimate setting. They talked about how rehearsal was a comfortable setting for them to do this movement and show their bodies in this way, and how comfortable they felt with each other because of it. However, they felt that even friends who they are comfortable with did not understand the point of the piece or saw a certain side of them and had a difficult time seeing this other side of them without judgment. While it was slightly discouraging, we discussed the fact that this is a part of the process and that this is why we were all invested in doing this piece. It also showed them that they had to prepare for many different kinds of reactions to the dance after the concert.

After drafting multiple versions of the program note myself, the dance professors came up with their own that said this:

"This performance is presented as part of my Gender, Feminist and Sexuality Studies research project on 'exotic dance' movement and is not meant to be viewed as a piece of artistic choreography. My project looks at how the movement associated with 'exotic dance' operates in different contexts and its experiential and performative impact on women. The movement material will be contextualized and developed as part of my senior thesis project to be presented on the Scripps Dance Concert in Spring '14. The dance includes movement vocabulary often found in contemporary music videos that may be considered sexually suggestive. If you are concerned this may be offensive or inappropriate for anyone in your party, please stay outside for a few extra minutes after intermission until the ushers open the doors.--MG"

They also suggested that the piece be taken out of the official concert and be moved to after the show as a separate showing that people could choose to attend, since they felt that this was more about the research aspect than the choreography as art or dance. I responded that I was not okay with the first sentence, and that I would not like the piece to be in a separate showing. I was very upset with the fact that they did not consider a dance "artistic choreography" that I and the dancers had spent a whole semester creating, practicing, reworking, and cleaning. I also had a problem with them writing the program note for me and quoting it as my words, after I had sent many options to them and remained flexible to changes. I had a meeting with the Scripps faculty and proposed another note:

"This performance is presented as part of my Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies and Dance senior thesis project on exotic dancing. My project looks at how the movement associated with exotic dance is experienced by dancers and whether the movement changes meaning in different contexts. The final project, to be performed in the Scripps Dance Concert in Spring '14, will present the research findings and thesis argument through a feminist lens. The dance includes sexually suggestive movement. If you are concerned this may be offensive or

inappropriate for anyone in your party, please remain outside after intermission until the ushers open the doors.--MG”

Finally, that note was approved by the faculty and it was agreed that the piece could stay in the show, but for logistical reasons. They never addressed the assertion that my piece was not “artistic choreography.” Throughout the process I discussed the different walls that I was coming up against with my FGSS advisor, dancers, friends, and various faculty and staff. They were shocked at the amount of push-back and criticism I was getting for doing a dance that was not particularly inappropriate or explicit. In fact, after an art professor of Angie’s came to the show, she emailed her and said, “I actually expected it to be more explicit with that warning there’ and ‘is the dance department really conservative?’ (laughs) She was questioning why not make it more explicit?” Many other audience members had a similar reaction, saying it was just like what they see in videos, movies, and television.

Still, some of the dancers were worried about their identities being compromised by having their names in the program and having it filmed and sold with the rest of the concert on DVD. They did not want future employers, schools, certain friends, and family members to see their performance in this dance. For instance, Lauren expressed her reason for wanting to keep her identity confidential:

“I just know how detrimental that can be to someone’s life. And I think I was...shamed for wanting to be in this dance at first, from my boyfriend and with the faculty, that really made it come to head [that] I am really anxious about being identified with this dance. If I don’t even have the support of the faculty, who knows if it will come back to haunt me... There still are negative connotations that I can’t really afford to have on my life.” - Lauren

Other dancers had no problem being associated with the dance and identified in it, but to protect their confidentiality, we made some changes to any identifying media. For the program, the dancers and I created fun stage names that were similar to “stripper names” and had humorous sexual references. The names were: Bambi, CoCo Butter Ki\$\$es, Kandy, Lexxxi, Lola \$hagnasty, Roxy, Sex-l Sinamon, and Queen K (some of their real last names have been omitted). We agreed that the dance would still be filmed but sold separately from the rest of the DVD only to the dancers in it and myself, with a copy for the dance studio. I asked the dance department to include an announcement and program note about not filming the show, which they normally do, and make sure that the faculty, other dancers/choreographers, and myself were being vigilant about watching for recording devices. The dancers were worried about the dance being posted on the internet by random audience members, like Morgan, who “was scared that people might like film us or something, but I was also scared of the way I would be treated afterwards, like if people would expect things from me or think I was a different person because I did this dance.” In fact, during dress rehearsal, one of the tech people filmed the dance on their phone and one of the other choreographers told him to delete it and made sure that he did. That irked some of the dancers, and making them uncomfortable and a little worried for the actual show.

During tech week, the actions and words of faculty and other dancers towards the dancers and me elucidated their attitudes towards the dance. During the lighting tech, one of the professors got up and walked out of our rehearsal, which offended many of the dancers. Morgan “felt really disrespected by [her]. The way she looked at us, the way she

talked about us like we weren't there and how in tech rehearsal she just got up and left as soon as we entered the room." Other dancers added:

"Dance is supposed to be about any form of self-expression through movement...I feel like as a dance professor, you should be more open. I understand if it goes against your conservative values, but at least be professional and open about it and to not leave during the showing or dress rehearsal, or you know, make comments about it." - Tessa

"As heads of the department, they should be constructive and supportive of all the dancers participating in their show and I think it's already a really big obstacle to have to appear confident to a large audience and it's kind of degrading when people would just walk out in the middle of our piece." - Carmella

Other micro-aggressions from faculty occurred throughout the tech rehearsals and performances that bothered the dancers:

"[One of the professors] asked me if I owned 5 ½ inch tall clear heels! Prior to doing this dance! And I was baffled! *Yes*, I owned them as weapons (laughs)...it made me feel like I wasn't good enough, it made me question being in the dance and my motives. Yeah it just made me feel like they didn't think that what we were doing qualified as dance, first of all, or difficult. And it really minimized how much work that we put into it." - Lauren

"I was in the bathroom with [a professor] at one point and she was complementing one of the other dancers and she was like 'yeah I just like to make sure I say good job to everyone' and then she saw me and was like 'oh hi Morgan' and like walked out." - Morgan

"The one thing that really bothered me was dress rehearsal where I went up to watch, and I was wearing my outfit but I had my sweater over the top...and I feel like that is very normal for college aged girls...and I went upstairs and [a professor] was like 'whoa girl, those are really short shorts'...and I just laughed, I was like I don't really know how to respond to that cause you're a professor, I don't wanna be like 'you shouldn't be making me feel bad for wearing this' and also it's my costume too, so it's not even that I chose to wear this out or something...why would you say that to make me feel bad?" - Angie

"When I was standing next to [another dancer, Alyssa], [a professor] came over and she's like 'oh, you did so great Alyssa' and I was just like (pause) I know she wasn't talking to me." - Tessa

"Since we knew that the dance department was so opposed to it, knowing that people in the audience were not happy about it and probably judging us, it made me feel really self-conscious and aware of myself in a negative way." - Haley

“I totally understand that it’s uncomfortable movement and not everyone is okay witnessing that or talking about sexuality or expressing sexuality but I think from members of the department I expected a little bit more support...there are ways to feel uncomfortable with something and still support the dancers...the people that have to perform and feel really confident about it.” - Carmella

These events led to dancers feeling negative and judged, instead of supported and safe.

Morgan was even worried that “certain professors who saw it might not respect me as much or think I’m not as good of a student” after the responses they were getting. Many of the dancers in the show were first years or sophomores who would presumably be working with faculty and taking their classes again in their time at school. These are examples of the ways in which the stigma of exotic dancing transfers into other contexts, even though it is being done in another setting with a different purpose and audience.

Although one could assume that age is the main factor, the dancers’ peers who were dancing in the concert also made some of the dancers feel uncomfortable with their comments and actions:

“Oh My Gosh! The way were received by other dancers who would make fun of us, like shake their booties terribly, they didn’t look good at all doing it! They were like ‘I should be in Max’s piece’...please. You auditioned...Max didn’t think you were good enough, so there (laughs)...things like that that are so passive aggressive, but fully elucidate that they have some sort of idea in their head that they’re superior...I mean I’m a trained dancer as well...there were other pieces that I could have been in had I chosen that.” - Lauren

“The way they looked at our dance was almost like it wasn’t really a dance...it seemed like some of the other dancers were annoyed...your piece, it was distracting, it was what a lot of people came to see and it was very different from everything else, it was very out there, it took away from other people’s pieces and maybe they felt upset about that.” - Morgan

Once the show started, however, the audience responded well to the piece, no one tried to film the show, and the faculty mostly stopped making negative comments. In fact, a few of the faculty made positive comments about the dance to me and my dancers,

saying it was a nice addition to the concert because it was a different style and the dancers were so talented. When Morgan talked to a professor after the show, “she was really happy with how it came out, and that was really good to hear. She was one of the only teachers who complemented me.” The audience cheered during the show and I overheard many people talking about how much they enjoyed it, or that it “wasn’t that bad” and they were confused about the severity of the warning. The dancers received polarized reactions from friends who loved the piece, were shocked by it, disapproved of it, or did not understand it. The comments that I got were all positive, and many people asked questions about the intent and what I was going to do with it next semester.

The faculty and student responses showed clearly the larger popular culture trend of stigmatizing exotic dancers, while celebrating the same movements in other contexts such as music videos, dance shows, and in clubs. The fact that certain faculty did not consider it “artistic choreography” showed the restrictions and categories that denote what is “art” and work to hide and devalue other dance forms that are not considered to be creative, deep, or appropriate enough for an academic dance setting. It took a lot of physical strength, flexibility, and skill to do the movements, and a lot of bravery and confidence to perform it in front of an audience. The disregard for the work that we had done and the seriousness with which we were approaching it was frustrating for the dancers, as quoted earlier, making them feel ostracized from the dance concert community. Putting this type of dance in the concert next to modern, ballet, and Irish step dance showed how dance is defined, and the fact that this dance is not respected made it easier to understand how much our culture disregards professional exotic dancers as

strippers rather than dancers or even acrobats. At this performance, the dancers were crossing the line for the faculty and some audience members into a grey area that approached stripping, because they were performing it for an audience that included men while wearing little clothing and having serious, seductive expressions. Exotic dance is not considered art in academia, so bringing the style into the formal dance concert against modern and ballet pieces was asserting that it has the merit to be in the concert dance world, and that is what I believe made certain faculty, dancers, and audience members so uncomfortable with the piece. It pushed the boundaries of what dance is as an art form, and what is acceptable in a dance concert setting.

Many dancers felt that the judgement they received from the outside was based partially on the audience and professors seeing them as a new person doing this movement, and the idea that they had been hiding this side of themselves previously, uncovering a private part of themselves that was revealed during the dance. While this may or may not be how the dancers felt about themselves, this ties into the binary of exotic dancers as deviant, overly sexual women, and college students as wholesome, educated, non-sexual women who are “above” that kind of movement. It fits into a limited idea of objectification which takes away the agency of the dancers and ignores the reasons that college students would want to do exotic dance, as well as exotic dancers who work to pay their way through college. The line that gets drawn between appropriate and inappropriate behavior in terms of women’s sexuality is vague, confusing, and hypocritical, because many of the movements are done on the dance floors of college parties, in music videos that are uncensored, and in dance and cheerleading troupes

during halftime shows. These movements were familiar for many of the dancers from their daily lives and their dance training, yet they were now being judged as a different type of *person* because of the context and costumes in which they were performing the movement.

The context of this performance ended up being the least accepting of this style of dance compared to the other two contexts. Exotic dancing in this context resulted in somewhat of a panic surrounding the creation of the dance, although the movement itself is not worse than what people have seen in public and popular culture. The negative comments that the dancers received about attire was really directed at their characters, showing how people (female faculty, in this case) control women's sexuality through shaming their clothes and appearance, and attaching those characteristics to identity. Ironically, the judgment and negative reactions that the faculty were worried about—which led to their censorship and control over the dance—came mostly from them. Their concern around the message of the dance and the appearance and reputations of the dancers turned the dance into something stigmatizing, shameful, and inappropriate. During the rehearsal process, the dancers had positive experiences dancing and were excited about being in the dance. The context of the college dance concert was changed by the reactions of the faculty and the discourse that they created in anticipation of a push-back from the audience that did not really happen. Of the parents who brought children to the show, very few of them took them outside during the dance, and most people asked me not about the dance itself, but about the warning and program note and how the dance departments had reacted to the dance. Some of the dancers talked about

negative reactions from friends who saw the piece and did not understand the point, the message, or why they were doing it. For example, Lauren said “There’s a reason why I have to closet myself in terms of being certain things, because it wouldn’t be received well in the normal population, it’s not even received well in this closed, safe space” and Haley felt her friends did not understand it because they felt it was “not bringing an issue to everyone’s attention, but just showing them stripping.” All of the dancers were concerned that the audience would not understand the larger message and point of the piece because we were not directly telling them through the movement, but they did not talk about many particularly negative or offensive experiences with audience members.

Dancer’s Experiences

In my interviews with the dancers, I asked them to reflect upon how they experiences in the dance affected them, especially relating to body image, confidence, and sexiness/sexuality/sexual expression. Their experiences reflect upon the dichotomies of rehearsal/performance, doing it for themselves/performing for others, looking sexy/being sexy, and “owning” the movement/being an object for sale. While dichotomies are not helpful when thinking about complex experiences, these separations and distinctions made it able for the dancers to think through their experience in the dance. I work to complicate and explain those dichotomies and reveal some of the underlying assumptions and stereotypes.

Body Image

For many dancers, dancing in the studio in rehearsals made them feel good about their bodies. For Morgan, “it probably made me feel better about my body...because I

realized my perceptions of myself are very skewed” and for Tessa, who described the movement as natural, she said, “while dancing, I felt just comfortable in my body and I didn’t feel like I need to hide it.” Kim added, “For me especially with my body changing, it was really cool to go up on that stage and own my curves and own my woman body and own my big butt (laughs)” and for Angie, “when I dance I feel better about my body. When I was performing it, I felt really good.” They all discuss feeling better about their bodies while dancing, especially while getting caught up in the movement, like Carmella:

“It’s weird because when I’m not dancing, that’s when I feel the most self-judgment and I think have the worst body image. But the movement itself makes me feel a thousand times better about my body...when I started moving, I was just so focused on enjoying every second of that movement and just expressing my sexuality a hundred percent and trying to be confident and just enjoying it, that there wasn’t room for that, which was really awesome and has been the best aspect of this entire thing.” - Carmella

The most common response from dancers was that the movement was fun and let them release or unleash something that they enjoyed doing, in a space that allowed them to do so. Being free to express themselves through this movement and feel good about their bodies through that reflects the erotic, as “it is a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing” (Lorde 54). The dancers were feeling in the doing and being able to work through the effects of the movement because of the safe rehearsal space.

The dancers tended to feel more comfortable in the dance studio than in the performance, because they felt that they were being judged by the audience, friends, other dancers, or faculty. Although many mentioned feeling exposed and uncomfortable with being “so bare” onstage, it did not bother them in rehearsal as much, because they did not

think people were judging them. They mentioned feeling supported, comfortable, relaxed, and carefree in private rehearsals as opposed to performances in little clothing:

“I don’t think we were ever nervous in rehearsal...we laughed it off together, and there is something really nerve-wracking about...when you’re performing, you know you have to bring it ten times more because you know there’s no room for that vulnerability.” - Carmella

“In the studio was fine, I got really comfortable with it, but onstage I was really self conscious.” - Morgan

Haley and Lauren also articulated the distinction between feeling good about themselves in rehearsal and feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious about their bodies in performance, saying:

“When I was doing it for myself and not thinking about the audience, it felt fine and comfortable, but when I started thinking about what the audience was thinking while I was doing those movements and being up on the stage naked, that’s when I started feeling uncomfortable.” - Haley

“During rehearsal I felt super empowered. It was great because you always had such positive feedback for us...and then having the other dancers there, we were always encouraging each other...whereas we didn’t have that when we performed it.” - Lauren

Once the movement became less private they felt that they were being watched and judged, they started focusing on the opinions of others instead of their own feelings. This distinction is important when comparing this context to the other two, because it reflects the main difference between them—one is private, designed for personal growth, and one is a public performance, designed to be watched. The fitness studio mirrors the rehearsal space, while the strip club mirrors the concert, although there are many differences between a club and the dance concert. One of the main differences is that people are expecting to see that style of movement and nudity in a strip club, causing much less discomfort than it did in the concert. That movement is appropriate in a strip club setting,

whereas it is not deemed appropriate in a concert setting. Another difference is that while there is stigma attached to strippers from the outside, once inside the club, they are desired, protected, and respected in a way because in that setting, the movement is normal and literally put on a pedestal above the audience. In the dance concert, however, the dancers were negatively stigmatized by certain audience members, faculty, and dancers because of its affiliation to stripping, where the movement is in fact normalized. The dance concert performance context is therefore the least comfortable for the dancers to be in.

There are clear differences in body positivity and comfort between rehearsal and performance, yet there were still negative feelings that came up for some dancers from comparing themselves to each other. While the dancers felt supported and close with the other women, Haley said she felt self-conscious sometimes while wearing little clothing, “especially dancing next to seven other girls who have perfect bodies.” Similarly, Lauren said:

“I just felt like my body wasn’t good enough, and there were moments where I did feel awkward...Because even though we weren’t competing for a man to give us money, I feel like I still have to compete against the other dancers like I need to be just as, if not more, sexy because my friends are coming and I wanna prove myself. No one wants to be the least desirable person in this group, so that was tricky and weird and hard for me.” - Lauren

Backstage before one of the performances, the dancers were talking about wanting each other’s body parts and putting them together to make the “perfect” body (I want Kim’s butt, Haley’s abs, etc). These women appeared highly confident and all had thin, fit body types, yet they still felt insecure about certain features. Angie commented on this, saying:

“I just found that really ironic, cause I feel like the dance is all about that...body image, women wanting to look like something else, and then we as the dancers totally did that backstage...Being in this dance you would think that we'd have more self confidence...and we talk about it and yet we still...seemed kind of insecure at that moment.” - Angie

Although the dancers talked about how the piece made them question what we normally think of as sexy, which I will discuss more later, it did not stop them from inevitably comparing their bodies to other women's and wanting to fit into a certain image of sexy. Self scrutiny for women is almost unavoidable in our culture with current beauty standards, and is heightened for professional dancers and women who are in the entertainment industry, to which appearance means getting a job. For instance, Carmella compared her feelings doing this movement to her body image during a classical dance class:

“I was more self-scrutinizing in a ballet class than I was in our rehearsal...There was something about our movement, I think the emphasis was more on owning what you've got and working with it as much as possible that I loved and I felt way better doing that and I felt sexier with this movement than I would in a class where I'm constantly critiquing myself or trying to embody a different dancer ideal that's more unrealistic.” - Carmella

This is similar to the many dancers from Flirty Girl who felt more comfortable dancing there than in classical dance classes, reflecting the hypocrisy of those dance forms; while exotic dancing is looked down upon for objectifying women and holding them to beauty ideals of sexiness, ballet and modern dance both require women to look a certain way and show off their bodies to audiences while wearing little clothing as well, just in a different context.

While the difference between rehearsal and performance might seem obvious, the incongruence between the dancers feeling comfortable and supported by the other

dancers and simultaneously competing with them is just as easily explainable, as it from the socialization of women to constantly compete for (male) attention. Lauren sums up the complexities of the different spaces and feelings well:

“In rehearsal we could build each other up, I wasn’t naked, I had the choice, we didn’t have other people scrutinizing us or our bodies... it was focusing on the community we were building...I did compare myself, but it didn’t matter cause we weren’t performing.” - Lauren

The dancers were able to feel good about their bodies while doing this type of movement in a safe space and while thinking only about themselves and their personal experience.

When they compared themselves to the other dancers and thought about what the audience may say, they noticed their flaws more and felt uncomfortable.

Confidence

Many dancers had their confidence pushed, tested, demanded, and built up from performing the dance onstage. As Carmella said, there was “pressure to be super confident, because I knew I didn’t want to make the audience feel any sort of discomfort and I think that they would have, had we revealed any personal discomfort.” Every dancer has to be confident while performing to an extent, but with the topic of this piece and the showiness of the movement, the dancers felt even more pressure to look confident, even if they did not necessarily feel it. Lauren felt that “it built a lot of character, and just learning that I can be sexy and portray that even though I didn’t feel it on the inside. It’s kind of like a cyclical thing cause it’s like that builds my confidence, therefore I can feel better about doing this dance.” The performativity of the confidence may have reduced its relationship to the erotic that the dancers had during rehearsal.

Instead of feeling deeply, they were putting on a performance to please the audience and

keep them from being uncomfortable. However, other dancers' experiences with the dance built their confidence from *not* trying to please the audience:

“The point is realizing it doesn't matter what other people think and embracing that. I guess it's something I can always look back to, like it's not something I feel all the time, of course, but it's something I can remember.” - Morgan
“Having to deal with outside criticism made me stronger, so it's not like it built up my self confidence, but it made the wearing on my self confidence a lot stronger...In terms of my confidence, I can't let other people affect it.” - Haley

Through this dance, they learned that confidence comes from not worrying about how others view them, which decreases self-deprecation. Their feelings are what matters, not others' judgments, which is an empowering realization. For Audre Lorde, “as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering and self-negation” (58). The dancers dismissal of others judgement in favor of their own feelings is an example of accessing the erotic within dance. Other positive experiences from dancers also reflected experiences of the erotic:

“I think it made me more open to trying new things, and to be more confident about trying something that I never thought about doing before...If I can do this, I can do anything.” - Tessa
“There were moments where I really was [confident], because I was working with my entire body and my entire performance...it wasn't like I was trying to hide parts of myself to enjoy that movement. I was just expressing me through that dance...I was expressing my own sexuality...that was I think experiencing self confidence. I think I've always known what it was and tried to be a self confident person, but there were a few times where I really fully experienced it and that was one of them.” - Carmella

Doing this type of movement gave some dancers the opportunity to build confidence and bring it into other areas of their lives. Tessa was able to feel comfortable in this movement, so much so that she would consider other activities that might seem scary. Carmella could genuinely feel good in her body and express herself without self doubt

through this movement and feel the difference between that confidence and other times where she still had self doubt. These experiences reflect the erotic “as a source of power and information” against the “false belief that only by the suppression of the erotic within our lives and consciousness can women be truly strong” (Lorde 54, 53). They are able to gain confidence through their deep feeling and self expression that gives them strength in other parts of their lives.

Sexy, Sexuality, and Sexual Expression

This dance for many dancers made them feel sexier because it let them see a different side of themselves that they either did not or could not express before. It also forced them out of their comfort zone into sexy movements and made them question if they were sexy and what that meant.

“I had to look at myself and believe that I was sexy in order to do the dance...It broke me out of my shell and made me realize that I can be sexy.” - Morgan
“I am not a very sexy person. But I guess...it’s normal...everyone has it in them, it’s just whether you decide to unleash it...There still might be a nervousness or a hesitancy with expressing myself sexually, because for me it’s different when I’m on the stage...so I guess just working on transferring it from the stage to real life.” - Tessa

“I knew it was there and I knew I was comfortable with it, but I was now able to unleash it.” - Kim

“It makes me question if it is sexy or not, but then I know that that’s what we were going for, so sometimes I do feel very sexy doing the dance, especially in my outfit...it made me question what sexy is and if I was doing enough to make it look sexy.” - Angie

“I was feeling really self conscious and not sexy, which is funny because I’ve done these movements before on stage...the difference is the context.” - Lauren
“I think this dance made me more comfortable with sexual expression because I think that sexuality and just sex in general is a hard thing to articulate and it can be taboo...and I think I’ve never really gotten to do that before, I’ve expressed sexuality in only very specific settings where it’s considered appropriate to do so and it’s only supported there.” - Carmella

While it gave certain dancers an outlet for personal expression and therefore access to the erotic, others felt the pressure to be sexy took away their genuine experience of it and its erotic potential. Clearly the dancers had mixed experiences and effects from the movement, but they highlight the importance of context for both. Whether the setting allowed them to express themselves and “unleash” a certain side of them that is normally hidden or constrained, or they felt pressured to be sexy in an uncomfortable, the context coded the movement in such a way that it had to be tied with being sexy, which is not necessarily how the dancers in the other two contexts felt. Many of the professional dancers and pole fitness dancers did not think of the movement as tied with sexiness and sex. For these dancers, the piece was about being sexy and their experiences reflect how that affected them.

Many dancers focused on the differences between them dancing in this “safe” context and space and professional exotic dancers who were exploited and doing it for different reasons. The themes of agency and ownership came up many times within the discussion of why they felt sexy and empowered while doing this movement in this context:

“This was our choice and we’re confident about doing this, we wanted to do this. It was completely for ourselves, we were doing this cause we were enjoying it, and I think that part made people the most uncomfortable, which is why it was even more enjoyable, cause it was funny...That part specifically was completely about sexual fulfillment, and it was uncomfortable for people to watch. They couldn't handle it (laughs).” - Morgan

“I completely owned it, like what I was doing, it was for me and to share to people look what I can do...there’s a very distinct line of you can’t touch this, you can’t have this, this is for me...that’s what makes it empowering, rather than giving it to someone for money, because they’re taking away that power for their own use.” - Kim

“I didn’t feel like I was a victim of the movement ever, I felt like I was in control and in charge...It’s just about flipping a switch, making it internal, making it for you, and making it about ownership as opposed to selling it to someone...I just think it ultimately was so awesome that we were given this opportunity to be able to be really honest with ourselves and with our expression of sexuality without ever feeling like we were being sold to people or exploited or objectified in anyway.” - Carmella

Through this discussion, they took away professional exotic dancers’ agency and also defined lines of ownership over movement that in reality are blurry and subjective. For instance, Kim went back on her original statement by saying that women can make the choice to be exotic dancers and that it’s not inherently exploitative, but she does not give a clear example of what the difference looks like:

“If a woman knows herself and know no man will own her power or anything and she makes money off of doing that, then I think that it’s anyone’s choice really, it’s what makes you happy really...if they’re able to do it and own it, then I support it.” - Kim

She then says women doing it in fitness classes, for “for yourself, I think is really beneficial in society.” (Kim) The line for her seems to be the intention of the women behind it, although she does not define how to “own it” and maintain power. In reality, there is a constant power exchange between the exotic dancers and their clients, as there is with any relationship and any performance, however that power exchange should and does not take away the agency of the dancers.

There is a division, similar to the other contexts, between the dancers’ view of what mainstream sexy is and what their definition of sexy is, which sometimes gets blurred when discussing the piece itself. The pressure to be sexy seems to be referring to a mainstream idea of sexy, not their own personal definitions of sexiness.

“I realize that...people will find me sexy if I'm being completely myself, like there's a better chance that I feel sexy and be perceived as sexy. A lot of times I think, especially in the media, we act as if sexy is completely visual and it's censoring yourself. You have to be a very specific thing to be sexy, but I think it's much broader than that...I never really believed in the media sexy to begin with...Although my idea of sexy was already that way, I didn't think of myself as sexy...so now it made me connect that to myself.” - Morgan

“When I think of sexy I think of a woman who's sexy and in charge, but not necessarily naked dancing for an audience. My idea of sexy is less sexual, but strong and empowered...it's a different aspect of sexy, I guess, dancing like that...It made me feel more comfortable with being sexy.” - Haley

“Feeling sexy is about having a lot of confidence in yourself and how you look, and feeling sexy just depends on the person...I used to think about sexy in the traditional sense, like you had to be made up, but I think it's more of a mind-set as well. So you can be outwardly sexy, in appearance, but I think there's more of a mental aspect to it.” - Tessa

“The older I've gotten, the more I've realized it's just all about personality...when it comes to attracting the opposite sex or people you like...It made me aware of the more widespread view of sexy...I feel like those moves are what you see in the media or what the definition of as sexy is in our culture. I don't feel that I have changed really, personally in the way that I express myself sexually.” - Angie

“Mainstream sexy...for most girls requires alterations...in order to embody the sexy ideal and I've done that, and yeah there are moments when it works and I feel thin and awesome and beautiful and sexy tonight but it's never a lasting thing, whereas acknowledging and owning every part of yourself in order to feel sexy is way more empowering in the long run and that's what I really liked about this piece is we had to do that and it really felt great in the long run.” - Carmella

The dancers here feel that there is a difference between mainstream sexiness, which some felt the dance portrayed and some did not, and their personal definitions of sexiness which depended more on personality, attraction, confidence, naturalness, and strength.

There is also, for Lauren, a separation between sexual expression, which is private and meant for a partner, and performing a certain kind of sexuality through dance, which is public and fake:

“This dance helped me to realize that there are these delineations...I realized that I do feel sexy doing these dances, but it has nothing to do with my own sexual behavior, like it's not a part of my foreplay...it's not something that's intricately

related...It's a compartmentalized side of me, side of who I am as a dancer, it's not a side of who I am in my own personal life...I think that now they think they have a preview of what it's like to have sex with me or something funny like that...I think it is hard for them to separate that." - Lauren

Being sexy, then is personally defined and can be accessed through many different avenues, including exotic dance movement. But it can embody and mean more than just sex or beauty, it can be extended to mean something similar to the erotic. Once again, sexiness as women define it themselves has more to do with the erotic than with the pornographic, which is how it is defined by popular culture.

Some dancers touched more directly on this experience as it relates to the erotic:

"Especially for a woman, it's big form of empowerment for us, when you feel sexy, you feel like you have something that you completely 100% control and you just feel really good about yourself and you just feel like you can take on the world...I think we were reclaiming it, cause it was us showcasing our body...we were showing off what we have." - Kim

"It reminds me of Use of the Erotic by Audre Lorde like how she talks about how the erotic is bringing your insides out, living from within, within outward. I guess that would be what sexy is because you're just being completely yourself and not afraid and letting it show. It's almost like opening yourself up, so your insides become your outsides. It doesn't matter what your perceived beauty is at that point, cause it's just, you're completely you." - Morgan

"I think that being sexy boosts your confidence...I feel better about myself and I feel confident going out into situations...I don't think many people have danced sexually for themselves." - Haley

The erotic, as "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings," can be sought and found within exotic dance in this context, especially in rehearsals (Lorde 54). They experience this through working through their ideas of sexy and how they feel about themselves during the dance. It does not necessarily always mean feeling positive, but giving them a space to have their own feelings and opinions without restricting them or convincing them otherwise.

Through the process, many dancers were able to work through how their identities related to their personas, how mainstream views of sexy dictated how they saw themselves, and how constrained they felt by society in terms of the appropriateness of the movement. They were able to feel free to express and explore new or hidden areas of themselves in rehearsal, but felt the pressure, judgment and scrutiny of mainstream culture once they had to perform it for an audience. The movement in the context of rehearsal, could help them access the erotic in a safe, supportive environment without the negative connotations and stigma. However, once confronted with censorship and judgement from faculty, disregard and mocking from other dancers, and mixed reactions from audience members that ranged from confusion to unquestioning enjoyment to disapproval, they felt self conscious and uncomfortable and had to re-evaluate their relationships with and ideas of sexiness, objectification, confidence, and stigma. While each ultimately had a unique experience that affected them personally in different ways, they all felt that the performance was a much different experience than rehearsals, reflecting the important role of the spectator in both exotic dance movement and explorations of the erotic.

Spring Concert

For my spring piece, I decided to create a mini thesis paper in dance form, by introducing and contextualizing each chapter as a section of the dance and then looking at the movement through the lens of the erotic. Here I will discuss some of the decisions I made regarding choreographic intent, movement content, spacing, costumes, music, and lighting. This reflects how the research affected the choreographic process and vice versa.

Certain movements and the movement of the chairs are motifs throughout the piece, traveling through each context/section. This is meant to show the continuity and relationships between all three contexts and the erotic, while the music, costumes, spacing and facing, and lighting is meant to highlight the differences between the contexts, especially in purpose, intent, and experiences of the dancers. Since the dancers' experiences are the most important part of the project, they choreographed most of the last section, which I will discuss later, and had input in the other sections. Throughout the dance they become more clothed, starting in bras and shorts and ending in color- and style-coordinated pedestrian clothing. This was meant to be the opposite of stripping, to show that this movement can be done in different ways and to make the audience question their perceptions of the dancers based on things like clothing, location, and intent, even with the same content.

For the first section, I chose to include the large group sections of my piece from the fall that highlighted the sexy movement in a choreographed, unison way that shows that it is a dance for a stage performance, not improvised or directed at a specific person/client. The costumes for the first section are small shorts, bras, and high heels, which is what they wore for the fall concert as well. The music is about stripping and sexual dancing, so that the lyrics directly reference the movements they are doing, featuring "Ayo Technology" by 50 Cent featuring Justin Timberlake, "Me and You" by Cassie, "Booty Wurk (One Cheek at a Time)" by T-Pain, and "I'm 'n Luv (Wit a Stripper)" by T-Pain. It reflects the context of a dance concert, since it is carefully choreographed with the showiness of a performance for a large audience who is separated from the dancers.

The facing is frontal the entire time in this section to make it clear that this is a dance performance for *this* audience, differentiating it from the other sections/contexts.

Originally, the movement was based on exotic dance movement that would be seen in a strip club, although performed in a more choreographed, stylized way. However, after going to strip clubs and seeing the dancing there, this section is much more cleaned, pruned, and planned, similar to a music video or dance team piece. It looks very different from the styles they are doing in the other contexts—more showy and particularly crafted—although they share many specific movements. This section is the most “sexually explicit” (although, it is very similar to a music video) because they are wearing the least amount of clothes, it is facing front, and the intent is performing for this audience. This section was also meant to shock the audience and bring out their discomfort with this style of movement right away, to set the tone so that the other sections could break down the misconceptions and stereotypes of what it means to do exotic dance.

The second section is designed to look like a Flirty Girl Fitness class, with a teacher leading a warm up and chair dance routine. The costumes are gym clothes with no shoes, to make it look like a normal dance fitness class. The music is upbeat pop and hip hop hits, not referencing stripping directly, although they do have lyrics about sex and dance. Since the studio plays mostly the top popular hit songs, I chose Britney Spears’s “Till the World Ends” and Beyonce’s “Partition” to reflect the all-female atmosphere and the styles of music they play. The chairs are arranged to look like a studio, with chairs on one side and in front, matching the dancers facing first to the side and then front. The fact

that the chairs block part of the front and side of the stage and face inward creates a fake wall between the dancers and the audience, giving the effect of peeking and listening in, rather than watching a show. This changes the audience's gaze so that they are looking in on a class, which takes away the performativity of the dancing, although they are still technically performing for the audience. The "teacher" speaks to the "class" throughout this section using a microphone, saying things like "make it sexy, ladies!" and "is everyone ready to have fun and get fit?". The movements are similar, although more aerobic, than the other sections. The routines are not as clean and choreographed because it is a class and not a performance, and it is clear from their facings, demeanor, chair placement, and the "teacher" talking, that this is a class and not meant for anyone to be watching. I asked the dancers to be chatting with each other, enjoying themselves, and not as worried about how they look, to reflect the more casual, fun, friendly feel of the studio.

The third section, which is supposed to be "inside" of a strip club, is set up so that the audience is seeing the dressing room of the club, with the dancers getting ready, doing their makeup, stretching, getting dressed/undressed, and talking to each other. The scrim is set up farther upstage and shows the silhouettes of the dancers behind it, who are supposed to be dancing on the stage in the club. There are a dance bar (which calls attention to the relation of pole dance to traditional dance forms) and two chairs behind the scrim which the dancers use throughout the section. While the dancers face the audience in front of the scrim, they are doing pedestrian activities that indicate the mundaneness of the backstage area of a club and remind the audience that the dancers are

normal people doing a job. This normal, almost boring everyday activity is juxtaposed with the highly performative movement they are doing behind the scrim in silhouette, which is the slow sultry gyrating movements seen in strip clubs. The effect of the silhouette is that the audience cannot see whether the dancers are naked or not. Some of the dancers have robes and slips on at various points over their performance outfits that they take off before going onstage or strip off during the performance behind the scrim; since I could not have them wearing thongs and pasties or being nude onstage, I chose to have them more clothed than other sections, in pedestrian clothing or robes. By having the fake audience of the strip club be on the other side of the scrim, the dance concert audience was taken out of the position of the spectator/male gaze and into the personal lives of the dancers, although they were technically still performing for them. I used muffled club music that sounded like a distant, incoherent rap song to further the audience's feeling of separation from the stage. By switching the gaze in this scene and showing a snapshot of the dancers' personal experiences and everyday lives, it brought up questions of performativity versus identity, objectification versus agency, labor versus pleasure, and discourse versus lived experience.

The final section brings this movement into the realm of Audre Lorde's erotic and looks at how sexual movement can be used in positive, transformative, transgressive ways. For this section, I asked the dancers to read Audre Lorde's "Uses of the Erotic," pick a quote or paragraph that inspired or stood out to them, and choreograph a short movement phrase to go with the words they chose. I told them it could be in any style of dance that they wanted, but that I wanted it to come from them, expressing how they

experienced the erotic in their lives. Once they had their phrases, I put them into groups and had them do their phrases together and work out a relationship or conversation with each other. This turned out beautifully without much direction, and became most of the last section. The first time we did the phrases all together and I put on the music on a whim to try it, it was magical. We all looked at each other and said that it was perfect and that is what we wanted it to be. The movements in the final section still reflect and comment upon the exotic dance movement, although it laced within a more contemporary style.

I choreographed a unison group section which brought them together with powerful movement that reflected their journey and growth through the dance and their relationship to each other and community they formed. They were in a circular formation facing each other, a mixed-facing scattered formation and two lines facing each other, which again took the presentational quality away from the movement and focused on the community coming together. The chairs were arranged in a semicircle across the back of the stage, with the effect of the audience being the other side of the circle, bringing the audience in as part of the community. As the climax of the final section, it was meant to show how women can share in these experiences together and support each other in finding the erotic. In the very end, they return to the beginning choreography with them doing small movements in a formation spread across the stage, with some of them onstage. They are doing the same exact movements, but they are wearing more clothing and doing it to different music, having a different effect that forces the audience to question how their perception of them has changed since the beginning.

I chose to use the instrumental version of Alicia Keys' "Brand New Me," because the sound and lyrics of the song went well with the intentions and meaning of the final section, representing a new way of thinking and experiencing exotic dance. Since the words of Audre Lorde are integral to the thesis and to the phrases they created, I put her text over the music, and had the dancers read it to have their voices represented. Their costumes are based on the idea of a fellow student in Dance Production class to have them wear something that they felt was sexy, not necessarily what is traditionally thought of as sexy (like knowledge, natural beauty, humor, etc), and have them all be in red. I liked the idea of nontraditional notions of what is sexy and the color of red as it suggests power, strength, anger, love, and lust. I added black and white to the color palette so that they would still have individuality to differentiate between them.

More so than any other choreography I have done, this piece was a collaborative process, in which we talked as a group about the intent and meaning of the piece often. While I had a vision and assigned large portions of choreography, I used many of their suggestions for how to piece it all together, which sections they wanted to do, what movements they liked or did not feel comfortable with, and what they thought about the meaning and direction of the piece.

When one of the dancers left in February after performing in the fall piece, it was surprising and sad for the entire cast. Rehearsals had been a little tense, with people getting tired and overly comfortable with the choreography due to the time in the semester. The dancer did not seem to like the last section and increasingly did not want to participate in rehearsals; she was late many times, missed some rehearsals, and was not

enthusiastic. When she emailed me saying she was leaving the piece, she said that she felt uncomfortable and had personal issues that made the last section difficult for her to do. Interestingly, the earlier sections which were purely performing exotic dance movements without personal content were easier for her to perform, but the section in which she was supposed to express her inner erotic and reflect upon her experiences, not only in the dance but in many aspects of her life, made her uncomfortable. It reflected the idea that exotic dancing may be just a performance for many women, while full expression of the erotic goes past the performance aspect into a deeper feelings and experience.

During the performances of the spring concert, the feedback from the audience, professors and other dancers in the show was much more positive. Many people approached me and said that they really enjoyed “where the piece went,” “where it ended up,” the “changes” that I made, and so forth. From their language, I questioned whether they thought I had just happened upon this, as opposed to the deliberate and thoughtful decisions that I made throughout the process, or whether they were merely relieved to see it have a “meaning” after last semester. While the reactions were less confused and significantly more positive generally, I still felt that people were uncomfortable about parts of the dance, but accepted it because there was some sort of resolution that they could grasp onto. There were also still some judgmental reactions, such as a faculty member commenting to three dancers in one of her classes, “y’all are sluts, by the way” after seeing the entire piece. While she may have been joking, this was not taken lightly by the dancers, who came and told me and the rest of the dancers in the piece, saying they were surprised, offended, and uncomfortable. In addition to being in a position of power

over them (she is still grading them in class), not having a close enough relationship for them to know how to interpret the comment, and possibly being construed as sexual harassment, this goes against the dance's message and indicates a huge misunderstanding of the piece. Backstage, another faculty member mocked their bow (in which they first bowed forward and then turned and bowed backward before posing) by bending over and hitting her butt while laughing. In addition, during one of the showings, a faculty member who was not familiar with the fall piece remarked about not knowing whether they did this for a living and said that one of the sections with tricks was not "artistic." A warning about suggestive content was added to the program and posted around the theater, and the dancers were warned about showing too much skin, especially their butts, and required to wear shorts with double sided tape to secure them down. These incidents reflected the judgments made in the fall and reminded the dancers and I that people may still react negatively or be confused about the meaning of the dance, even when it was much clearer.

The negative and confused reactions, especially from some of the older audience members and faculty, suggested a difference in judgment based on age. Many of the younger audience members may be more willing to accept sex positivity as a concept and an empowering lifestyle choice, especially in the context of a liberal arts college. Many dancers alluded to this as well, yet it does not explain the reactions of some audience members and other dancers in the fall concert. Some of the audience, regardless of age, was still confused about the different sections, how they related to each other, and the overlying message. Partly, I did not feel the need to supply clear answers, as this is a

creative artwork and a highly complex topic, and partly I think the shock of the dancing makes people less open to new ideas about its nature and purpose.

Conclusion

The experience of making this dance revealed the ways in which women's bodies and sexuality are constantly being watched, regulated, and shamed, even in settings which claim to value women's empowerment, agency, and self-expression. While I started out this project in the mindset of feeling uncomfortable and conflicted about public nudity, overt expressions of sexuality, and paying for sex work in general, the experience of talking to the dancers in each context and hearing other people's comments about my thesis dance and paper made me realize the harsh and often hypocritical panic surrounding women's sexuality. The dancers, while feeling more comfortable about performing this version of the piece, remarked before the first performance that they forgot how scary it was to perform it in front of an audience, and how nervous they got before going onstage, partially because of people's reactions and judgments. I would argue that what ultimately makes people uncomfortable is not women being "objectified" by men, but women being publicly confident about their bodies and sexuality. More often than not, women are uncomfortable watching other women dance in this way, possibly because they are "taught to separate the erotic demand from most vital areas of [their] lives other than sex" (Lorde 55). There is a palpable discomfort and revulsion in seeing women enjoying dancing and moving in an erotic way in public, because it is seen as a private expression and encouraged only in certain settings.

For instance, in the strip club, it is seen as normal, enjoyable, and comfortable for patrons because the context is set up and created for that type of dancing to occur. The fitness studio is set up for women to express themselves and explore the erotic privately. Yet in the college dance concert, it is not considered normal or appropriate, and so it helps *create* the negative and judgmental perspectives that it is so worried about neutralizing in the public audience. Since the women in this setting were not doing it for money or specifically for male enjoyment or arousal, which are often the reasons given for it making people uncomfortable, there is little reason for worrying about it being exploitative, objectifying, or disrespectful to women unless the audience members or faculty assign that to the dancing itself, which I argue that they do. As Lorde explains, “we have often turned away from the exploration and consideration of the erotic as a source of power and information, confusing it with its opposite, the pornographic” (54). The dancing, because of its connotation and connection to stripping and an assumed lack of agency, power, and respect, still carries with it the stigma and judgment of professional exotic dance for some audience members and dance faculty. The choreography is being confused with the pornographic and categorized as such, although it has the potential, and for some the reality, of being a part of the erotic as an exploration of feeling, and through that, a transgression of norms.

Conclusion

The erotic is a key to unlocking women's potential, and I argue it can be accessed by women using exotic dance movement, even within the power structures that constrain women's sexuality. As a tool of transgression, women can actively work against the norms that dictate how they should act, look, and feel by experiencing the depth of feeling of the erotic and using it for their own power. Exotic dance in each context may be read as objectifying, or empowering, or even silly by outsiders, but the experiences of the dancers need to be taken into consideration. Exotic dancing in each context gives many women a way to access the erotic and transgress normative ideas of female sexuality and power. While I hope to have conveyed some of these possibilities, studying exotic dance in different contexts merits more research in scholarship, especially focusing on the women themselves and valuing their experiences. The future of this study should be grounded in interdisciplinarity, as dancing requires the connection of mind and body, and so the writing should reflect that.

Additionally, in my chapters I did not have time to fully discuss the ways in which “women...people of color, gay men, the disenfranchised, as well as people with disabilities, have historically been tied to the material conditions of their bodies, structuring an identity that has repeatedly been constructed as oppressively and basely physical, as a lack of selfhood—a lack of moral, spiritual, and social agency” (Albright 7). The women that I interviewed did not bring up how their identity influenced their experiences directly, and I did not feel comfortable enough asking most women, except a few of the dancers in my piece with whom I was close. Since dancers are “marginalized

as being *only* their bodies because they work intensively *with* their bodies,” it is impossible to ignore the realities of their bodies in influencing both their experiences and how they are perceived by audience members (7). For instance, one of the dancer’s in this piece’s friend asked her if she was the only Asian in it, implying that no other Asian women would be comfortable enough or willing to do it. Similarly, in the clubs, they hire a variety of women so that the customers have every “type” to choose from, since many men want a specific ethnicity and body type. Class was another unspoken factor that affected their experiences and the way they are perceived. For example, professional exotic dancers are thought to be “desperate” and poor, although many dancers make a lot of money, while elite college students are thought to be rich but may be on full scholarship. Although the women did not talk about themselves, I was purposeful about interviewing women with a wide range of races, ethnicities, body types, and ages, to collect many voices and experiences. While it did not come into my central argument, the way that women’s bodies are always gendered, racialized, and classed effects how the audience perceives them and how they experience the movement. Therefore, it was my aim with the dances to ask “that the audience see their bodies as a source of cultural identity—a physical presence that moves with and through its gendered, racial, and social meanings” by focusing on “the dancer’s specific physical, emotional, and cultural experiences within the moment of dancing” (Albright xxvi). Going ahead, more work should be done on the effects that their identity has on their experiences of exotic dance.

Another topic that merits more discussion is exotic dance’s relationship within different contexts and to broader culture. The stigma surrounding the dance form affects

dancers differently depending on where they perform it, and the idea that some places are “safe” demands further questioning. In addition, the discourse surrounding exotic dance in mainstream culture is far behind the scholarship, leaving dancers with the burden of explaining the nuances of their experiences. The debates of feminist scholars need to enter mainstream culture so that it can catch up, and hopefully understand the deeper layers of feeling present in the dancing. The transgressive potential of exotic dance is being blocked by our society saying that exotic dance can only be and mean one thing: women’s oppression, yet that is not what dancers themselves are saying. Listening to dancers, spreading new discourse on exotic dance, and talking about it in interdisciplinary and intersectional terms, can expand the current ideas about exotic dance in transformative and transgressive ways.

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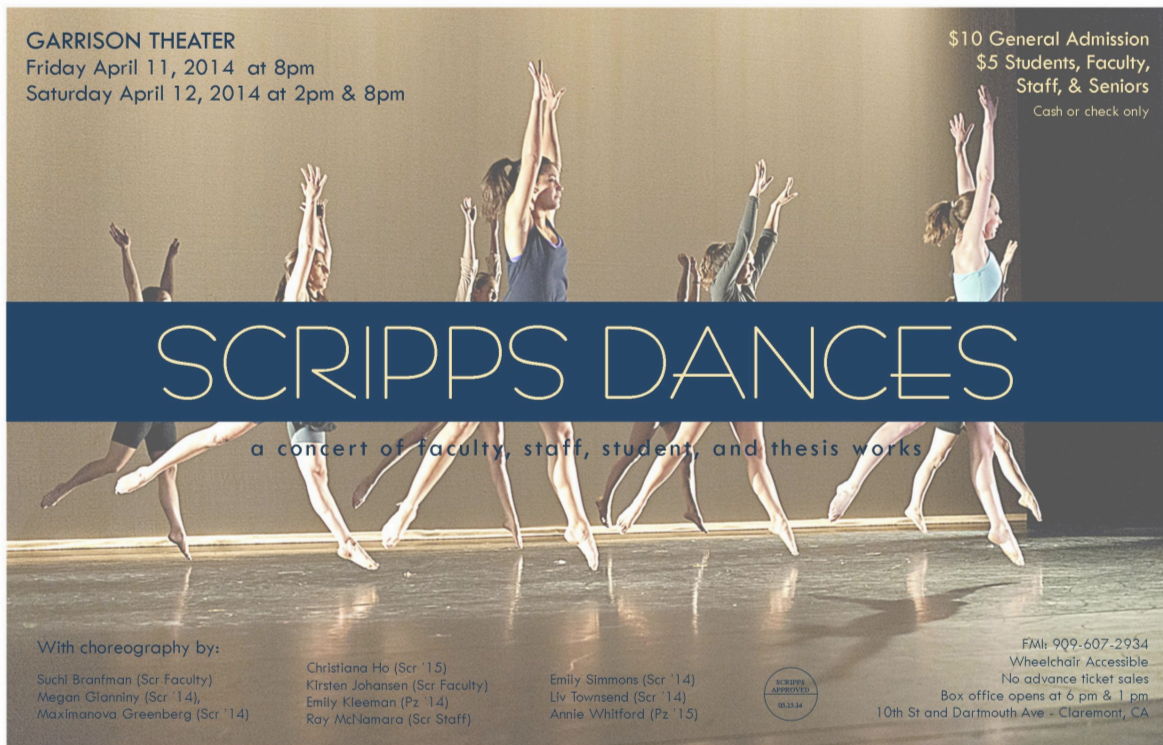
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Appendix A: Poster for the Spring Dance Concert



GARRISON THEATER
Friday April 11, 2014 at 8pm
Saturday April 12, 2014 at 2pm & 8pm

\$10 General Admission
\$5 Students, Faculty,
Staff, & Seniors
Cash or check only

SCRIPPS DANCES

a concert of faculty, staff, student, and thesis works

With choreography by:

Suchi Branfman (Scr Faculty)	Christiana Ho (Scr '15)	Emily Simmons (Scr '14)
Megan Glanniny (Scr '14)	Kirsten Johansen (Scr Faculty)	Liv Townsend (Scr '14)
Maximanova Greenberg (Scr '14)	Emily Kleeman (Pz '14)	Annie Whitford (Pz '15)
	Ray McNamara (Scr Staff)	

FMI: 909-607-2934
Wheelchair Accessible
No advance ticket sales
Box office opens at 6 pm & 1 pm
10th St and Dartmouth Ave - Claremont, CA

SCRIPPS APPROVED
10.13.14

Appendix B: Sample Questions for Dancers

How do you feel about this style of dancing?

How does dancing make you feel?

How does dancing here make you feel?

Which movements are your favorites?

When you are dancing, how do you feel about your body?

Has dancing changed your body image?

What does self-confidence mean to you?

Has dancing changed your self confidence?

What does it mean to you to be sexy?

How dancing changed your view or experience of being sexy?

How important do you think it is to be sexy?

What do sexuality and sexual expression mean to you?

How does this dancing influence your experience of sexuality and sexual expression?

How dancing changed your view or experience of sexuality and sexual expression?

What is the message you are trying to send to audience members or observers?

How do you feel your are seen by your audience or observers?

What is your motivation behind doing this type of movement?