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**CHOREOGRAPHING THE LINE: EXPLORING THE  
ART/OBSCENITY PARADOX OF FEMININE SEXUALITY WITHIN  
THE CONTEXT OF POLE DANCE**

by

**CAMERON BOUCHER-KHAN**

**SUBMITTED TO SCRIPPS COLLEGE IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT  
OF THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF ARTS**

**PROFESSOR WILLIAMSON**

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**APRIL 29, 2022**

“The distinctions between inside and outside, between finite form and form without limit, need to be continuously drawn. This requirement applies to representations of the female body in high mass culture. It extends to the way in which the categories of art and pornography are defined and maintained. In nearly every case, however, there is a point where the systems break down, where an object seems to defy classification and where the values themselves are exposed and questioned”

- Lynda Nead, *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*

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## Acknowledgements

Thank you to the Scripps Dance Department, Kevin Williamson, Ronnie Brosterman and Pat Bostock-Smith, and for the endless support, encouragement and instruction.

Thank you to Martha Gonzalez and Kevin Williamson for giving me their wisdom and guidance through this process, and believing in my work.

Thank you to Sasha Marlan-Librett for finishing and caring for my piece when I was in isolation for coronavirus. I could not have finished this without you.

Thank you to my beautiful, talented and courageous dancers, Abby Barahonu, Tierney, O'Keefe, Divya Ahuja, Kate Olsen, Megan Itagaki. Your trust in me, collaboration and assistance brought this project to life.

Thank you to my mom Jacqueline Boucher, my dad Mario Khan, and my aunt Jamie Boucher for loving me, supporting me, encouraging me and cheering me on.

Lastly, thank you to all of my pole dance teachers who have taught, inspired me and given me the tools to fall deeply in love with myself and this art form.

## Abstract

This project seeks to explore the relationships between pole dance and pole fitness, art and obscenity and respectability as it relates to work, class, and social systems. It analyzes the way female sexuality is accepted or rejected within society and explores the boundaries between the two through the staging of pole and contemporary dance. The dichotomy between art and obscenity is explored in the relationship between stripper pole dance, and the fast-growing pole fitness community. Within this relationship, strippers are demonized as obscene, while pole fitness dancers' labor is viewed as artistic, despite the sexuality present in both. The difference between the two lies in the commodification of sexuality, which reveals a classist approach to determining good and bad. The research done in this project was used to create a dance piece to be performed at Scripps Dances 2022 that sought to reveal contradictory ways in which sexuality is praised and vilified, and explore where the line between the two is drawn.

## Introduction

The following project is a research-based dance project that questions and critiques conceptions of sexuality, art, bodies, and movement. It seeks to analyze our understanding of the line between art and deviancy, especially in the context of pole dancing. This paper outlines 3 main arguments and concludes with a choreographic process and analysis on the subject. The 3 arguments are one, that the history of pole dancing undisputedly comes from strippers and sex workers, two, that other narratives surrounding pole that distance themselves from strippers serve as a way for pole fitness dancers to legitimize their own practice of pole through the erasure and denigration of strippers, and three, that good and bad versions of sexuality are not only contradictory, but heavily rooted in racism, classism and misogyny.

This project emerged from a very personal place as I am a pole dancer. I began pole dancing in June of 2019. I convinced my mom to go to a \$10 intro class with me, and we had so much fun we continued on for the rest of the summer. During my first class I was instantly hooked and obsessed with getting good. I have identified as a dancer since I was 4 and have had a very contentious relationship with my body and movement that led to feelings of insecurity and inadequacy. Pole became a place for me to reclaim dance and to fall in love with movement again. I am very serious about contemporary pole, which is heavily influenced by my background in dance. After pole dancing in multiple different places and posting content online, I have noticed a strange attitude and idea about the role of stripping in pole dance. It began when I first switched dance studios...

The first studio I attended was called Jordan's Paradise in Washington, DC. Jordan's has since closed down, but was owned by a stripper whose stage name was Jordan's Paradise. The

environment there was fun, and freeing. The studio was decorated with colorful lights, painted purple, and students were encouraged to dance and embrace their sexuality. Once the studio was closed, I was forced to switch to a different one. This studio was focused on fitness and less on dancing. The attitudes felt very anti-sex work, I heard on numerous occasions teacher making comments about how strippers are unskilled and strip clubs are nothing like what it is done at the studio. As I began posting more of my stuff online, some comments I received also rubbed me the wrong way. I remember reading one that said, “This is proof that pole dancing isn’t a sexual act but a art in dance and can be beautiful not sexual” (Figure 1). It was interesting that my work was reading as unsexual, when I was wearing minimal clothing and pole dancing. The comment was so aggressively anti-sex work, that it struck me all the assumptions that were being made about what I was doing vs. what strippers do. While my intention was not necessarily to be “sexual”, I dont believe it was devoid of sexuality either, but I was called beautiful. What about me and my dancing is any more beautiful than anyone else's? Why do “beautiful” and “sexual” exist on a binary? Can something not be both beautiful and sexual? These questions are what led me to the birth of my research topic.

I am a white, feminine presenting queer person from Washington DC. I come from a middle class family and was raised by my mom. I am of average height for a woman, and my build would be considered thin. I am a pole hobbyist. I have performed for money, but never in an environment that required stripping. I am not a sex worker. The only reason I say this, is to state my positionality within the argument. I couldn’t help but wonder whether the feedback I was receiving was because of how my appearance was being interpreted based on the systems of racism and ableism in society. Was it my whiteness that allowed me to be seen as beautiful instead of sexual? Or was it my body and small frame that allowed it? And why must sexuality

and beauty exist on a binary, can something not be both sexual and beautiful? These questions are what formed my research and became the seeds of this project. My research is based in my deep appreciation and gratitude for sex workers and strippers who through the years have created and popularized this art form that I am so in love with. Personal responsibility lies at the forefront of my work, and I believe firmly in advocating for the decriminalization of sex work. I also believe in dance and performance, as a powerful tool in producing ideas and causing audiences to think. My goal for this paper is to advocate for the liberation of sex workers and to create a dance that reflects these views and also seeks to embrace sexuality and critique our societal conceptions of sex, work, art and morality.

I begin in the first chapter The History of Modern Pole Dance discussing the narratives surrounding where pole dance originates from. I open with a discussion of common ways in which the history of pole dance is talked about, which deviates the history from its root in sex work. In light of this the next section tells the true history of pole, beginning from the early forms of stripping, to our current day. In the second chapter, Movement, Sexuality, Bodies and Respectability, I tackle the multiple ways in which sexuality permeates itself in different ways and how we create lines between good and bad forms of this sexuality. In the first section, Ballet and Respectability, I begin by discussing ballet, and how ballet is viewed in society despite its history and roots in sex work. Historically ballet has always been a staging of desire and male gaze, yet it is revered as being a pure and highly regarded art form. In the next section, Dance, Sex and Desire, I look at the ways in which sexuality exists not only in ballet and stripping, but in many forms of dance, from performances to social dancing. In the next section, Female Bodies and Degradation, I describe the ways in which women are objectified on a daily basis. The male gaze is always present, and is always there, but this section seeks to question whether being

objectified, automatically means one is being degraded? In the next section, Hating Barbie Pole; The Commodification of Sexuality, I discuss the views of pole fitness dancers, and how they view themselves as separate from strippers despite wanting to emulate them. Much of their disgust for strippers lies in the commodification of the same sexuality they seek to gain through learning pole dance. So what is wrong with commodification of female sexuality? Lastly in the final section, Straddling the Art/Obscenity Dichotomy, I discuss pole dancing through the lens of Lynda Nead, and the Art/Obscenity spectrum of female nudity. Female nudity is either seen as art or as obscenity, but what lies in between. Where exactly is this line drawn and why? What makes one nude body obscene and another revered? Together, these sections culminate to create an argument that criticizes and highlights the contradictory and misogynist ways in which we classify when sexuality can exist as acceptable and when it cannot. What lies at the center of these contradictions are opinions rooted in racism, classism and misogyny. The final chapter, Challenging the Art/Obscenity Dichotomy Through the Staging of Pole Dance and Sexual Movement Modalities, discusses the process and thought behind my creation of the piece *Nobody's Looking/Fantasy*. I discuss casting, the rehearsal process, technical and choreographic choices, and detail the overall experience of creating the piece.

## The History of Modern Pole Dance

When one thinks of pole dancing, there are powerful images that come to mind; Girls with long legs, thongs that sparkle, massive high heeled platforms, false eyelashes and lap dances, dollar bills falling from the sky. These are the most common images associated with pole dance, completely intertwined with strip club culture and stereotypes. This exists because pole dance is a part of stripping. While this fact might be obvious to many, due to the stigmatization surrounding pole dancing, there are also other prevailing narratives about where pole dance came from that are perplexing when analyzed. When researching the history of pole, one will find 12th century practices detailed in almost all the historiography from pole dancing blogs, studio websites, Wikipedia, pole forums, as well as scholarship surrounding pole dance. This recurring narrative is what I will be referring to as the “common history of pole dance”.

As I am dissecting this common history of pole dance, I must also clarify what I mean by pole dance; Pole dance, refers to the practice of pole dancing that prevails within society in strip clubs, pole dance studios, homes, performances, pole dance competitions and the media. Pole dance poles are most commonly made of stainless steel, titanium, brass, chrome, but can also be powder coated to provide extra grip. The standard diameter for these poles are 45mm, but are available in 40mm and 50mm as well. Dance poles can come in all sorts of heights to fit the desired ceiling to floor height, and if made well, are able to switch from spinning to static. Pole dance is most often performed in platform heels, or barefoot. There are a range of pole dancing styles including stripper style, contemporary pole, low flow, Russian exotic, and many more. What I refer to as modern pole dance is pole dancing as it is found in society today. The history

of pole dancing I will be discussing is the development and evolution towards modern pole dance.

## What the History is Pole Dance is NOT

When you search online for the history of pole dance, you find narratives detailing how the first instances of pole dancing were found in England, India and China. This isn't incorrect, practices involving a pole did exist in those places. But there is a difference between saying something existed, and saying something originated from something else. To say something originated from something else requires a path of origin, a linear history that demonstrates the evolution, growth and that then transforms and turns into something else. The inclusion of these narratives in the historiography of pole is more calculated than it may first seem; these narratives seek to create a history of pole that distances itself from strippers. In this chapter I will recount these pole-centric practices, the Maypole dance, Mallakham, and Chinese pole, in order to demonstrate that while a pole was involved, there is not enough evidence to suggest that any of these practices are the origin of modern pole dance. I will recount what I believe to be the true origin of pole dance, its growth from sideshows and burlesque, to modern pole dance in its many forms and as it exists today. I will also theorize how these narratives have been circulating as a means to legitimize pole dance as a fitness activity by historically separating it from stripping.

Beginning with 12th century Europe, we find there is a practice called the Maypole dance. The Maypole was said to be seen as a Pagan celebration of fertility. The pole in this instance symbolizes and stands for a phallic symbol. The Maypole dance took place at the annual



Beltane festival which was celebrated usually on May 1st.<sup>1</sup> During this fertility celebration young people would perform a dance that involved standing in a large circle around a very tall pole. The dancers circled around the pole would hold on to long colorful ribbons attached to the top of the center pole. The top of the pole was also decorated with a crown of flowers. The dancers would move around the pole in a circular motion until the ribbons were wrapped fully around the pole. To get the ribbons fully wrapped around the pole, the women would circle in one direction and then would circle in the other. The men and women would weave in and out of those coming towards them in order to create a weaving pattern with the ribbons as they wrap around the pole. Once all the ribbons were weaved together and wrapped tightly around the pole, the pole would be barely visible under the layer of ribbons.<sup>2</sup> This festival spread to Germany, England and Sweden. Before the Victorian Era, the Maypole festival would end with a feast and a celebratory Beltane orgy.<sup>3</sup>

The next dance that uses a pole, and is found in histories of pole dance, is called Mallakhamb. Mallakhamb is a fitness activity that uses a large wooden pole that originates in India. The name Mallakhamb comes from the combination of malla-, meaning wrestling, and -khamb meaning pole. It is a cultural fitness activity that can be traced back to the 12th century, and was originally developed in the state of Maharashtra. It uses a mixture of yoga and fitness poses both on rope and on pole.<sup>4</sup> Traditionally, Mallakham was performed on a large wooden pole made of Sheesham or Indian rosewood and was smoothed with the use of castor oil. There

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<sup>1</sup> "The Origins of the Maypole Dance," Learn Religions, accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.learnreligions.com/history-of-the-maypole-2561629>.

<sup>2</sup> "Celebrate Beltane With a Maypole Dance," Learn Religions, accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.learnreligions.com/celebrate-beltane-with-a-maypole-dance-2561651>.

<sup>3</sup> "(Learn) The History of Pole Dancing," *PolePedia* (blog), July 11, 2018, <https://polepedia.com/origin-history-pole-dancing/>.

<sup>4</sup> Jon Burt, "Mallakhamb: An investigation into the Indian physical practice of rope and pole Mallakhamb" (Edith Cowan University, Edith Cowan University, Research Online, Perth, Western Australia, Perth, Western Australia, 2010), <https://ro.ecu.edu.au/theses/1870>.

is evidence of Mallakhamb in a text titled ‘Manasolhas’ that belonged to the Chalukya kings. It details a sport where wrestlers would hold poses on a pole in order to maintain their agility and posture. At the end of the Chalukya dynasty the sport was abandoned until the 19th century when fitness instructor Balambhatt Dada Deodhar reintroduced the sport to his pupils.<sup>5</sup> It was initially practiced to develop strength, but has since developed into a sport, with its own championships held at district and national levels.<sup>6</sup> While some Mallakhamb poses resemble ones you may find in modern pole dancing, the Mallakhamb pole is much thicker and made of wood, and is historically a sport performed by men (Figure 2).

In addition, Chinese pole can be traced back to the 12th century and my research found that Chinese pole first existed as a form of strengthening exercise for warriors.<sup>7</sup> Overtime, Chinese pole became a form of circus entertainment. Chinese pole uses two large rubber coated poles and is highly acrobatic. These poles are generally 3 to 9 meters in height and approximately 3 to 4 inches in diameter.<sup>8</sup> Men climb these poles and perform acrobatic tricks by leaping from the different poles and holding poses. There are often multiple performers at once, and the men are fully clothed, often in multiple layers, to avoid friction burns from the rubber coating on the poles.<sup>9</sup> Chinese pole has historically always been performed by men; it was only recently that women began to join the practice.<sup>10</sup> Chinese pole still exists and is performed today as a circus art (Figure 3).

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<sup>5</sup> “Mallakhamb: History, Origin, Unique Features & More - Holidify,” accessed December 13, 2021, <https://www.holidify.com/pages/mallakhamb-4466.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Burt, “Mallakhamb.”

<sup>7</sup> “250 Years of Circus: The 800 Year-Old Art of the Chinese Pole | WhatsOnStage,” accessed December 13, 2021, [https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/circus-250-chinese-pole-sarah-cosset\\_46229.html](https://www.whatsonstage.com/london-theatre/news/circus-250-chinese-pole-sarah-cosset_46229.html).

<sup>8</sup> “Circus Dictionary,” October 13, 2009, <https://web.archive.org/web/20091013140359/http://www.nica.com.au/dictionary>.

<sup>9</sup> Carolina Are, “A History of Modern Pole Dance,” Blogger On Pole, July 8, 2021, <https://bloggeronpole.com/2021/07/a-history-of-modern-pole-dance/>.

<sup>10</sup> “250 Years of Circus.”

The Maypole dance, Mallakhamb and Chinese pole are all practices in which a pole is used. Of the three, the Maypole dance has the least in common with modern pole dance. The only similarity between pole dancing and the Maypole dance is the existence of a pole, but even so, the ways in which the poles are utilized are vastly different. Pole dancing utilized the pole to dance around and perform tricks, whereas the pole used in the Maypole celebration is used to hold ribbons, and act as something to weave the ribbons around. There is potentially an argument to be made that the Maypole celebration's view of the pole as a phallic symbol may be similar to the way the pole is viewed in strip clubs. But within strip clubs the point of the pole is not to be used as a phallic symbol, and more as a tool to perform tricks and dance on. Although dancers may choose to invoke the idea of the pole as a phallic symbol as a means of performance and arousal, that is not a defining characteristic of the pole itself or its purpose. Overall, modern pole dance and the Maypole dance bare very little resemblance to one another, making it pointless to include in the history of modern pole dance.

Mallakhamb and Chinese pole are more frequently cited as being the origin of pole dance than the Maypole dance. With good reason, Mallakhamb and Chinese pole do have a lot of similarities with modern pole dance, but I argue that there is not enough evidence to cite either of these practices as being part of the epistemological history of modern pole dance. For instance, Mallakhamb is and has always been a male dominated sport and today there are some female competitors, but it is generally a sport practiced by men. Modern pole dance on the other hand is a woman dominated dance form that draws from femme styles of movement, with some men occasionally participating.<sup>11</sup> A historical link between Mallakhamb and modern pole dance, besides similarities in some of the tricks, is weak and arguably non-existent. Modern pole dance in India though has taken off within recent decades.

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<sup>11</sup> Are, "A History of Modern Pole Dance."

Shilpa Rane is one of the pioneering pole dancers in India, being one of the first to open a pole studio in India. Rane's first experience with pole dancing was on a trip to London in 2002, where she encountered a "burlesque style of pole dancing".<sup>12</sup> Rane felt inspired to bring this back to India with her. On her studio website, she discusses how she researched show girls and burlesque dancers and attended shows in order to prepare for teaching pole dance.<sup>13</sup> While this is only one example, I think it highlights how stripping has influenced the creation of pole dance studios. For women like Rane, part of the appeal of pole dance is the sexiness, sexiness that does not come from Mallakhamb. While it is possible some Mallakhamb moves may influence or inspire pole dancers to try new moves, pole dancing in India has no relation to Mallakhamb, but instead comes directly from strip culture.

Chinese pole, like Mallakhamb, is and has always been a male-dominated sport. As a mentioned above, modern pole dance is woman dominated dance form, that typically uses a very femme style of movement. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, women were prohibited from appearing on stage with a man, as it was seen as improper. From 1644-1911, the years of the Qing dynasty, women were prohibited from performing, participating in, or even watching theatrical performances. Therefore, performance groups were all-male, and any roles involving women were performed by men who would dress as women. After the fall of the Qing dynasty, mixed performance groups were allowed again, but it has taken many decades for women to overcome and unlearn the patriarchal traditions surrounding performance, sexuality, and gender roles.<sup>14</sup> Today, pole dancing is becoming increasingly more popular in China.

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<sup>12</sup> "5 Incredible Pole Dancers from India," *DESiblitZ* (blog), October 24, 2018, <https://www.desiblitZ.com/content/5-incredible-pole-dancers-from-india>.

<sup>13</sup> "Exotic Pole Dance Workout," accessed December 13, 2021, <https://exoticpoledanceworkout.com/#>.

<sup>14</sup> Sixth Tone, "What Chinese Opera Can Teach Us About Gender," Sixth Tone, August 29, 2018, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1002838/https%3A%2F%2Fwww.sixthtone.com%2Fnews%2F1002838%2Fwhat-chinese-opera-can-teach-us-about-gender>.

One of the first pole studios in China was opened in 2005 by Luo Lan. Her studio grew to become a chain with 24 locations, and many of her students went on to open their own studios.<sup>15</sup> Lan discusses in an interview how many people in China see pole dancing as being associated with strip clubs and sex, but that she is slowly trying to change people's mind's and instead show them that it can be a fun and effective form of exercise.<sup>16</sup> While Lan attempts to change people's perceptions of pole dance, the truth is that these perceptions exist because strip clubs are where pole dance came from. If it truly originated from Chinese pole, there would not be this association or desire to change people's minds. Lan says she was influenced by the growth of fitness-based pole dance in the USA and Europe, but those pole studios she was inspired by grew out of strip clubs.<sup>17</sup> Chinese Pole World Champion Coco Kehong even said when asked about how he started pole dancing, that the first time he was exposed to it was through working as a waiter in a bar.<sup>18</sup> While he doesn't outright say stripping, it is safe to assume that the pole dancing he saw in a bar was more similar to modern pole dance than it is to Chinese pole. This wave of pole dancing in China is influenced directly from the growth of strip clubs in the US and Europe, being that strip clubs are outlawed in China. This wave of pole in China isn't coming from Chinese pole, and Chinese pole did not influence the evolution of stripping.

Mallakhamb and Chinese pole being cited as part of the origin of pole dance, while it may seem like a small detail, has a big influence on the way pole dance is viewed today and who received credit for it. It may be possible that Chinese and Indian practices may have had some sort of influence on American circus culture around the 1900s, but even American circus culture had roots in sex work. Chinese Pole existed in the circus as a gymnastic-like event, suited for

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<sup>15</sup> Are, "A History of Modern Pole Dance."

<sup>16</sup> "Chinese Cautiously Pole Dance Their Way to Fitness," *Reuters*, January 30, 2007, sec. Oddly Enough, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-poledancing-idUSPEK16567320070130>.

<sup>17</sup> "Chinese Cautiously Pole Dance Their Way to Fitness."

<sup>18</sup> Are, "A History of Modern Pole Dance."

families to view. Whereas the Hoochie Coochie girls, whom Pole dancing developed from, were separated into their own acts in their separate tent away from the rest of the circus. While it is still possible that these practices influenced the Hoochie Coochie dancers, the above explanations of the growth of Pole Dance in India and China clearly show that pole dance has not grown directly from Chinese Pole of Mallakhamb, and was stigmatized due to its close relationship with stripping. In many ways, a lot of the tricks performed in Mallakhamb and Chinese pole bear resemblance to tricks seen in competitive pole today; it is more a coincidence than indicative of an origin story.

While doing research into the history of pole dance, the Mallakhamb and Chinese pole argument was present in almost every history I found. What was not present was any explanations or sources that could indicate how they are related to pole dance. There are few articles or books that detail the history of pole dance or even discuss pole dance at all. Those that do, omitted sources that address Mallakhamb and Chinese pole. In article I found, the source was the book *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dance* by Kerry Griffiths. When I located Griffith's book I was excited to read what I hoped would be a well compiled history of pole dance and an answer to my problem. To my disappointment it seemed no different from anything else I read on pole dance studio websites, or Wikipedia.. I combed through the bibliography and index and was unable to find a source on the connection between Chinese pole, Mallakhamb and pole dancing. I found nothing that could explain to me how and why these narratives ended up everywhere. It couldn't just be because they all use poles, right? How does something go from being male-only fitness practices to becoming what we commonly understand as pole dancing today, the Pleaser heels, the false lashes, the minimal clothing? I have

yet to find an answer. All that was left to ask is, if there really is no historical link, then why include it?

The inclusion of these falsified histories only seeks to create a history of pole dancing that distances itself as far away from the strippers as possible. To take the art of pole dance, and to mold it into something that is socially acceptable, while leaving behind those who bore the brunt of creating it. Historically, we've seen this same phenomenon happen to oppressed groups for centuries, from colonialism and imperialism, to cultural appropriation. While at first glance this inclusion may seem miniscule, they all perform tricks on a pole right, that must make them related? But would you agree it is enough to say baseball came from golf, simply because they both hit balls with sticks? One would probably need more information before coming to a conclusion like that. Pole dance should be no different. This falsification of history delegitimizes the integral role strippers, burlesque dancers, and sex workers had in the creation of pole dance, as a job, as a performance, and as an art form. Modern pole dance does not exist in studios, in music videos, in movies, in pole dance competitions because Chinese pole and Mallakhamb exist. Pole dance exists because of the strippers who earned their income stripping, pole dancing, and performing on stages. To detach strippers from pole dancing as an attempt to tailor the narrative to seem more respectable by rebranding it as solely a fitness activity is extremely classist and misogynistic. It is the gentrification of pole dancing. What pole dance needs is not male dominated sports to act as a moral scapegoat. What pole dance needs is for the strippers and sex workers who created this art form to be protected, supported, and respected for their work not only in creating pole dance, but for their work as laborers and as human beings.

## The History of Pole Dance Is

### Early History

The historical evolution of pole dance begins in the US with what was known as the *danse du ventre*, which was first shown to large American audiences at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893. The *danse du ventre* is a French term that refers to the North African dances that came to America through the entertainment trade with Egypt.<sup>19</sup> The Chicago World Fair was intended to commemorate Columbus's "discovery" of the New World and be a demonstration of American technological advancements and cultural innovations. The Fair was located near the shores of Lake Michigan, extending over 686 acres of land with over 65,000 exhibits. In what was labeled the Midway Plaisance sector of the fair, originally designed to display anthropological studies, and give white audiences an opportunity to compare their cultures with ones around the world; there were situated different village exhibits featuring all sorts of entertainment.<sup>20</sup> Four of these villages featured women performing the *danse du ventre*, a Cairo street, the Algerian village, the Turkish village, and the Persian Palace.<sup>21</sup> After the fair, these dancers did not return to Cairo, Algeria, Turkey or Persia, but instead many packed up and joined other fairs.<sup>22</sup>

Due to the large volume of press coverage and popularity of these dances, the birth of a new exotified character was born, and her name was Little Egypt. The dances performed at the

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<sup>19</sup> Katherine Vecchio, "Little Egypt: A Critical Biography," *Dissertations, Theses, and Capstone Projects*, September 1, 2019, [https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc\\_etds/3309](https://academicworks.cuny.edu/gc_etds/3309).

<sup>20</sup> Robert Clyde Allen, *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture*, 1 online resource (xvi, 350 pages) : illustrations (some color). vols., Cultural Studies of the United States (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=1546>.

<sup>21</sup> Vecchio, "Little Egypt."

<sup>22</sup> Peter Jensen Brown, "Early Sports and Pop Culture History Blog: Part II - the History and Etymology of the 'Hoochie-Coochie' Dance," *Early Sports and Pop Culture History Blog* (blog), July 8, 2016, <https://esnpc.blogspot.com/2016/07/part-ii-history-and-etymology-of.html>.



Chicago Fair were so wildly popular with American consumers that American dancers began to take on the role of Little Egypt, the exotified and Americanized version of the *danse du ventre*.<sup>23</sup> This exotification and sexualization of these belly dances is where the origin of the term exotic dancer begins to evolve from.<sup>24</sup> In the 1962 song by the Coasters, Little Egypt, the singer tells the story of his experience seeing Little Egypt perform. The song begins, “I went and bought myself a ticket and, I sat down in the very first row, wo wo... Little Egypt came out strotting, wearing nothing but a bow, wo wo,” from there the song details more of Little Egypt’s act. She lets her hair down, does the hoochie-coochie, she did a special number on a zebra skin, then it continues, “She did a triple somersault and she hit the ground, She winked at the audience and then she turned around, She has picture of a cowboy tattooed on her spine, Saying Phoenix, Arizona, nineteen forty-nine” As the song says, as Little Egypt dances the singer believes she is Middle Eastern up until she turns around, exposing her tattoo that shows that she is actually from Phoenix, Arizona. The song ends with saying Little Egypt no longer dances, and instead is at home cleaning up after the seven children that she ultimately had with the singer.<sup>25</sup>

As the song describes, Little Egypt was a white dancer, who would impersonate a middle eastern woman, sometimes even taking on the name Fatima, or Zora. There was no singular Little Egypt, it was a stage persona assumed by multiple women who would dance what came to be known as the Hoochie-coochie, the kouta-kouta or the cooch dance.<sup>26</sup> Little Egypt eventually grew to become so popular that she could be found at any burlesque troupe, traveling sideshows, or circus group in the country. The belly dancing aspect of pole dancing’s origins, is where a lot of the “slink” and pole floorwork we see today comes from. The *danse du ventre* belly dancers

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<sup>23</sup> Vecchio, “Little Egypt.”

<sup>24</sup> Are, “A History of Modern Pole Dance.”

<sup>25</sup> The Coasters, *Little Egypt*, song, 1962.

<sup>26</sup> Vecchio, “Little Egypt.”

would slide around on the floor, in a manner that was almost snake-like, and that element of the dance was continuously adapted and evolved as it passed down through dance styles.<sup>27</sup> A few years after the creation of the hoochie-coochie, a new, saucier element was incorporated. At the St. Louis Fair in 1963, all along the Midway Plaisance competition ensued with the promise of a more revealing show than the next. But it was Omeena, who “does what is called a 'take off' of the genuine article. She takes off almost all of her clothing, and is sufficiently suggestive to satisfy the most blase old roue. She executes the coucheecouchee or houchecouchie, or tootsiewootsie . . . in the presence of men only.”<sup>28</sup> This was the beginning of the implementation of clothing removal that separated the sexier hoochie-coochie from its predecessor, the *danse du ventre*.

During the late 18th century Hoochie-coochie dancers were popular among traveling circus groups. The term “hoochie coochie”, sometimes referred to as coochie-coochie or even just cooch dancing, was often used to describe provocative and sexy dances, such as belly dancing. Hoochie-coochie dancers would perform for the traveling circus.<sup>29</sup> They would have their own tents, and were advertised as Girl shows. The tents were set up with the stage in the middle and seats around in the circle, and in the center of the stage would be a pole, used to hold up the center of the tent. Being that the pole was so conveniently placed in the center of the stage, these hoochie-coochie dancers began to incorporate the pole in their routines. They would hold on to it while dancing, swing around, gyrate on it, and even would climb up it and perform tricks.<sup>30</sup> These poles began to be referred to as the “snorting” pole, because as the women would grind on the pole, the men in the audience would snort like pigs. In The International Showmen's

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<sup>27</sup> AM Davies, “Yes, a Stripper Podcast,” n.d.

<sup>28</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*.

<sup>29</sup> Allen.

<sup>30</sup> Davies, “Yes, a Stripper Podcast.”

Museum in Florida, there is evidence that suggests that these Girl shows were segregated, meaning there was one tent for the white dancers, and another for the Black dancers. These Black girlie dancers are often erased from many histories, The International Showmen's Museum is one of the few places that even mention Black girl show dancers.<sup>31</sup>

## Striptease and Burlesque

Beginning in the 1920's and up until the 1960's traveling circuses declined. Even as they declined, Girls shows consistently remained the most popular attraction among circus-goers.<sup>32</sup> This decline in popularity of traveling shows had much to do with the Great Depression and Second World War, which left people with no money to spend on entertainment. Beginning in the 1920's strip shows began to appear in bars in the form of Striptease. These performances were much like what you would expect from a Burlesque dancer today. The striptease dancers would tease their audiences through the removal of their clothes, often with the accompaniment of a live band. Couple's would even go together to attend these performances. There were elaborate costumes and props that went with each act.<sup>33</sup> Throughout the 1920s and 30s, you saw dancers employing the art of the tease. But by the 1950s, the creation of pornographic films and magazines created a demand for more nudity, and more explicit acts.<sup>34</sup>

By 1942, burlesque theaters in New York were being revoked of their licences for promoting "filth, vulgarity, queer innuendos, immorality, and male sexual violence".<sup>35</sup>

Anti-burlesque campaigns were ignited to target not only burlesque theaters but pushed for the

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<sup>31</sup> Davies.

<sup>32</sup> Allen, *Horrible Prettiness*.

<sup>33</sup> Davies, "Yes, a Stripper Podcast."

<sup>34</sup> Sherril Dodds, "Embodied Transformations in Neo-Burlesque Striptease," *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 3 (2013): 75–90.

<sup>35</sup> Becki Ross, *Burlesque West: Showgirls, Sex and Sin in Postwar Vancouver*, 1 online resource (xix, 373 pages, 8 unnumbered pages of plates) : illustrations (some color) vols. (Toronto ; University of Toronto Press, 2009), <https://www.deslibris.ca/ID/433745>.

regulation of sexual magazines, movies, and even crime comics. During World War II, these sultry magazines featuring burlesque dancers, and other female entertainers served to boost the morale of troops while they were stationed elsewhere. Soldiers, and by extension, the United States as a nation, depended on these pornographic displays of female sexuality. However, the dancers and entertainers themselves were never awarded the respect they deserved for their work and were instead criticized for corrupting male-sexuality and the virtuosity of not only the soldiers, but of men in general, and were therefore depicted as a threat to the nation.<sup>36</sup>

In the late 1960's, American sociologists and criminologists began to study and write on striptease dancing. They would go to nightclubs to conduct observational research and came to the conclusion that stripping is a "deviant occupation", that attracts "girls from unstable backgrounds" who are predisposed to "exhibitionist behavior" due to a lack of affections from their "absent fathers" and in need of "easy economic gain".<sup>37</sup> These ideas about strippers and sex workers are still highly prevalent today and are constantly used to criticize and devalue the work of stripping. The numerous attacks on burlesque and striptease dancing in the United States led a lot of dancers to seek work elsewhere, that place being Vancouver, Canada. After the War, Vancouver began to develop their reputation as being "home to the hottest night-clubs north of San Francisco".<sup>38</sup> Vancouver liquor laws were very loose, making it the perfect place for nightclubs to erupt. The police in the area were generally corrupt and could be paid off and silenced through bribery. On top of that in the early 1960's the Pacific Western Airlines, B.C. airlines and charter services of float planes allowed travelers to come in and out of Vancouver with ease as well as transporting miners and loggers from the coastal regions into Vancouver.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Ross.

<sup>37</sup> Ross.

<sup>38</sup> Ross.

<sup>39</sup> Ross.

The Post-War economy in Vancouver was growing, giving consumers a lot more disposable income to spend on the rapidly growing nightclub scene. This increase of spending lasted until the late 1970s. The expanding proliferation of pornography, as well as the Women Liberation movement of the 1970s, forced these strip shows to change. They became less about the performance and more about the nudity. As a result of the Liberation movement and increased nudity, women stopped attending the shows.<sup>40</sup> Some women felt as though the dancers were objectifying themselves and no longer wanted to spend money or go see the dancers anymore. But on the other hand, the movement caused some women to feel very sexually liberated allowing them to feel comfortable and empowered to show off more of their bodies.<sup>41</sup> Not only did the audience and explicit nature of the show change but so did the theatrical aspect as well. It was no longer about creating an elaborate performance, live-music stopped being incorporated and so did the intricate costuming. Instead of the women slowly teasing the audience by removing ten layers of clothing, dancers began, in many places, to perform fully nude.<sup>42</sup>

### Strippers and the Birth of Pole Dance

In the 1970s and 80s Vancouver became well known for its strip clubs and talented dancers. People would come down to Vancouver just for the night scene and dancers would come to Vancouver to find better places to work. American dancers would come up to Vancouver to dance, but were only allowed to stay for six months on a work permit. Once their visas expired, they would go back down to California, Oregon, and Washington until they could renew their visas again to head back up to Vancouver.<sup>43</sup> The club owners during this time were also very

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<sup>40</sup> Davies, "Yes, a Stripper Podcast."

<sup>41</sup> Dodds, "Embodied Transformations in Neo-Burlesque Striptease."

<sup>42</sup> Davies, "Yes, a Stripper Podcast."

<sup>43</sup> Davies.

entrepreneurial, they would have shows going all day long since there were people traveling in and out of the city at all times of the day. They would spend a lot of money investing in sound systems, stages, and advertisements. Their focus was on producing the best shows and having the best dancers. In the late 1970s the first documented brass poles were installed on stage at the No.5 Orange and the Wild Duck Hotels in California. The owners incorporated these poles as a nod to the previous hoochie-coochie dancers in the sideshow fairs and as an attempt to create a novel experience for their customers.<sup>44</sup>

Along with the incorporation of the dance poles came the incorporation of showers. The incorporation of showers and poles into the venues coincided with the eventual elimination of live musicians. The disco music of the 1970s was a huge craze and a lot of dancers wanted to dance to music that the musicians couldn't play or didn't want to. As the girls began bringing in their own CDs, live accompaniment of music slowly faded away. The club owners didn't mind this change because this meant they no longer needed to pay musicians.<sup>45</sup> Music was not the only thing changing. As I mentioned before, the development of pornography pushed for more explicit routines and with the incorporation of showers, dancers began to perform fully nude. The practice of “splitting” or “spreading” one's genitalia on stage became popularized and shifted the culture towards more graphic performances and displays of female sexuality. During this time many prominent dancers were going on record to say they would no longer perform, many felt this was going too far and refused to participate. There were a lot of criticisms about the nudity and full exposure of the vagina.<sup>46</sup>

In Canada up until the 2000s dancers would have agents who would book them venues and they would be paid to perform places on top of the tips they made. This is very different to

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<sup>44</sup> Ross, *Burlesque West*.

<sup>45</sup> Ross.

<sup>46</sup> Davies, “Yes, a Stripper Podcast.”

how stripping currently operates in the US. Now dancers have to pay cover fees of sometimes up to hundreds of dollars to be able to perform somewhere. These dancers, represented by agents, would go on tours to different clubs who had booked them.<sup>47</sup> Strip clubs as we know them today emerged out of Vancouver hotels. The Marr, being one of these hotels, was the first to create the Image Studio on Alexander Street in 1989. Image Studio was a pole dance studio designed for the purpose of training dancers. The Marr wanted their dancers to be the best and so they created the space for experienced strippers to be paid to teach pole work, floor work, and choreography to newer strippers. Jack Cooney, co-owner of the Marr Hotel, believed strippers needed to be trained and viewed them favorably as athletes. He was proud to have created the first strip school with twenty-five regularly attending students, six being men. Strip competitions such as Exotica '84 were held at the Drake Hotel, also co-owned by Jack Cooney.<sup>48</sup> Pole competitions were held and judged by agents in order to find girls to hire for tours. Many agents began hiring experienced dancers to teach younger dancers in the clubs after-hours. This is the first documented example of pole studios and pole competitions, created solely for strippers.<sup>49</sup>

### Pole Dance in the Early 2000s

Among the pole dance community it is often said that Canadian stripper Fawnia Mondey was the first stripper to open a pole studio in 1998. In reality that is not the case. Fawnia Mondey taught classes from her home just as many other strippers did during this time. In the late 90s and early 2000s, it became very common for strippers to teach other non-strippers out of their homes and rent spaces to get extra income on the side. While Fawnia did not open the first pole studio, she was the first to launch at-home pole instructional DVD videos. The first official

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<sup>47</sup> Davies.

<sup>48</sup> Ross, *Burlesque West*.

<sup>49</sup> Davies, "Yes, a Stripper Podcast."

brick-and-mortar pole studio was S-Factor in Los Angeles in June 2003, opened by Sheila Kelly.<sup>50</sup> But, S-factor didn't label themselves as being a pole studio, and instead claimed and marketed themselves as a “feminist movement”. The first official pole studio that fully claimed pole dancing was Pole Junkies in Edmonton by Alena Downs in 2004. Alena was a performer in Canada at the time and Pole Junkies has grown to become one of the largest online pole dance platforms. In 2005, the first pole competition in Amsterdam, the World Pole Championships, featured primarily strippers as competitors.<sup>51</sup>

In Atlanta, Black strippers began to pioneer a lot of the movement and aesthetics we envision when we think of stripping today. In 2008, the concept of “making it rain” was traced to Black dancers at Magic Club City. The aesthetic of bills flying and raining down over dancers is very pervasive in the media, and has been a topic prevalent in popular media especially within music and music videos. This imagery is still extremely prevalent in music videos today. This is also where the styles of twerking and bounce were incorporated on the pole, and are still wildly popular within both the recreational pole community and with strippers.<sup>52</sup> Twerking itself has origins as a celebratory dance in Kenya and in other parts of Africa, and through black strippers, has made its way to being a crucial element of stripping today.<sup>53</sup>

Along with the growth of stripper aesthetics, 2008 marked a time of extreme growth within the recreational pole dance community. Stripper, podcaster, and sex worker activist AM Davies, shares how during this time many non-strippers were attending the new studios popping up, and the culture of recreational pole began to take on a narrative that felt very anti-stripper. This created a culture within these studios that was not only anti-stripper, but also became

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<sup>50</sup> Davies.

<sup>51</sup> Are, “A History of Modern Pole Dance.”

<sup>52</sup> Are.

<sup>53</sup> Makau Kitata, “Sexualising the Performance, Objectifying the Performer: The Twerk Dance in Kenya,” *Agenda* 34, no. 3 (July 2, 2020): 11–21, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2020.1773286>.



anti-sexy as well. Many recreational pole dancers began to eliminate erotic styles of pole dance from their repertoire as a way to separate themselves from strippers and sex worker culture.<sup>54</sup> In 2010, the creation of Instagram led to another period of extreme growth. Instagram gave polers the opportunity to connect with each other and learn moves, transitions, and choreography from one another. During this time people began to embrace sexy pole again and many new styles began to emerge. People began blending genres and developing their own styles. Famous Australian pole dancer and creator of PoleArt Competitions, Michelle Shimmy, is credited with starting the pole dance hashtag system of #pd (#pole dance) followed by the name of the move to categorize tricks.<sup>55</sup> For example, if you wanted to see tagged content for the move titled Cupid, you could search #pdcupid to find videos. This made searching for moves to learn and finding inspiration a lot easier. Through Instagram many different pole-related hashtag trends occurred, some seeming very anti-stripper, and some being pro-stripper. An example of this would be the 2015 #notastripper trend, which was designed to combat the “stigma” of recreational pole dancing as being seen as stripping. In reality, the brunt of this stigma landed on those who actually strip, not those who decide to participate as a hobby. To combat this, strippers started the #yesastripper trend, in order to show that yes, a lot of pole dancers are strippers and there’s nothing wrong with being a stripper.<sup>56</sup>

### Coronavirus and Pole Dance

During the Coronavirus lockdowns of 2020 and 2021, the pole dance community was forced to move online through the use of sites like Instagram, Zoom, Onlyfans, and Patreon.

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<sup>54</sup> Crimson Minx, “Pole Parlour: Episode 3- Annemarie Davies: Part 1,” Pole Parlour, accessed December 13, 2021, <http://www.poleparlour.com/podcast/2016/2/24/episode-3-annemarie-davies-part-1>.

<sup>55</sup> Are, “A History of Modern Pole Dance.”

<sup>56</sup> Sofia Barret-Ibarria, “Making Pole Dancing a Sport Is Offensive to Strippers,” accessed November 11, 2021, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/qvxpdm/pole-dancing-sport-offensive-to-strippers>.

Some pole competitions have moved online, such as Pole Sport Organization competitions. Many teachers began to teach online courses or develop video recorded teaching programs with subscribers. This gave pole dancers the ability to connect globally and gave students the ability to access and learn from teachers they normally wouldn't have the opportunity to take class from. I took many pole classes online during this period and found it nice to connect with pole dancers across the country. Since slowly going back to in-person classes, online classes and teaching platforms have remained online and will hopefully continue to be in the future.

## Conclusion

While piecing together this history I found there were few sources on pole dance and stripping. The majority of research came from stripper-led podcasts, blogs, and articles. There are very few academic sources that exist on pole dance and most of the ones that do center on topics of empowerment and acceptability. Arguments debating whether or not pole is empowering, whether it should be, and how the role of feminism plays into pole dance are prominent topics. Very few sources focused on strippers themselves or told their stories. This question of empowerment in the larger picture of pole dance is overall unimportant, and white centered. In *Feminity, Feminism, and Recreational Pole Dance*, Griffiths discusses the way the pole studio she attends is marketed, and she find the target audience to be to no surprise, middle class white women.

This question of empowerment can only circle itself because it's entirely subjective. Nobody can say what is and isn't allowed to make you feel empowered. You are entitled to feel empowered and uplifted by whatever makes you feel that way. As someone who does feel empowered by pole dancing, this continual argument and discussion over empowerment feels

like another attempt to legitimize pole dance in the eyes of general society. Built on the hope that if it is an empowering activity for women then it may someday find itself as socially acceptable. Just as there is no justice for pole dance through the falsification of history, there is no justice for pole dance through female empowerment. The legitimization and respect for pole dancing will come when we legitimize and have respect for strippers and sex workers of all kinds.

During my research I did find some amazing and thoughtful work. The book *Burlesque West* by Becki Ross became an incredible resource for me during this process. Ross did an outstanding job of collecting and putting together the history of stripping in Vancouver, Canada. *Horrible Prettiness: Burlesque and American Culture* by Robert Clyde Allen was another book I found incredibly useful. I found there were more resources on the history of burlesque than there were for pole dance. My criticisms of these burlesque scholarships, *Horrible Prettiness* included, is they all tell a narrative that places burlesque above stripping. They detail how ingenious and tongue-in-cheek Burlesque used to be and how women on stage used to have more autonomy to be provocative and assert their own agency. The demand for more nudity made the women get naked, marking the implementation of striptease as the death of burlesque. What we now think of as the art of the tease, is not considered part of burlesque and instead as being the downfall of burlesque. Something about this sentiment feels very anti-female sexuality. Why does a woman lose her agency when she exhibits sexuality? The manner in which these narratives place Burlesque on a pedestal, only to shun and look down upon any other form of sex work is confusing and contradictory.

On the other hand, in *Burlesque West* Ross's documentation of stripping and its history felt respectful, informative, and lacked a tone of disapproval towards sex workers. In the Preface of her book, Ross discusses the immense amount of backlash she faced for wanting to conduct

this research. Many opposed the idea of researching strippers, and her project was called a joke, pointless, a waste of money and more. Luckily, the large amount of negative attention she received allowed the ex-strippers, club owners, and those a part of the industry during those critical years to find her and share their stories.<sup>57</sup> The reaction to Ross's desire to dig into the history of stripping in a location that was so central to its growth is really telling of the way society casts aside strippers and sex workers and dehumanizes them. There is little to no research on the topic and strippers are humans, therefore making the study of stripper history essential to the compilation of human history as a whole. Throughout the years so much history was lost due to the lack of or inaccurate documentation of stripping and sex work.

The bulk of the history I found came directly from strippers. Stripper and Sex Work activist AM Davies and Crimson Minx host of the Pole Parlour podcast, detail an extensive history of pole dance on Davies's podcast *Yes A Stripper*. Another resource I used was a history written by stripper Carolina Are, on her blog, *Blogger On Pole*. These collections of history were done not only through research, but through discussions with other strippers as a means to collect as much stripper knowledge as possible. Strippers are working hard to create and document their own histories, but it begs the question why nobody else is doing it? Why isn't stripping as well researched a profession as any other? Why are the few scholars who are doing the research, such as Ross, faced with such intense backlash for wanting to explore that unwritten history? What is it about the selling of sex that compels people to justify the erasure of history? Why is there a shift to redefine pole dance, without a shift to redefine how we view sex work? And what is it about the commodification of sex that makes people so angry?

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<sup>57</sup> Ross, *Burlesque West*.

## Movement, Sexuality, Bodies and Respectability

In this chapter, I want to explore the contradictory ideas and expectations women face within society. Strippers are not the only dancers who perform sensuality, play with sexuality, and elicit desire. The way some expressions of sexuality are revered while others are condemned is evident in all aspects of society and this quandary becomes especially clear when examined under the lens of pole dance. I will begin by discussing ballet, its history, and respectability, in order to reveal the classism and racism hidden beneath our impressions of ballet. From there I will discuss other ways in which sexuality exists in dance outside of stripping, to demonstrate notions of appropriate and inappropriate sexuality are embedded in places that we don't always realize or consider. I will then discuss how women experience objectification in daily life, and whether one can be degraded if they are consenting to be objectified. Following that, I will discuss interviews with pole fitness dancers, and examine why many do not want to be associated with stripping. Lastly, I will discuss the art/obscenity dichotomy when it pertains to female nudity in art, and use that to examine pole dancing, and what is deemed acceptable and what is not. In culmination, all of this seeks to question why we demonize female sexuality only in certain contexts, and what are the ideologies that these beliefs uncover.

I want to explore the idea of sexuality, and when it is allowed and when it is not. When it is revered and when it is condemned. I want to explore sexuality within the context of dance, and even more so in pole dance. How sexuality is expressed within dance, when it is intentional and when it is not? I also wish to examine sexuality in daily life as well, as an expression, as it is present in media, and as an occupation. There are contexts where sexuality is condemned, and contexts where it is acceptable. As a society, where do we draw the lines between what are

acceptable representations of sexuality and what are not? How does this then lead to the disrespect, condemnation, and erasure of sex workers and sex workers history?

## Ballet and Respectability: Who Is Deserving of Respect?

I saw a post on Instagram recently, pictured on the right was a drawing of a ballerina, and on the left was a pole dancer, at the top it read “They both dance for a living, why would one deserve less respect than the other?”. The post was made by @laineey.molnar on November 18, 2021, and the comments included people angered by the notion that pole dancers are deserving of respect (Figure 4A). “Why should I respect someone who chose a not honorable way ‘for a living’?” said instagram user @its.\_sadat. Another comment by @colleensilvergleason read, “Because Pole-dancing is nothing more than treating yourself as nothing than an object for men to lust after (Figure 4B). Pole-dancing and/or stripping dehumanizes women into nothing more than pieces of meat for mens pleasure”. Another reads simply, “There is no power in being a sex object,” written by @zaneta\_wuwu (Figure 4C). There were many more comments just like those, angry and offended by the comparison. Many made the point that ballerinas train their whole lives, performed gracefully, and were not at all sexualized or made to be sex objects for men. These comments are quite ironic, considering the immensely sexual history of ballet and ballet dancers. The idea that ballet is a non-sexual art form is not only completely false, but is heavily rooted in classism and white supremacy.

## Ballet and Its History of Staging Desire

In Susan Lee Foster’s book, *Choreography & Narrative: Ballet’s Staging of Story and Desire*, Foster details the history of ballet and the impact of sexuality on the development and production of the art form. In the 1820s, the dance world, mainly ballet, was in disarray,

pondering the ephemerality of performance and dance. A painting was art that could last hundreds of years, but a dance performance exists only for a short moment in time which for many, came to represent loss. Because of this, ballet was viewed as a less powerful art form than others, its impact was fleeting, never permanent. French dance enthusiast, poet and novelist Théophile Gautier, writes of ballet that its only purpose served for nothing more than to “display beautiful bodies in graceful poses... it expresses only the passions.”<sup>58</sup> He also says of ballet, that the only narrative it is able to tell, is of the love between a feeble woman and an aggressive man. This ephemerality and loss that categorized dance at the time, was comparable only to another ephemeral bodily act, that being, sex. Like dance, sex was also fleeting, existing in a moment and not in the next. Dance not only represented erotic encounters, but began to represent sex itself. “To love to dance too much,” became a code signifying sexual promiscuity, and the metaphors surrounding dance all pointed to both sensual and sexual gratification.<sup>59</sup>

The differences in choreography for men and women were choreographed to represent their gender roles; the ballerina was categorized by her lightness, delicacy, and effortlessness. The ballerina was the central focus of performance, and positioned her as the gratifying object of the audience's desiring gaze. Her partner then became an extension of the audience, and the presumed male heterosexual gaze. During this time, publications on ballet at the Opéra circled around, detailing the behind the scenes, profiles of dancers, and even gossip. Within these publications were the stories of the *petite rats*, the young prepubescent girls who were training to become ballerinas who were often poor and hungry. These young dancers would walk miles to dance, starving with little to wear. Once these girls became members of the Opéra staff, their

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<sup>58</sup> “Choreography & Narrative : Ballet’s Staging of Story and Desire,” accessed February 6, 2022, <https://web-s-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=82207b31-d83c-48e8-9477-d57a2e1b4fed%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>.

<sup>59</sup> “Choreography & Narrative : Ballet’s Staging of Story and Desire.”

salaries were still not enough to afford food, housing, dance classes, or costumes. Many of these girls, with the help of their mothers, aunts, or older sisters, would enter contracts with older businessmen and aristocrats who would provide them with financial security in exchange for sex. These men were often called protectors, and these arrangements could last anywhere from a few months to a few years. The specifics of these contracts were written about in the publications on the Opéra, and they amassed a lot of attention.<sup>60</sup>

In 1830, the Opéra was leased to a man by the name of Louis Véron. Véron believed ballet's purpose was to enlighten the senses, and so he invested in the production value of the performance, and in the dancer's appearance and skill. Instead of dancers moving up through the ranks of the Opéra, Véron would import dancers for limited periods of time from other countries. In order to increase support, he opened the Foyer de la Danse, so that admirers could have a more intimate experience with the dancers. With an audience of wealthy men, dancers would warm-up and rehearse before going on stage. Foster describes the experience of season ticket holders as an "enchanted land of enticingly dressed sylphs, peasant maids, and svelte nobles, the Foyer de la Danse structured the patrons' escapist reveries around the objectified physique and coquetry of the dancers." And for the dancers, this served as a place for them to market themselves in hopes of arranging a contract to garner them financial security. These pre-performances were as choreographed as the actual routines. First the figurantes, the dancers who only did large group work, would come out, then the corypheés, the dancers who do small group work, then the mid-level dancers and lastly the stars. In the order they would stand in front of the large audience of men, and stretch their legs, do barre work, practice their pirouettes and poses in front of a mirror before going on the stage.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> "Choreography & Narrative : Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire."

<sup>61</sup> "Choreography & Narrative : Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire."



The wealthy businessmen and aristocrats were not the only ones who influenced the sexual atmosphere and air of desire, but the dance critics were as well. In their reviews of dances, they discussed the skill of the dancers, but also their physical attributes. They discussed the dancer's bodily proportions and engaged in examining the physical characteristics of each dancer as a way to determine her character. Theophile Gautier was especially focused on details; he would analyze the proportions of the dancer's limb, eye color, hair, all to analyze her character; her dancing was no longer at the forefront. Foster writes, "critics claimed a strange intimacy with the dancers but also an objective distance. They knew every curve of each dancer's flesh, but they also compared, curve for curve, all dancers' attributes." These ballerina's dancing bodies became objects of discussion for critics to compare, analyze, pick apart, and criticize. "The parceling of her body into its various delicious and less adequate parts obscured the dancer's personhood both on and offstage and opened up the dancer's body to the viewer's consuming gaze. The body's parts, salaciously separated from the whole, became subject to symbolic purchase." The ballerina was a dancer, a performer, and an object of the male gaze and sexual desire.<sup>62</sup>

This history of sexuality within ballet is still relevant today. Ballet exists as it does today because of the public staging of sex, male objectification and desire. The picking apart of dancers' bodies and sexualization of young dancers, all still occurs in the ballet world today. Is it no secret that ballet dancers are expected to have very specific height, weight, proportions even skin color. In an article titled *The Ideal Ballet Body* written in Dance Informa Australia magazine, Brain Nolan explains the body type necessary in order to be accepted into a standard professional ballet company. A female dancer must be thin, have a long neck, a short to medium

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<sup>62</sup> "Choreography & Narrative : Ballet's Staging of Story and Desire."

length torso, long legs, long arms, a high instep, and overall a well proportioned body.<sup>63</sup> Former ballet dancer Cherilyn J. Lee tells of her experience being 5'5 and 108lbs, medically underweight, and still being told by instructors to lose a couple pounds.<sup>64</sup> This picking apart of body parts is a remnant of years of objectification and sexualization of dancers and their bodies. Within the last several years, many dancers have come forward to expose the grooming and sexual abuse also present within ballet. The large number of dancers who have come forward reveals these were not isolated incidents, but instead were horrendous symptoms of a culture of hierarchy, misogyny, and frequent conditioning of young girls to be silent and obedient.<sup>65</sup> Ignoring the sexual elements of ballet and pretending they do not exist allow for instances such as these to go unnoticed and unchecked. And all of this has not even begun to scratch the surface of the racial issues present within ballet. Ballet is still silently existing under the weight of its history, of objectification and sexualization of dancers for male audiences.

Outside of the history of ballet, it is also important to note why it is that ballet garners so much respect, despite its history with sex work and sexuality. Ballet is a very white genre of dance that is rooted in European aesthetics and is associated with ideas of properness, fragility, purity, and delicacy, ideas that are not awarded to black bodies.<sup>66</sup> Ballet classes themselves are also extremely expensive, making it inaccessible to those within a lower economic class. The dance form remains very exclusive today, it is heavily lacking in diversity and continues to maintain and enforce European aesthetics of beauty. Being seen as a very white and prestigious dance form, has a large impact on the way Ballet is seen and respected in society. Unlike

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<sup>63</sup> "The Ideal Ballet Body," *Dance Informa Magazine* (blog), June 30, 2011, <https://dancemagazine.com.au/2011/07/the-ideal-ballet-body/>.

<sup>64</sup> "Pursuit Of The Perfect Ballet Body Issues Are Dangerous And Long-Lasting," March 2, 2021, <https://www.balletherald.com/ballet-body-image/>.

<sup>65</sup> "Grooming and Sexual Abuse in Ballet: Why Dancers Are Especially Vulnerable," *Pointe Magazine*, December 1, 2021, <https://pointemagazine.com/grooming-and-sexual-abuse-in-ballet/>.

<sup>66</sup> {Updating}

stripping, ballet's proximity to whiteness allows it to be exonerated from receiving the same treatment as stripping, despite their common history of sex work. The anger about this comparison stems from what is highly esteemed as being prestigious and pure, i.e. white, being compared to stripping.

I want to return to the question that the Instagram post I mentioned posed, “They both dance for a living, why would one deserve less respect than the other?” The ballerina has not escaped the male gaze, or the sexualization of her body. She hasn’t escaped the reality of being made an object of sexual desire. But truly, what woman has? Foster writes of ballet:

Sentiment filled and evanescent, the dance's display of bodily movement earned it a position as the most feminine art of them all. Yet the fact that it was produced within the public realm and not within the domestic sphere forced a version of the feminine defined by masculine values and expectations. Untainted by, because incapable of expressing, issues with social or moral relevance, the ballet entertained and diverted its audience, and at its best enchanted them with its ephemeral beauty. An eclectic group of spectators—business men and their wives, artists, shopgirls, students, aging aristocrats—looked past the seamy backstage life with its poverty, frivolous expenditures, and mothers serving as pimps in order to adore the ballerina or become lost in the landscape. The spectacle they encountered presumed a homogeneous vectoring of desire on their part. The female dancer, even as she celebrated the feminine attributes of grace and lightness, also functioned as the object of a masculine desire. Ballets, in all their exquisite invention and wondrous fragility, also stuffed the stage with scantily clad women for a masculine gaze to admire.<sup>67</sup>

Where there are feminine bodies moving, there will be men there to sexualize them. Ballet does not exist in a vacuum, no dance form does. There are undertones of sexuality in many dance forms. What makes one form of sexuality better than the other? We all deserve respect.

## Dance, Sex and Desire

Ballet is not the only dance form that reflects sensuality and desire, all performed dance forms contain within them the potential to express desire. Dance performance requires us to look

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<sup>67</sup> “Choreography & Narrative : Ballet’s Staging of Story and Desire.”

at bodies for pleasure, for entertainment. Which then lends itself to the potential to elicit not only ideas of desire, but the viewing of physical manifestations of desire as well. Culturally in the US, dance is often associated with ideas of romance and enticing ideas of sensuality and desire. Not only on the stage, but social dancing, films, clubs dancing, freestyle/improvisational dance, and bodily mannerisms all have the ability to play out ideas of romance, sex, sexual identity, and desire.<sup>68</sup>

The sexuality that is elicited through dance forms is not only expressed through heteronormative sexualities. In *Dancing Desires*, editor Jane Desmond compiled a collection of essays that seek to explore queer and non-normative sexualities within dance. These essays all seek to further the argument that 1) in order to understand dance history and practice, they must be analyzed in relation to histories of sexuality, and 2) the analysis of dance, and bodily practice, should be regarded as significant to gay and lesbian studies and “queer theory”. Dance not only is a mode to express sexual desire, but sexual identity as well. The way in which one dances, and how they dance in relation to others, has the ability to publicly enact a story of sexuality, desire and identity. In dance, declarations of sexual identity are made through movement, two examples of movement that can indicate queer sexualities that Desmond highlights are the swish of male wrist, or a woman with strong strides.<sup>69</sup> Expressions of sexuality and desire in dance that are intentional, ask the audience for the performance to be read as sexual. If we accept that many dance forms, outside of ones that engage in sex work have the ability to be sexual, then many dancers become “objects of lust”, not just strippers.

While some dance performances may have the goal of expressing sexuality, dance performances that do not have the intention of expressing sexuality can still be read as sexual by

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<sup>68</sup> Jane Desmond, *Dancing Desires: Choreographing Sexualities on and off the Stage*, Studies in Dance History (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001).

<sup>69</sup> Desmond.

their audience. Although dance and sexuality are inherently linked through bodily action, the intention of the dancer may not always be to express desire. But there is always the possibility of being sexualized by the audience even when that may not be the dancer's intention. The first example asks the body to be read as expressing desire, but the second does not. The latter, being a reality for women, not only as dancers, but in all aspects of life. Walking down the street, swimming at the pool, shopping at the mall, the gym, these are all places where women exist, and find themselves being sexualized, even when their intention was not to elicit that kind of reaction. Where there are female bodies moving, there will be men to sexualize them. Film theorist Laura Mulvey writes about how within film, the camera will act out the male gaze and its desires. The female spectator then must decide whether they identify with the passive object being looked at, or identify with the male protagonist. Mulvey's work on this was published in 1975, yet it can still be applied to film today.<sup>70</sup> The objectification of women is nearly inescapable be it in dance, film, art, tv, social media, or simply enacted in person.

This unfortunate truth about the reality of objectification present in women's existence is even more pervasive for women of color within a white supremacist society. The stereotypical representation of Black women as the Jezebel is one large example of the way in which Black women are objectified. The Jezebel alluring and highly sexual, she is seen as a "worldly seductress" who is reduced to her body and treated as a tool for others pleasure. Research also shows that in the media today, Black women are significantly more hypersexualized in the media than white women. In a study analyzing the content of 120 music videos, researchers found that Black women were more likely to appear in revealing clothing than any other racial group. It was also revealed that Black women were often depicted as being hypersexual, with an sexualized

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<sup>70</sup> Kelly Oliver, "The Male Gaze Is More Relevant, and More Dangerous, than Ever," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 15, no. 4 (October 2, 2017): 451–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17400309.2017.1377937>.

overemphasis on her physical features.<sup>71</sup> The objectification of women is a much harsher reality for Black women, and their experiences with degradation are much more present in the media than any other race.

## Female Bodies and Degradation, When Does It End?

If we are always being sexualized, then what then becomes degrading and what does not? What dehumanizes us and what does not? Is it possible for something to be inherently degrading? These words, degrade and dehumanize, are often used to criticize sex work and stripping. But then, if women are in their daily lives being harassed, objectified, and sexualized without consent, is everyday life for women reduced to a degrading and dehumanizing existence? Conversations over what is and isn't degrading ignore agency. Being sexualized alone does not equate to being degraded. Therefore, one cannot say stripping in itself is degrading. Stripping can be degrading, in the same way having sex with someone you love can be degrading if your boundaries are crossed. Stripping, like anything else, possesses the potential to be degrading, but it alone does not inhere being degraded. In the book *Naked Lives: Inside the Worlds of Exotic Dance*, author and former stripper Mindy Bradley-Engen words this perfectly:

Some may say that the act of stripping is degrading in any context; that is, it is demeaning for women in any club, by reducing them to physical bodies. To say that stripping in itself is degrading based solely on the fact that attention is being placed on nudity and sexuality naked assumes that being looked at as a physical body is inherently degrading. Humans are physical beings; being seen physically and sexually does not in itself dehumanize. Being looked at as a physical being, noticed for one's physical attributes, is only demeaning if it is unwanted. If one does not want to be looked at as purely a physical or sexual being, then stripping can be demeaning. But this may be the case in any occupation. A teacher or lawyer who is seen as a sexual object rather than a colleague is being degraded. But what if one does want to be seen in such a manner or really does not

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<sup>71</sup> Joel R. Anderson et al., "Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype: The Impact of Target Race on Sexual Objectification," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (December 1, 2018): 461–76, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684318791543>.

mind? Perhaps it is somehow inherently wrong, and people who want to be seen as sex objects are misguided (though I seriously doubt that). But that does not change the fact that they do want to be seen that way, and many really do not feel bad about it.<sup>72</sup>

It seems then, that the difference between being degraded and not is this idea of consent and personal experience. Consent in this context, refers to the permission and agreement to do something and implies the adherence of boundaries and respect. Degradation is about boundaries not about sexualization. For something to be degrading, it relies heavily on consent and personal experience.

As strippers, through the nature of the occupation, consent to be sexualized is given. In return for the permission they give to be viewed sexually and the performance of sexuality, they receive compensation. There is an exchange. On a grander scale, strippers use the sexuality and male gaze already present in society, and commodify it. They take this gaze and turn it into something to be purchased, into a job. There is a demand for the performance of sexuality and proximity to that; strippers provide the supply. Some people hate their jobs, and others do not, but work is ultimately work. While stripping is a job like any other, requiring a large amount of patience, acting, and physical labor. Many people are very angered by it, seeing it as a deviant and an irredeemable aspect of society. The commodification of sexuality is something that triggers a lot of anger and hatred from society.

It is also important within the context of stripping to note, that contrary to popular belief, a lot of strippers enjoy their jobs. This is not a universal experience, as no job is enjoyed by everyone who does it. There is a lot of exploitation within clubs, and that is largely due to the stigma against strippers that doesn't allow them to advocate for themselves in the same way that

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<sup>72</sup> "Naked Lives : Inside the Worlds of Exotic Dance," accessed February 15, 2022, <https://web-s-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=fd2545d7-b909-4aa5-8563-39784a5be91e%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>.

workers in other jobs would be able to. But exploitation and working conditions aside, many find that there is something rewarding about giving attention to, and conversing with men who otherwise wouldn't get to talk to women in that way. There is also something very empowering, and even addicting, about these workers' ability to make large amounts of money very quickly. Often though, sex workers feel they must say they love their jobs in order for it to be legitimized. This has been called the “Happy Hooker” narrative. Sex workers sometime feel, that in order for their work to be respected as work, they cannot discuss the workplace violence and unsafe they sometimes face. The assumption that sex work is degrading no matter what detracts from discussions about workplace conditions that would otherwise be noticed in “real” work.<sup>73</sup>

## The Desire to be Sexy and the Commodification of Sexuality

As a society, there is a lot of anger towards the commodification of sexuality. While some people do critique pole fitness as being degrading as well, those who criticize it are angered by their own negative perceptions of strip culture. What they hate about pole fitness is the proximity to strip culture and feminine expressions of sexuality. The current rise in the Pole Fitness trend demonstrates that while some people are angered by pole dancing in all its forms, those who are not angered by pole fitness often draw harsh lines between what is acceptable pole and non-acceptable pole. A great example of this phenomenon playing out online is the #notastripper hashtag. In 2015 pole fitness dancers created a trend in which they would pictures and videos of them pole dancing with the hashtag #notastripper, as a movement to end what they believed was a stigma against them. The stigma they are referring to is the association that people have to pole

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<sup>73</sup> Molly Smith and Juno Mac, *Revolting Prostitutes: The Fight for Sex Workers' Rights* (London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2020).



dance and stripping. They believed they were being oppressed as pole fitness dancers by being associated with strippers and created this movement to combat that. This clearly demonstrates that though strippers created pole dancing, these pole fitness dancers felt as though they had more of a right to be associated with pole dancing than those who invented it. This is the sanitization of pole dance. In order to combat this, strippers retaliated by creating the #yesastripper hashtag in order to loudly and proudly assert their existence and right to be associated with pole dancing.<sup>74</sup>

Those who accept pole fitness, but not stripping, do not have a problem with the desire to feel sexy or dance sensually. Instead, the problem lies in the commodification of the performance of sexuality. The prices of pole classes are often very steep, ranging from \$25 to \$35 per class, and often are marketed towards a white middle class demographic. Advertisements lean towards marketing ideas of sexiness, fitness, empowerment, and confidence<sup>75</sup>. In the book *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dancing*, Kerry Griffiths interviewed a number of women who participated in pole fitness about their thoughts, feelings and experiences with the practice. In the majority of interviews, women who participated in pole fitness expressed large amounts of frustration and disgust at the idea of being associated with pole dancing in clubs. Some even went so far as to say that the difference between women who do pole fitness and strippers was that club dancers possessed lower levels of intellect.

Overall, Griffiths found that the main thing the pole fitness dancers alluded to as being the difference between the two was that unlike in clubs, the women who participate in pole

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<sup>74</sup> Barret-Ibarria, "Making Pole Dancing a Sport Is Offensive to Strippers."

<sup>75</sup> Kerry Griffiths, *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dancing* (London: Routledge, 2015), <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315762739>.

fitness do not perform for male audiences, and do not perform for money<sup>76</sup>. There are three quotes from Griffiths that I think are important to analyze:

- 1) “Mel stated, ‘it’s so frustrating, constantly having to explain to people...no, I don’t do it for money’, ‘no, I don’t do it for men’, ‘no, I don’t take my clothes off’”
- 2) “Hannah’s interview indicates that she feels she can escape negative comparisons to the Barbie doll and present herself as respectable, via her intellect and pursuit of education, yet she works her body and persists in seeking a look which corresponds with that of female strippers, or those women she terms as Barbie, a look which she believes men want and desire. Pole dancing was seen by Hannah as a means of achieving this ideal look.”
- 3) “she believed that she could escape the association with the Barbie doll as unintelligent and devoid of personality, by virtue of her active and visible participation in education and employment, presenting herself as having the agency to make choices about pole dancing. Yet Hannah described pole dancing classes as offering women an opportunity to temporarily pretend to be a stripper, and claimed that her classes teach women to be sexy. Being sexy was something which she desired.”<sup>77</sup>

The first quote; the anger felt at the association with stripping, despite stripping being where Pole originated. Behind the frustration, is the belief that people should assume that her version of pole, pole fitness, is the dominant form, when in reality pole fitness grew from stripping. The second and third quotes reflect the idea that strippers do not possess intellect, and that intellect is what stands between strippers and pole fitness dancers. This is extremely classist and dehumanizing. Plenty of strippers have educations, but even if they do not, it is elitist to base someone's worth on whether or not they decide to pursue an education and have the ability to choose not to strip. Many women decide to become strippers out of financial necessity, and there is nothing wrong with that. There are many factors that can lead someone to be in a place of need, and none of those determine someone’s worth. Another aspect of these quotes that is essential to point out, is that the same people who are criticizing strippers need to strip, are also

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<sup>76</sup> Griffiths, *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dancing*.

<sup>77</sup> Griffiths, *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dancing*.

attempting to emulate them, and are envious of their sexuality. Strippers are being criticized not because of their sexuality, but because of the commodification of their sexuality.

Interestingly, Griffiths notes that many of the women who were disgusted by the perceived proximity to strippers, also admired them for their sexuality and ability to attract men, and expressed a strong desire to emulate that. Many even said their goal for starting pole dancing was to attract men. During pole dancing, they all wore revealing clothing, stripper shoes, and danced in a sexual manner, all for the purpose of attracting men, but still found themselves criticising strippers for the same thing<sup>78</sup>. So the “line” then becomes the commodification of sexuality. As Bradley-Engen writes, “Strippers did not invent tanning beds, breast augmentation, sexy outfits, high heels, or lingerie. They just brought them all together in one place and made money off of them.”<sup>79</sup> The commodification of sexuality is not something that only strippers partake in; many pop stars, models, and actors also sell sex and ideas of sexuality to make a living. Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook invented it as a means to post pictures of his classmates so he and his friends could rate them. Zuckerberg is now one of the richest men in the world, profiting off of his desire to sexualize and berate women<sup>80</sup>. When women profit off of the male gaze they are seen as deviant and immoral.

## Straddling the Art/Obscenity Dichotomy

This paradoxical way of delineating a difference between good and bad pole dance, can also be seen reflected under the lens of the art/obscenity opposition. For centuries the nude female body has been taken and replicated as high art within Western traditions. Laura Nead, author of *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, argues this boundary between art and

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<sup>78</sup> Griffiths.

<sup>79</sup> “Naked Lives : Inside the Worlds of Exotic Dance.”

<sup>80</sup> Oliver, “The Male Gaze Is More Relevant, and More Dangerous, than Ever.”

immoral female sexuality hinges on the containment and regulation of the nude female body.

Nead writes, “If the female body is defined as lacking containment and issuing filth and pollution from its faltering outlines and broken surface, then the classical forms of art perform a kind of magical regulation of the female body, containing it and momentarily repairing the orifices and tears”<sup>81</sup>. This idea does not only apply to classical art, but reproduces itself in the ways social and cultural concepts of self-regulation, purity, exercise, sexuality and bodily configurations are imposed on women. If the artful feminine sexuality is one that is contained, untouched and idealistic, then the feminine body as it exists in real life can not be considered artful or aesthetically pleasing. Within the current day, wealth, cosmetic surgery, and photoshopping serve as ways that this aesthetics of containment and nude womanly perfection continue to be reproduced under the contexts of today’s societal norms and standards.

In the 70s and 80s, the use of the female body in performance art was a large way in which this aesthetic of containment was challenged and subverted. Nead discusses in detail female performance artists and their use of the naked body to dissolve the aesthetics of containment by violating, sully, and exposing the body in ways that would be categorized as obscene. In these instances, the use of female nudity works directly to combat patriarchal notions of femininity, and purity.<sup>82</sup> But is there a difference then, between these feminist performances of obscenity, and the burlesque and peep show performances of the same time period? According to performance artist Elinor Fuchs, “ ‘the staging of the obscene body’ in women’s performance art creates such a moment of erotic transgression. This violation also occurs at a cultural level, as the protocols of both the ‘legitimate’ and the ‘experimental’ theatre are pushed to their limits and

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<sup>81</sup> Lynda Nead, “The Female Nude : Art, Obscenity and Sexuality,” accessed April 19, 2022, <https://web-p-ebscohost-com.ccl.idm.oclc.org/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook?sid=d8b5c710-c61d-4d94-8252-2bd2bb5e986f%40redis&vid=0&format=EB>.

<sup>82</sup> “The Female Nude : Art, Obscenity and Sexuality,”

seem to dissolve into the realm of burlesque, peepshow and porn.” Some believe feminist performance art fails for this exact reason, that it does not deconstruct the gendered norms and simply replicates it on a grander scale.<sup>83</sup>

When placed in the context of pole dancing this art/obscenity dichotomy begins to lose its structure and form. Pole fitness dancers represent art, while strippers represent obscenity. Pole fitness dancers have been fighting for pole dance to be recognized as a sport, and recognized as art. But at the same time, have taken this movement and practice from the strippers who are viewed as obscene. The pole fitness dancer exists as the controlled female body. Her sensuality exists for the sake of fitness and the maintenance and regulation of her own body. The stripper’s body is uncontrolled, she dances for money, and is viewed by society as lacking in purity and morality. But in reality, the pole fitness dancer wants to emulate sexuality, to be seen as desired by men and pole dances to feel more sexually attractive.<sup>84</sup> The only thing delineating from the art and obscene within this framework is compensation. Financial gain obstructs the values of control over women’s body and self-regulation and instead warrants her independence financially, this is what makes her obscene.

Within the context of race this becomes further complicated. In societal and cultural conceptions of morality, the white woman is deemed as the most virtuous. The white woman exists as a symbol of purity, morality, and womanhood. Conceptions of morality and virtue are heavily racialized. The color white alone is symbolic of purity, which is further extended to white skin tones as well. Outside of whiteness, womanhood is also deemed pure and virtuous. Historically the white woman has frequently been depicted as an angelic glowing figure. The

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<sup>83</sup> Nead.

<sup>84</sup> “The Female Nude : Art, Obscenity and Sexuality,”

white woman is viewed in society as a nurturing figure and a symbol of goodness.<sup>85</sup> This conception of white womanhood, is what allows the white naked woman to be seen as high art within Western cultures. Although she is naked, her virtue and morality are assumed due to her white skin. This conception of female morality does not extend to women of color. Which makes working in stigmatized environments even more challenging and dangerous. While white women who participate in sex work are still viewed as having some level of virtue, the Brown sex worker does not.

The assumption that whitemen are inherently more virtuous is reflected in the workplace. There are many different types of strip clubs, with varying degrees of stigma, and disparity among working conditions and safety. Hustle clubs, which are seen as lower-tier seedier environments often have very little regulation and rule enforcement than show clubs. Show clubs are often highly selective, competitive, and are focused on maintaining high standards and a professional atmosphere. Working in clubs with more enforced regulation is shown to benefit dancers' overall health and safety within the workplace. But show clubs often discriminate against lower class and women of color in order to maintain their professional environment. The physical attributes of women of color are seen as less desirable in these environments and are believed to make the clubs seem less professional and high class. Women of color are discriminated against and prevented from obtaining better working conditions on the basis of racism and classism. Unlike white dancers, they are prevented from the ability to participate in professional and high-class stripper environments which garner them more protection.<sup>86</sup> Due to the white woman's assumed virtue and prestige, despite her job as a stripper she is able to be

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<sup>85</sup> Sarita Srivastava, "'You're Calling Me a Racist?': The Moral and Emotional Regulation of Antiracism and Feminism," *Signs* 31, no. 1 (2005): 29–62, <https://doi.org/10.1086/432738>.

<sup>86</sup> "Naked Lives : Inside the Worlds of Exotic Dance."

seen as a higher class stripper than her Brown counterparts. White strippers are viewed as less obscene than Brown strippers.

## Conclusion

Pole Dancing serves as a unique lens to view the contradictory societal expectations and rules for expressions of sexuality, which are heavily influenced by racist and classist ideals of virtue and economic superiority. The idealized view of whiteness as virtuous is first seen here in our conceptions of ballet: despite its roots in sex work, Ballet's aesthetics of whiteness prevent it from being viewed as immoral and categorize it as high class art. In Western culture especially, dance is often linked with desire and women's sexualization. The art/obscenity dichotomy determines whether these expressions of female sexuality are accepted: the woman who is contained and devoid of imperfection is considered art, while the stripper is positioned as her antithesis. But, under the lens of pole dancing, the strict boundary between the art and the obscene begins to blur, as women who participate in pole fitness criticize women for profiting off the same thing they do. Pole fitness women want to attract desire in the same way strippers do, but also want to be viewed as separate from and more respectable than strippers. This desire for distance from stripping has led to the changing of history and narratives of pole dance. Within this contradiction value systems clash and what remains is misogynistic and classist ideas of work and respectability.

## Challenging the Art/Obscenity Dichotomy Through the Staging of Pole Dance and Sensual Movement Modalities

My goal for my dance piece *Nobody's Looking/Fantasy* was to critique the ways in which sexuality is demonized in certain contexts but not in others, especially as it pertains to dance, and more specifically pole dancing. A lot of my critique and theory is based on the work of Lynda Nead in *The Female Nude: Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*. Nead analyzes why the female nude is allowed to exist in Western culture high class art while still suppressing the sexuality and bodies of real women. I wanted to apply this framework of the art/obscenity dichotomy to pole dance, and critique the ways pole fitness dancers employ tactics of historical erasure, and verbal condemnation in order to separate themselves from strippers, the true creators of pole dance. I was inspired by different elements of sexuality, and wanted to blend them with movement that is both erotic and flowy in order to cause audiences to question their feelings about the sexuality displayed in the piece, whether it constitutes as art, and on whom. My primary focus was to create something that forced thought and an examination of one's prior concepts of movement, art and sexuality within dance and pole. This piece was choreographed to be performed at Scripps Dances 2022, which was held April 8th 2022 at 8pm, and April 9th 2022 at 2pm and 9pm (Figure 5).

Besides myself, I wanted to cast 6 other dancers and work with a larger cast, to play with having many bodies on stage and their relationships to me and each other. For the audition I choreographed a short phrase. The phrase started off very quick and sharp, but then incorporated leg waves on the ground that added a more sensual element to the movement. My goal was to see how dancers handled both forms of movement, the quick sharper movements and the slower



sensual ones. I wanted them not only to balance both, but also to demonstrate a level of comfort with the leg waves. The audition was held on February 12, 2022, at Richardson Dance Studio. By the end of the day I had 5 dancers casted.

My group rehearsals were scheduled for Sunday nights from 6pm to 9pm. Three hours to account for the time it took to set and and take down the pole. Additionally I booked rehearsal time for 10am to 12:15pm on Mondays to plan out what I wanted to do at future rehearsals and work on pole sections on my own. The first rehearsal was the day after the audition and I was still in search for one more dancer. During the rehearsal, I choreographed two sections to the song *RIP Chrysalis*, one in which the dancers split the pole and mirrored each other in V formation, and another in which they start in a clump and in a cannon begin to fall over and move through each other. Both of these sections remained in the final version of the piece to the same song and were essential in setting the tone for rehearsals, the piece, and how the dance would develop moving forward (Figure 8D and 8E). My rehearsals began with setting up the pole. As soon as dancers would arrive at 6pm, I would have whoever came in first begin assisting me by passing me parts of the pole so I could assemble it. The first rehearsal included a tutorial of the pole, how it works and how it is set up. After the pole was in place, I would loosely lead a warm up, giving dancers the option to follow along or do their own warm up. Because I would be on the pole, I recognized that my warm up would be more focused on shoulders than my dancers would need which is why they were given the option to not follow along with me. After warm-up we would jump into choreographing.

Before the next rehearsal I found a sixth dancer and I was able to find all the songs I was going to use. I created a general outline of how the piece would go (Figure 6). The first song I planned to use was *Mercurial Nerve* by Eartheater. This section was going to be a solo section on

the pole and was intended to set the tone of the piece as containing erotic movement styles. The song opens up with a woman singing, and feels very chilling. I wanted the music to be slow but haunting and create an energy that is beautiful and captivating while also being sensual. The next song I chose was *I Close the Door Upon Myself* by Susumu Yokota. This song is instrumental and begins with a piano that sounds mysterious and playful. My intention for this section was to highlight dancing that would be categorized as sexual but in a manner that would still be considered tasteful and artful. As the music picked up I wanted the sensuality to shift from being artful to obscene and for the line of acceptability to be crossed. The next section would be to the song *Curtains* by Eartheater. I wanted this section to be robotic and quick. The music has a techno beat and overlaying that there is a piano. The piano is frequently off rhythm and sounds as if two separate songs are playing at once. The idea for this section was to have the four dancers doing movement that matched the beat in the song, and to have myself on the pole dancing to the piano sections in the song. Following that would be *RIP Chrysalis* by Eartheater, this would be a full group section that would incorporate two sections choreographed during the first rehearsal. I liked the sensual and playful nature of the song, and thought it fit really well with the movement from the previous week. Next, the song *Slyly Child* by Eartheater. This is one of the songs I was most excited about finding. It is chaotic and creepy, and contains the voice of a child speaking, which becomes distorted and hectic. The child repeats, “Nobody’s looking,” over and over, which I thought would be an interesting addition, considering the piece’s theme of gaze and viewership in the context of sexuality. For this section I envision a lot of bodies moving at once, and visually something that looked just as chaotic as the song, while still maintaining elements of eroticism. The last song I chose to use was *Hallways* by Grimes. I decided to use two different parts of the song. I used the first three minutes, which was upbeat, and then used the last

minute, which was a more mellow version of the song and included mainly vocals with a low volume beat in the background. The first section of *Hallways* was intended to be an upbeat group section, the vocals of the chorus has the artist singing the words “Fantasy” over and over, which I thought fit in really well with the theme of the piece. I wanted this section to be very erotic and over the top. The second section, I wanted myself to be on the pole, and I wanted one other dancer on the stage. I envisioned myself doing something very flowy and sensual, and the other dancer doing something very sharp and robotic on the floor. This was how I envisioned my piece developing, and for the most part it is pretty consistent with the final version. The music remained exactly as I outlined it. I made the mix of the music very early on and the piece was choreographed with the music.

After the first rehearsal, I was able to find a sixth dancer. At the next rehearsal, I divided the dancers up into groups, one group had two dancers and another had four. I gave each group a prompt and gave them some time to come up with material based on the two prompts. The first group of two was asked to create choreography that mirrored each other, that reminded them of the kind of sexuality found in art museums. I gave the example of the painting *The Birth of Venus* by Botticelli, which depicts a naked woman, the goddess Venus, standing in a clamshell. This section would be the one danced to the song *I Close The Door Upon Myself* by Susumu Yokota (Figure 8B). The other group was given a prompt to create a unison choreo that was very sharp and quick; this would be the one danced to the song *Curtains* by Eartheater. During the time that they worked in their individual groups, I spent time working on combinations that I wanted to add to the piece. The group of two had created a long mirroring section that took up about half the music. The group of 4 came up with a long combination as well. From the combination I selected dancers to divert from the original combination, and added pauses as well. I had a small

phrase that I taught to them, and had it adapted to the floor as well. I had the timing lined up so that by the end of the music, all 4 dancers were back to dancing in unison.

The next rehearsal involved creating a transition between the two sections within the song RIP Chrysalis, and finishing the section with two dancers. For the first half of choreographing the piece, I felt shy asking the dancers to do moves that felt very sexual in nature. I knew that I would be comfortable doing them, but there was a part of me that felt very concerned about making my dancers uncomfortable. Although I gave a warning about the sexual nature of the piece at the audition, and all the dancers were made aware of the themes. In hindsight, I find my instinct to censor my choreography and my dancers very interesting. As rehearsals progressed, and there was more comradery and closeness between me and the dancers, I felt much more comfortable requesting erotic movements from them, but this was definitely a challenge I encountered towards the beginning of the creation process.

The following Monday was used for the creation of the solo during the first song (Figure 8A). I made the choreography begin very slow and sensual, and then progressively become more challenging with inversions. I decided that the first section would be done in heels. Platform heels, similar to the pole, are a symbol of stripping and as my intention was to evoke the connotation, it was necessary to include them. The heels I chose are the Flamingo-808 Pleasers in Chrome, which are 8 inches tall. I choreographed the beginning to be quite simple, and used mainly moves one would find in a beginner class. I walked around the pole, did a pole dip and pirouette, and some body rolls. In pole fitness classes, I have heard teachers criticize strippers for their skill level, saying that what strippers do is easy and not as rigorous as the dancing found at a pole fitness studio. While this isn't true, I still wanted to highlight simple sensual moves in the beginning in order to demonstrate how simplicity doesn't make something any less artful.

During the next rehearsal I began the section for the song *Slyly Child* (Figure 8G). As a transition I incorporated a part where the dancers gather together in a clump and walk slowly around the pole staring at me as I walk around the opposite side of the pole staring back. I wanted this moment to represent the tension between two versions of opposing sexuality (Figure 8F). I wanted this section to feel as chaotic as the music and wanted to emphasize the words of the song “nobody’s looking, nobody’s looking”. The dancers would eventually meet in a line at stage left. I had one dancer stay by the pole with me, so we could do a duet. The dancers who were in a line would then suddenly all begin moving really quickly at the same time, doing different sharp movements. This part took a lot of time, because it required that I, little by little, teach each of the 5 dancers movement. I wanted the dancers in the back to have high level movements, and those towards the front to be at a lower level. Working out the timing and movements took a long time, but it ended up being one of my favorite parts of the piece.

The week following was spring break, and I was unable to find time to make up for the rehearsal, so we lost one week of rehearsal time. The following rehearsal I spent most of the time cleaning the piece in preparation for the Scripps Dances Showing. The showing involves doing a run-through of the piece for the Scripps Dance department faculty in order to demonstrate your progress, show the piece to the lighting designers and receive feedback on the piece. After cleaning, I finished the section in the line from the song *Slyly Child*. I added a section that involved all the dancers from the line rolling over to their back and doing leg waves. This part was shown at the showing, but later removed because I believed it looked too busy after the quick section in the line, and it needed more stillness. On Monday, me and one other dancer came in to work on a duet (Figure 8G). Creating this was harder than I anticipated it being. On this first rehearsal, we made a lot of material, but ended up ditching most of it later

and rechoreographing it. This part was not shown at the showing, I was not confident it was ready to be seen yet.

The showing took place on March 25th, 2022 at Richardson Dance Studio. My piece was the last to be shown, due to the time it takes to set up the pole. I received feedback from Kevin Williamson three days later. The feedback was most positive, Williamson noted that he really enjoyed the spatial play between symmetry and asymmetry, and described the vocabulary as “flowy and commanding, precise and highly controlled, and somehow erotic and reflexive simultaneously” (Figure 7). He had two main points of advice, the first being to pay more attention to the transitions between sections of the piece. He explained how transitions can be great places to illuminate the themes and questions of the piece. Focusing the transitions on what I want the audience to understand and know from watching the piece. His second piece of advice was to pay closer attention to the use of gaze. He described how gaze can indicate a lot about the tone of the piece and the feelings and intentions behind it. He noticed that throughout the piece there was an intense outward focus, and that I should take time and think about my use of gaze and the intentions behind that. I think both of those were really valuable points, and I felt excited to move forward and incorporate those more into my piece.

At the next rehearsal we began to make costumes. I had in my head an idea but wasn't fully sure what it would look like. My initial idea at the beginning of the semester was that everyone would wear nude, to give an illusion of nudity. I quickly realized it would be difficult to find pieces to match each dancer's skin tone correctly, especially with a budget of \$20 per dancer. Instead I had the idea of using tan sheer tights. I went to Walmart and purchased as many pairs of sheer tan tights I could find, and hoped to layer them over black undergarments (Figure 9). I wanted my dancers to feel comfortable in their costumes, and even had one dancer reach out

to me to express concern over what she thought the costumes may be. I asked each dancer to bring in their own black undergarments that they would feel comfortable wearing on stage, some examples I gave them were sports bras, bralettes, tank tops, underwear, spandex, etc. I was surprised to find that most all of my dancers were comfortable dancing in their bra and underwear. From there, I distributed out 3 pairs of tights to each dancer and gave them the freedom to cut them and create tops and shorts out of them in whatever ways they liked. All I asked was that the tights be layered somehow over the black undergarments. The process of making costumes together was really fun, and it was cool to see all the creative ways in which dancers created clothing from the tights.

Once our costumes were complete, we took some pictures and got back to work finishing the dance. During this rehearsal we were able to get started on the final group section of the piece, to the song *Hallways* by Grimes (Figure 8H). I wanted this section to feel over the top, and play on different performances of sexuality. The section opens with two dancers moving at once as soon as the beat starts. From there they move into a formation that involves 3 dancers standing stacked in front of each other. I was feeling inspired by being a child and pretending to look like you were making out with something by turning around, crossing your arms to give yourself a hug and sliding your arms up and down your back. I had the dancer in front turn around to face the two dancers in back. The dancer in the middle would mimic the same arms motions as the child would on themselves, sliding up and down the body. And then the last person would grab and reach for the person at the front. I wanted it to look as if someone with four arms was reaching and grabbing at the dancer in front. During that section, 4 dancers were positioned around the dancers in a square formation. They were on the ground mirroring each other on the right and left sides to do leg circles on the floor. From there they transition into a new section in

which the 3 dancers in the center suddenly break out into very quick and robotic movements. I had them repeat the sections that they did in the line from the previous song. From they begin to melt to the ground on top of eachother, and two dancers from the square run around the stage to eventually melt on top of the dancers who already made it to the floor. That was as far as I got in this section, and I requested for two dancers to come in the next day.

At the next rehearsal, with one of the dancers I was able to finalize the duet on the pole. We ended up changing it a lot so that it fit the music. This section ended up being more inspired by contemporary dance than I had anticipated. Once that was complete, another dancer came in to work on a trick on the pole that would be classified as doubles. Doubles is a kind of pole in which two people dance on the pole at once. Doubles is a lesser known aspect of pole dance and I thought it would be interesting to have it present in the piece as a whole. It is often also present within pole competitions, and serves as its own category. I picked a move that would not require another pole dancer to complete. I climbed to the top of the pole and held myself up with an inside leg hang. My inside arm reached to find the foot of the hooked leg, and the other arm and leg hung down at the sides. The dancer at the bottom would then grab my foot with their outside arm, grab the pole with their inside arm, and lift up their back leg for me to grab. From there they were able to lift up the leg that I wasn't holding, and be suspended in the air hanging from my arm and foot (Figure 8I).

On Tuesday March 29th I tested positive for coronavirus and was moved into Scripps isolation housing. I had scheduled a rehearsal for my piece on Garrison Theater stage on Friday, our last rehearsal before tech week that saturday, our lighting rehearsal the following monday, and run throughs of the show schedules for Wednesday and Thursday. I was unsure when I would be released, and would have to test negative in order to be able to make the Friday



performance. I was unable to attend the stage rehearsal or my last scheduled rehearsal to finish the piece. I still had around 3 minutes left of the piece that needed to be completed. Luckily enough for me, one of my dancers in the piece also happened to be a very close friend of mine, Sasha Marlan-Librett. She was willing to help lead the group and finish up the group section of the dance, and work with the dancers to run and clean the piece. For the stage rehearsal, Marlan-Librett was able to assist the other dancers in practicing transitions on stage and cleaning. For the last rehearsal before tech week, Marlan-Librett and I discussed some ideas for the ending, and ways in which she could make the group piece continue to match the tone and choreographic style. She incorporated some *port de bra* arms, to reflect the research on ballet I had told her about and used cannons and undulations to create a cool effect while the dancers sat stacked in a line on the floor (Figure 8H). Dancers would pop out of the line, do a quick movement, and then pop back in the line. From there they would slide out of the line and divide off in pairs. Each pair would have a dancer in front and one in back, the dancer in back would reach under the armpits of the dancer in front and drag them back, then they would take the hands of the dancer in front, and trace up and down their body (Figure 8J). It was almost as if the dancer in front was a puppet of the dancer in back. From there they walked off in pairs, held a pose that replicated something done earlier in the dance and then walked off, to leave one dancer on the stage. The last dancer would learn a section later to be danced with me during the last minute of the song.

Monday April 4th from 9pm to 10pm was my scheduled lighting rehearsal, which I wasn't able to attend. I emailed Williamson some ideas to assist in the process. I said I didn't want any really saturated colorful lighting, except for blue colors. I thought it would be cool to have a mix of colder and darker toned lighting. For the ending section, which wasn't

choreographed yet, I wanted two spotlights, one on the pole and one on the other dancer on stage. Because I wasn't able to be there to see the lighting, Williamson facetimes me so that I could see the stage. It was difficult to see through the phone what the lighting looked like, the colors appeared distorted. Because I couldn't see for myself, I wasn't able to make decisions about the lighting myself. Overall I believe the lighting was on par with what I requested, but there were added elements that I think added to the piece. On the day of the lighting tech, I received a text from one of my dancers saying that her roommate had just tested positive for coronavirus. I asked that she not come to this rehearsal, and wait to get tested before coming back to rehearsal.

On Wednesday, the dancer informed me that she had tested positive. I spent the morning watching videos of each transition and mapping out the piece without her. I drew on paper formations and where each dancer would stand now, and arrows showing how they would move across the stage. Two dancers had to learn new parts in order to replace the dancer who had tested positive, so I sent them individual text messages with videos of the parts they needed to learn. I hoped that this would help make the process of filling in the gaps easier. Williamson facetimes me during the rehearsal so that I could watch the dance. To my surprise, all the dancers had learned their new parts, and the transitions were done just as they had been written down. While it was difficult not being able to be there, I felt happy that I was able to be helpful without being there and felt very grateful for the my dancers who were working hard to continue doing the piece without me.

By Thursday, anxiety started to set in about whether I would be able to perform on Friday and finish my piece. I also had a lot of concerns about my own body, and whether I would be strong enough to perform the dance. Williamson scheduled a time for my cast to rehearse on the

stage on Friday from 5-6pm before the show. Thursday night was the dress rehearsal, which is the same time that a photographer comes to take pictures of the dances. In hopes that I would make it out on Friday, I requested to do a run through with lighting so I could have pictures taken. I asked a friend of mine William Blackman to come take pictures, given that I would be released on Friday.

April 8th, the day of the show, I tested negative and was able to be released from isolation. I informed everyone, and prepared for the rehearsal at 5. The plan would be, rehearse from 5-6pm, and then from 6-6:15pm, do a full run through of the dance with lighting so Blackman could photograph the piece. At 4:45pm, two of my dancers met with me at Richardson Dance Studio in order to retrieve the X-Stage, and help me bring it to the Garrison Theater. One the pole was set up I choreographed the last minute of the dance. The dancer had been freestyling during all of tech week, and I really liked what she was doing. We worked together to take some of the freestyling, and incorporate it into more structured choreography so it could reflect what I was doing on the pole (Figure 8K). I knew I wanted the piece to end with us both doing splits, I in a jade split on the pole, and the dancer doing a similar split on the floor. We timed it so that we would both enter the split at the same time and the piece was complete. I changed my solo so that a few of the tricks were removed to lower the difficulty and relieve some stress. The run-through with lighting went well, although Blackman did not have a lot of experience in dance photography, the pictures he took of the piece came out really beautiful (Figure 8 and 9).

All of the performances went really well. Despite being nervous, the dance fully came together and felt good to perform. The dance remained mostly consistent with the original draft of how I envisioned it. The section to the song *Slyly Child* changed in that I imagined myself dancing with them but ultimately I believed the choreography was good enough to stand alone,

and I thought it created a very interesting tonal shift, from the first two sections. Another change from the initial plan was the last minute of the piece. I first envisioned the other dancer in the last section to do very quick and gestural movements on the floor but later realized the ending needed to take on a more sexual tone just as the beginning had. The choreography that the dancer did in the final section was entirely stripper movement vocabulary. Having that be the ending of the piece was central to conveying the idea and fully pushing the boundaries of comfortability, obscenity, and acceptability within the context of concert dance.

I think the overall balance between mechanical, flowy, and sensual movement form was important to the messaging of the piece as well. I wanted to make something that could be seen as both art and obscenity. My intention was not to upset the audience or make something that directly replicated stripper modalities. My goal was to play with both movement types and combine them in ways that blur the lines and cause the audience to ponder its acceptability. The mechanical movement aspects of the piece provided a stark contrast to the other movements in the piece and represented the rigid ways in which we attempt to police expressions of sexuality in society. The flowy movement qualities were designed to reflect a genre of contemporary pole dance, the style I am most comfortable with. Within both the mechanical and flowy movement sections were sprinkled in elements of sensuality which was made more apparent next to movements that were directly inspired and taken from sex workers. Throughout the piece, there was always some element of sensuality present, whether it was more discreet or very obvious, making the lines between good and bad representation of sexuality less clear within the piece as a whole. Overall I think the piece went very well, and expressed the message clearly.

## Conclusion

The main point of this project replies on three arguments, one, that the history of pole dancing undisputedly originates from strippers and sex workers; two, that other narratives surrounding pole that distance them from strippers serve as a way for newer pole fitness dancers to legitimize their own practice of pole through the erasure and denigration of strippers; and three, that notions of good and bad versions of sexuality are not only contradictory, but heavily rooted in racism, classism and misogyny. From these three arguments, comes the inspiration and catalyst for my dance piece titled *Nobody's Looking/Fantasy*.

Throughout the process of my research and choreography for *Nobody's Looking/Fantasy*, has taught me a lot about performance, choreography, and has furthered my growing appreciation, love, and respect for all sex workers. I wanted this project to shine a light on the problematic, contradictory and nonsensical ways in which sex work is demonized in society, and to create a dance that embraces feminine sexuality. I had originally hoped to also include interviews in this project, but was unable due to time constraints. My plan was to interview sex workers who I have previously danced with who have both worked at strip clubs and also have entered pole fitness environments. Some had been teachers and some had taken a few classes, but all had experience in both fields of pole dance. I believe this work would have been extremely beneficial to my research and provided more insight on the topic. It is important to hear and center the experiences of sex workers themselves, they are the most important voice in the discussion, and had I had the time I would have loved to incorporate my community into my work.

There are still many questions this project has left unanswered. Why is there so little work on sex work and stripping? There is a lot of documentation, research and theory on pornography, but very little on in-person sex work. Sex work have been documented to have existed as a profession since 2400 BC, and yet these workers are still ostracized from society as cast aside as disposable.<sup>87</sup> Why do those who attempt to research sex work face intense backlash? Regardless of ones value systems regarding sex, shouldnt the knowledge and documentation still exist? Why must they be erased from society? Why is there a cultural shift to redefine pole dancing, without a shift to redefine sex work? Why do people feel so angered by the ways in which another person makes money? Why do we have so little respect for sex work as an occupation? It is by no means an easy job, it requires an extreme amount of personal maintenance, patience, people skills, dance, performance ability, and hustle. Yet, stripping is seen as a last resort for those who ‘lack father figures and cannot find a job elsewhere.’<sup>88</sup> My research process revealed gaps in research on sex work, and lacking research on racial disparities and violence against sex workers. This topic as a whole is virtually unexplored outside of the work of strippers themselves; there is a huge dearth in research and historical collection that needs to be addressed. Sex workers are a part of society, and deserved to be remembered, documented, and respected as such.

This lack of research and acknowledgement does not come without a cost. As strippers are pushed to the outskirts of society, they are protesting for better working conditions. Stripper strikes are being held all across the country in New York City, Los Angeles, Philadelphia, Minneapolis, Portland and other places all fighting for safer working conditions and an end to

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<sup>87</sup> “Historical Timeline - Prostitution - ProCon.Org,” Prostitution, accessed April 21, 2022, <https://prostitution.procon.org/historical-timeline/>.

<sup>88</sup> Griffiths, *Femininity, Feminism and Recreational Pole Dancing*.

racial discrimination.<sup>89</sup> There are very real and violent consequences to the stigma against strippers and sex workers. The lack of respect for the profession contributes to exploitation and creates a dangerous work environment. These strippers protests have explicit demands, including: equal employment opportunity, safer working conditions, protections from sexual assault and sexual violence in the workplace, representation for BIPOC dancers, properly installed equipment, and an end to racial quotas, racial and body type discrimination in hiring processes, predatory and unclear managerial structures, lack of transparency from club owners, and more.<sup>90</sup> These demands should be the minimum standard for work environments, and demonstrate how little respect and care is placed on protecting these workers. Research shows that sexual violence, namely “unwanted touching by patrons, sexual coercion and harassment by patrons of other employees, and pressure by management to engage in paid sex acts,” are all fairly common experiences for strippers.<sup>91</sup> Just as any other occupation, being a stripper does not warrant being touched without consent, or make sexual assault less damaging; everyone has a right to be free of sexual abuse. Research also shows that sexual abuse happens at a far greater rate to Black women than to white women. Black survivors of rape are less likely to have the instance defined as rape, and are held more responsible for the offense than white women.<sup>92</sup>

My research is based in the belief that the pole community needs to grow a respect for sex workers and stand in solidarity and support with them. Pole is quickly becoming more popular, and this growing acceptance of pole needs to be extended to sex workers as well. They are the creators of this art form, pole does not exist without them. There is no way to separate strippers from pole dancing, no matter how much work is put forth to change the narrative.

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<sup>89</sup> “The Stripper Strike Goes National,” *Decriminalize Sex Work* (blog), June 27, 2020, <https://decriminalizesex.work/stripper-strike-national/>.

<sup>90</sup> “The Stripper Strike Goes National.”

<sup>91</sup> Tracy N. Hipp et al., “Exploring the Relationship between Strip Clubs and Rates of Sexual Violence and Violent Crime,” *Journal of Community Psychology* 49, no. 4 (2021): 962–79, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jcop.22376>.

<sup>92</sup> Anderson et al., “Revisiting the Jezebel Stereotype.”

Instead of ostracizing strippers from the practice they created, pole fitness dancers need to put in the work to help legitimize the profession of sex work and advocate for the health and safety of sex workers. This research is all done with an ethic and politic of the decriminalization of sex work. Decriminalization stands at the core of this work. The policing of sex work directly correlates to the prevention of unsafe work environment, and risk reduction overall for both clients and workers. The criminalization of sex work prevents sex workers from being able to self-advocate for fear of facing arrests, which disproportionately target Black sex workers.<sup>93</sup> Sex workers face a disproportional rate of violence, and the solution is to decriminalize sex work.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> “Race, Sex Work, and Stereotyping,” *Decriminalize Sex Work* (blog), accessed April 20, 2022, <https://decriminalizesex.work/why-decriminalization/briefing-papers/race-sex-work-and-stereotyping/>.

<sup>94</sup> Lucy Platt et al., “Associations between Sex Work Laws and Sex Workers’ Health: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Quantitative and Qualitative Studies,” *PLOS Medicine* 15, no. 12 (December 11, 2018): e1002680, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002680>.



## Appendix

### Dancer Reflections

#### Dancer 1:

During the auditions I immediately felt a connection with Cam's movement. Birth of Venus, The Siren, all of that imagery had been sitting inside me waiting for a chance to show itself. I was so excited to get to perform my sexuality in this way—I've struggled a lot with seeing that part of me as legitimate and valid in the academic world. Mapping out the choreography for the piece was such a wonderful and intimate experience, and I am so grateful. Our live-streamed performance prompted a discussion with my mom, which I was really nervous for (we've had talks about topics like this in the past and it's been hard for both of us emotionally) but I think seeing how beautifully everything came together helped her understand that what I do is art and should be accepted that way.

#### Dancer 2:

Being a part of Cam's piece "Nobody's Looking/Fantasy" was a defining experience for me. Watching them create complex phrases spontaneously was mesmerizing to watch. I felt like the piece came together very naturally and the progression of each section to the next made sense aesthetically and conceptually. Additionally, I appreciated that she gave us some creative control so that we could move in ways that felt natural to our bodies, especially in the duet. Coming from a conservative country, the stigma around pole dance and any kind of suggestive movement is very real. In spite of being here in the US and having outgrown an orthodox mindset in my

early teenage years, being a part of this piece felt liberating. I loved the idea of exploring sexuality and reflecting on this process. I definitely feel more confident in my skin. Being in such a fun, encouraging and supportive environment really pushed me to unapologetically be the best version of myself and more than anything, to accept and appreciate my body. Due to covid concerns, the last minute changes were a bit stressful, but seeing everyone band together to figure it out was inspiring. I'm truly grateful to have been a part of this amazing experience with such talented, kind-hearted and beautiful dancers.

#### Dancer 3:

The process was really fluid, collaborative, fun and exciting to be a part of. Cam would make up choreography on the spot that fit our bodies and fit the different shapes they were trying to create. The effect always came after the fact, and the bodies that were dancing the choreography came first. I enjoyed exploring different modalities of movement such as flowing, sensuality, flirting with the audience, and power and strength.

#### Dancer 4:

Being in this piece was super special and brought me a lot of joy. Growing up doing ballet and then competitive gymnastics, I would have never imagined myself feeling comfortable performing in a dance like this. I grew up focused on pulling my crazy curly hair back when I danced, making sure there were no flyaways. Pointing my toes so hard they would cramp up. Doing sit-ups before I would fall asleep at night to ensure that my stomach was perfectly flat when I entered the studio. Your dance embodies everything that my experience dancing and doing gymnastics as a child did not- exploring the ways my body could move and the shapes we

could make together. Your focus on collaboration was refreshing, and the piece evolved so beautifully, I think largely because we were comfortable making mistakes and adjustments. I felt so powerful and sensual and proud dancing, and those feelings are what I'll always be chasing when I audition for other pieces or choreograph a dance of my own in the future.

Dancer 5:

I think it was a really unique choreographic process to be a part of since I am used to simply learning and regurgitating movement taught to me by the choreographer. The process was very collaborative and I was able to explore new dance modalities that I previously had very little experience in.

Dancer 6:

I was really excited to perform this piece from the start. I haven't always felt comfortable in the past performing sexuality in spaces where it feels encouraged or even required and have had off and on feelings about it in the past. In middle school I learned how to dance sexy for middle school dances and never thought much about it. I thought I passed at it—maybe I would give myself a B instead of an A, but it was good enough and felt good enough. Both the objectification and self-objectification felt good sometimes but also wrong and dehumanizing. I didn't always feel like it was authentic or a full enough representation of me, or I felt like I was doing something just for others. Later high school and freshman year college I started dancing more freely—using my hips and but also incorporating some other feelings and more masculinity into my dancing in a way that also felt good. I didn't overthink it. Since then, some days I feel totally stuck as to how to perform myself and my sexuality versus how to just feel good in social

dance spaces. Sometimes I don't give a fuck, and other times I get insecure about not excelling in certain hyper-sexualized dance moves. Now I feel more comfortable accepting that sometimes I will want to dance in a sexual way and other times I won't and both feelings are valid. I was really excited to get a chance to perform sexuality in a context where I could focus on it and learn it—I could learn how the fantasy that looks so natural is fulfilled, how much work it takes. And also in a context where I could also utilize and highlight some of my contemporary dance skills. I was excited to perform sexuality in a space that acknowledged that it is a performance. I don't know how it read to people, but the performance was pleasurable in a way that I don't really know how to explain. Maybe I knew that to some it would feel inappropriate, others would feel seen, and some would just feel horny. I was okay with all the reactions. The rehearsal process was really sweet and silly and fun throughout. You made the space really safe and made the dancers feel like they had agency to do what they were comfortable with. I really enjoyed the contrasts that existed in the piece because it was obviously hinting to the audience, for me at least, to think about the fact that we are creating and performing a fantasy (that it didn't just exist on its own and that we were working hard at it) but there were also elements within the piece that broke the fantasy in a way, with the “Nobody's looking” piece, the moments of walking and gazing at each other, moments abruptly looking at the audience, and sharp robotic moments that contrasted the movements with more sexual connotations.

## Photographs

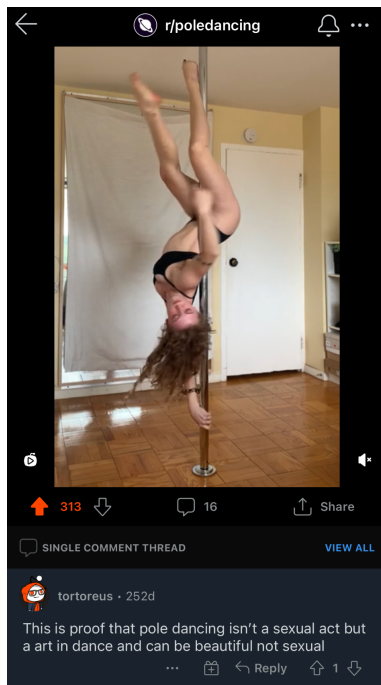


Figure 1. Reddit comment on a video of me pole dancing online



Figure 2. Mallakhamb<sup>95</sup>



Figure 3. Chinese Pole<sup>96</sup>

<sup>95</sup> "Mallakhamb."

<sup>96</sup> "Chinese Pole," Circus Performers | Show Production | Circus Consultants, accessed April 23, 2022, <https://www.acrobatproductions.com/circus-disciplines-explained/2013/8/5/chinese-pole>.

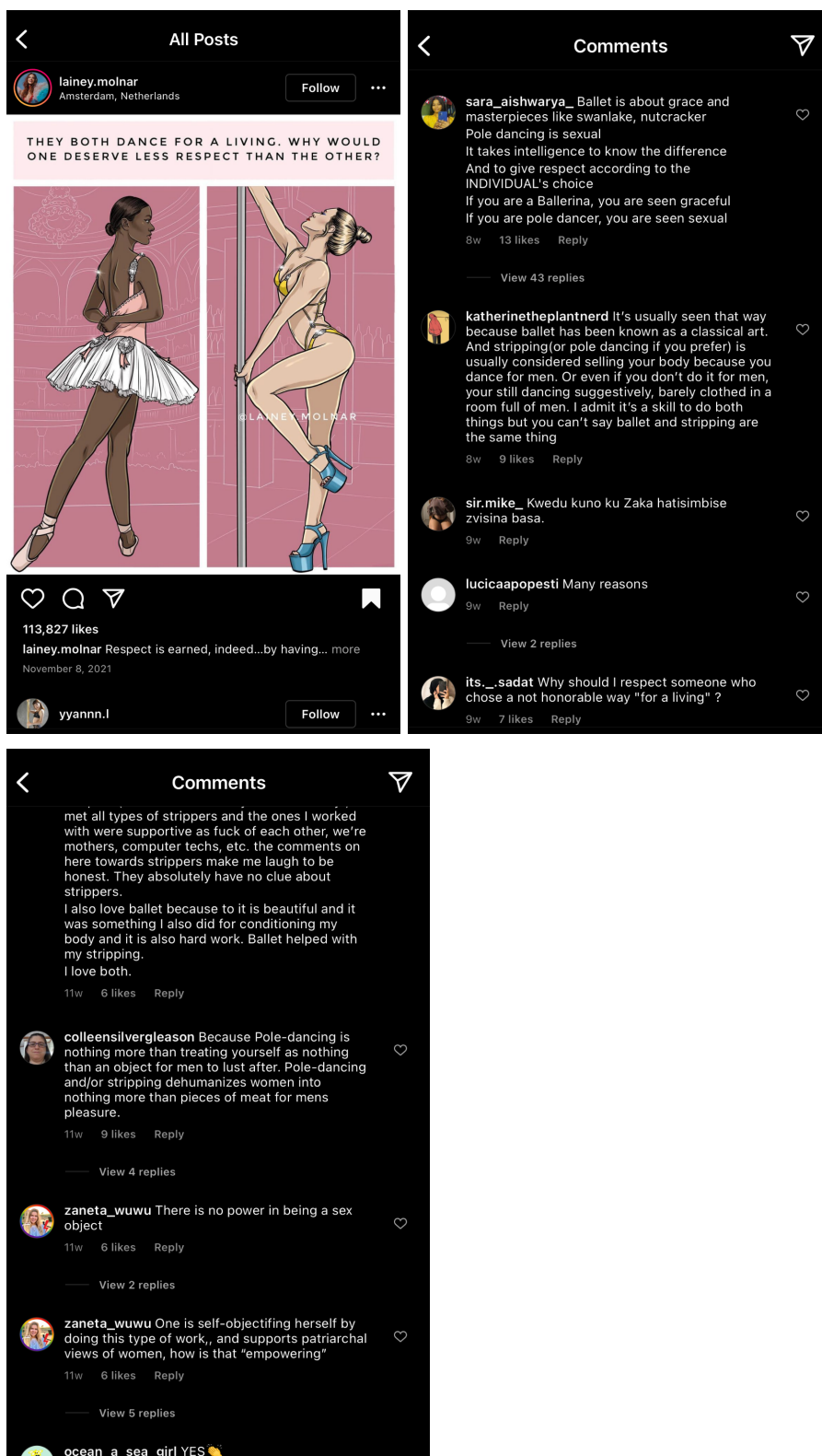


Figure 4. Instagram post and comments comparing ballerinas to strippers (photos labeled A-C left to right)

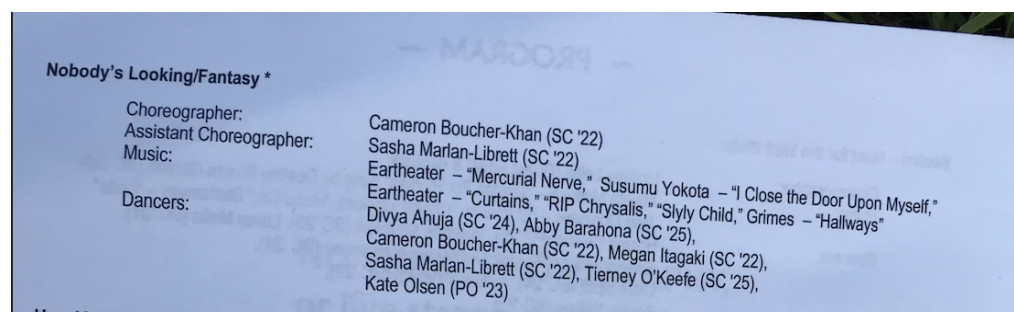


Figure 5. Scripps Dances 2022 Program (photos labeled A and B, top to bottom)



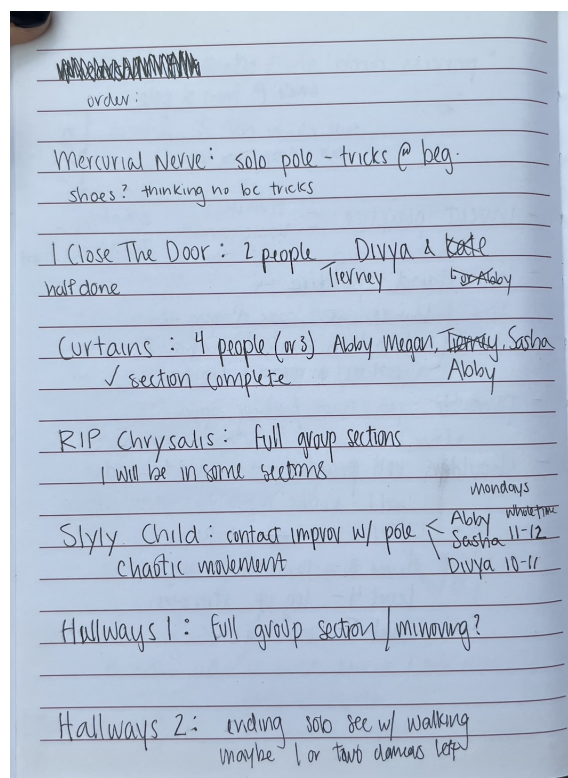


Figure 6. Journal entry outlining conception for piece

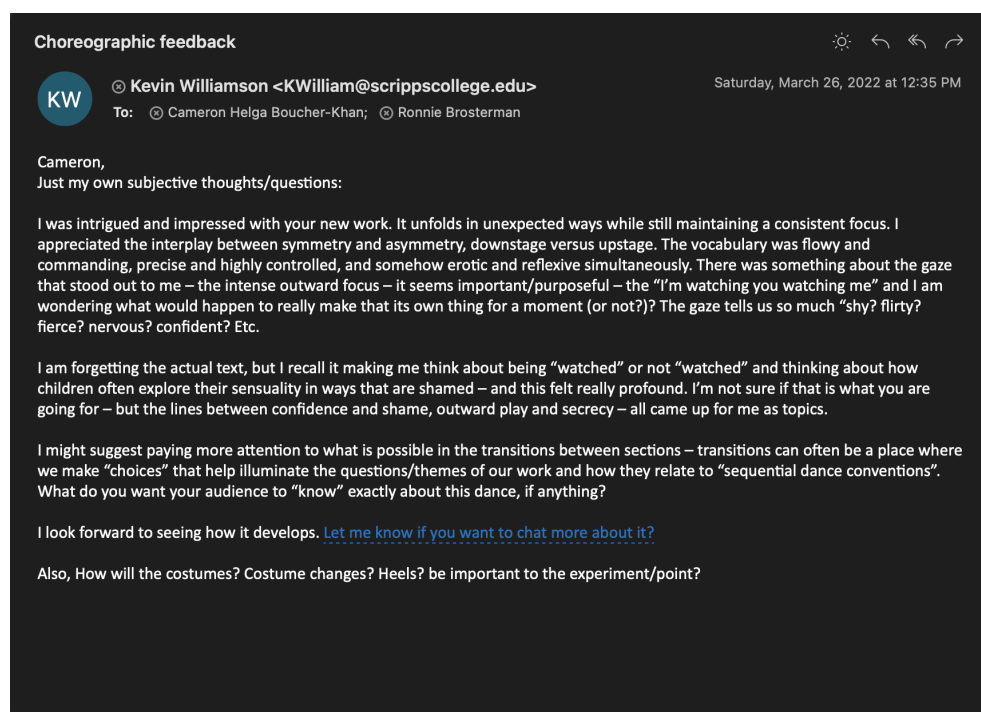


Figure 7. Feedback from Kevin Williamson after Showing



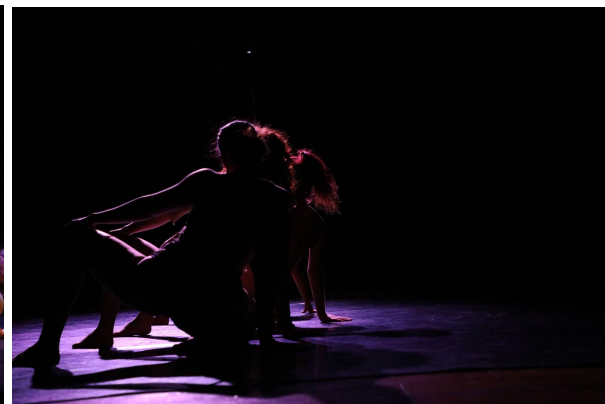




Figure 8. Important choreographic moments taken by William Blackman(labeled A-J left to right, top to bottom)



Figure 9. Pictures of Costumes taken by William Blackman

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