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Sex and desire on the dancefloor: A queer post-structuralist approach to reclaiming erotic dances

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Abstract

In this article I intend to examine the rising popularity of erotic dances as a leisure activity practiced in a feminist dance school situated in Brussels, and question what exactly it is these dancers are reclaiming when using a discourse about sexual liberation and empowerment. To address the complexity of gender, sexuality and performance, this study uses a queer post-structuralist analysis and an ethnographic methodology when studying erotic dances. Based on observations and in-depth interviews with students and instructors, this study argues that writing off erotic dance solely as a hype within the trend to commercialize sexuality, is ignoring the useful and subversive ways in which these erotic dancers are investigating the production of their sexed bodies to disrupt and deconstruct normative ideas about sexuality and gender.

Keywords

Sexuality, Desire, Erotic dance(s), Gender, Queer theory, Performance

Introduction

Sexual and erotic dance forms that came to prominence in *male gaze* environments, like pole dance, are becoming increasingly popular as leisure activity in Western societies. The history of these dance forms negatively connotated them as degrading to women (Jarrett, 1997). Although recently, erotic dances have been reclaimed by feminists who are rewriting the patriarchal scripts of female sexuality. Pole dance has been reinvented as a fitness activity for everyone (Holland, 2010) and neo-burlesque as a self-aware and ironic take on the genre (Nally, 2009). To what extent can these dance forms be subversive and how can a feminist critique be employed in such a practice? Especially in times where a new postfeminist generation of women is seeking empowerment and people of all genders are dealing with shifting ideas of sexuality (Gill, R. & Orgad, S., 2018).

My scholarly interest in erotic dances emerged directly from personal experiences. After attending some burlesque and pole dance shows, I became intrigued. I entered my first erotic dance class in 2020 at a studio in Brussels that teaches a wide variety of erotic dance forms such as pole dance, burlesque, strip tease, lap dance, and chair dance. As a feminist, I was admittedly skeptical and felt guilty about voluntarily participating in (and paying for) an experience that I assumed was sexually exploitive of women. Thus, I entered my early classes with a critical eye toward underlying meanings and functions of the dance, particularly as they related to gender. From my first dance class on, I was immediately struck with an apparent contradiction: If this dance was a mechanism for women's oppression, why did it feel so good?

After a couple of months attending dances classes at this studio, I realized these classes had become spaces where gender meets embodiment, sexuality meets physical exercise and empowerment meets feminist thinking. It is therefore my purpose in this article to examine why erotic dances, despite or maybe because of their negative connotation, appeal to practitioners as a recreational activity. Is practicing erotic dance a reinforcement of the patriarchal status quo and again essentializing women to their sexual bodies? Or can it, while being a reinforcement, also be a potential – and maybe even very crucial – site to deconstruct gender norms and stage a complex subjectivity depending on the context, moment, and person?

The revival of erotic dances and it's critical feminist reflections

The Second-wave feminist movement and interlinked sexual revolution of the early 1960's brought forth an explosive revival of striptease, burlesque, and overt female sexual performances. A revival named by McNair (2002) as porno-chic: the tendency of mainstreaming a commercial sexuality. When joining in this trend, women learn that they should not be ashamed of their sexuality, but instead perform it actively, embracing, enjoying, and reclaiming their right to sexiness (Just & Muhr, 2019). This is how, after burlesque striptease disappeared from the mainstream stage for a couple of decades, it re-emerged after the 1990's and became demarcated as 'neo' or 'new' burlesque (Jarrett, 1997). While the diachronic development of classic burlesque performances reveals a shifting matrix of class, gender and moral values, Dodds (2013) suggests that contemporary neo-burlesque performances also mobilize embodied transformations that complicate questions of female spectacle, power and reconfigures the idealized female body. However, the desire of the new burlesque community to portray feminine identity performances with a commitment to feminist politics is troubled by an anxiety about whether burlesque is compatible with feminism (Ferreday, 2008).

The reappropriation of pole dance as a recreational activity is different to neo-burlesque and other erotic dances since without the element of sexiness, it is an activity not so different from regular fitness, gymnastics, or contemporary dance classes. Recreational pole dancing in the U.S., U.K., and Australia is primarily marketed and experienced as a fitness activity with added benefits of feeling confident and empowered, having fun, and feeling good about oneself (Donaghue et al. 2011). To date, Holland's (2010) U.K. study is

the largest qualitative account of the experience of recreational pole dancing. She found that participants and instructors frequently describe recreational pole dancing as an embodying activity that provides an enjoyable form of exercise that is ‘liberating’ and ‘empowering’. Dances using a discourse about sexual empowerment, have been researched thoroughly by critical feminists studying what exactly it is these dancers are reclaiming. Researching pole dance, Donaghue et al. (2011) for example, argue that due to the emphasis on ‘empowerment’ via the mastery of ‘sexy’ movement of the body, the dance style is thoroughly immersed in the postfeminist sensibility in which the body is located as both the source of authentic self-expression and the means to power. These authors then raise the question whether the discourse of empowerment and the construction of ‘choice’ is not yet another control mechanism. A mechanism that fits the contemporary pressure to construct the self as a confident woman who is fond of her own body. As Gill and Elias (2014) argue in their study about the ever growing ‘Love Your Body’ discourses, messages that imply women should not simply makeover their bodies, but now their subjectivity as well.

Additionally, previous literature argues that performing erotic dances reproduces and reinforces patriarchal notions of femininity and female sexuality. Despite the language of empowerment, power discussions seem curiously absent, the meaning of sexual objectification can be wrapped ‘in a shiny, feisty, postfeminist packaging that obscures the continued underlying sexism’ (Gill, 2012). Erotic performances then, are reinterpreted not as a capitulation to men, but as a means of celebrating one’s potential power over men and subsequently adding to the heterosexualization of popular culture (Donaghue et al., 2011). As McRobbie (2011) rhetorically asks: ‘what price does she pay for such seductive freedoms?’

The need for a performative and queer approach

This compact summary of what has been written on the revival of erotic dances shows that the majority of the literature emphasizes the underlying sexism and *male gaze* domination, findings that did not correspond with my own experiences when practicing erotic dances at this Brussels based dance school. Feminist critics, as listed above, associate erotic dances with findings about the sexualization of women in pornography (MacKinnon, 1989 and Whitehead & Kurz, 2009) and the objectification in advertisement (Gill, 2008). These researchers focus on body images and therefore omit the experience of the body in movement. Methodologically, this entails the exclusion of gender and sexuality while researching erotic dances, resulting in the reduction of sexuality to sexual identity. Consequently, feminist research trying to dismantle the dominant and oppressive structures of gendered practices and politics while adopting a heteronormative perspective on gender and sexuality, ironically reinforce the gender binary. The framing of sexual desire among these dance communities within a gendered dichotomy of ‘passive’ and ‘active’ or ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine’, requires a theory that encourages investigating the many ways that gender and sexuality may be discursively intertwined. How does dance enact or rework social categories of identity, and how does the meaning of movements change as dance styles cross the borders of gender and sexuality, are questions that have yet to be asked when researching personal experiences with erotic dances. To ask these questions, matters of embodiment, identity and desire need to be addressed from a complex, intersubjective, and personal perspective.

Therefore, when researching sexuality, gender and erotic dances, a queer perspective is crucial. Queer theory implicates a different way of understanding the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality: by deconstructing the binaries of sex and gender and foregrounding the constructed nature of these classification systems, a researcher can resist the tendency to congeal these categories into social identities (Valocchi, 2005). In order to resist reducing sexuality to sexual identity, I will instead turn to the notion of desire, an energy which depends on dispersion and loss, demonstrating that identity is fluid, multiple and can be renewed or reassembled by collecting or recollecting new revisions (Linstead &

Pullen, 2006). In this research, questions on sexuality will be addressed through different components such as gender identity, sexual practices, desires, embodied movements; resulting in a definition of sexuality that is fluid, queer, and self-defined. This approach, specific to queer theory, is much-needed to surpass a heteronormative feminist narrative about gender, without essentialising identity construction in an authentication process reinforcing the heterosexual-homosexual distinction (Seidman, 1994). Queer analysis then reveals the instabilities in the hegemonic sexual formation and is sensitive to the ways individuals may subvert the normative alignments of sex, gender, and sexuality in the construction of heterosexuality (Valocchi, 2005).

Besides calling into question the salience and coherence of sexual identity categories, a queer analysis also points out the critical importance of intersectionality. Numerous feminists use an intersectional analysis to criticize the use of a collective identity based upon womanhood. According to them, doing this minimizes the different interests and power dynamics active among women with respect to class, race, ethnicity (Crenshaw, 1995). Adding sexuality and gender to the set of differences, comes to show that the understanding of sexual identity itself is inflected in unique ways depending on racial, ethnic or class affiliations (Valocchi, 2005). Queer theory then builds on the limitations of identity-based analysis and stimulates deconstructing normative ideas about sexuality and gender by paying attention to the very personal experiences of intersections. Notwithstanding the irrelevance to an individual's identity formation, these deconstructive strategies overlook the very concrete and violent institutional forms to which the most logical answer is resistance in and through a particular collective identity. Leading to a queer dilemma since again fixed identity categories are both the basis for oppression and the basis of political power (Gamson, 1995). Using queer theory when studying a community – in this case an erotic dance school - helps to understand the longing for a collective identity and simultaneously question the viability and political usefulness of sexual identities.

Methodology

Previous literature researching pole dance, concluding it is a neoliberal construct to empower, have either studied the websites of pole dance schools and not the performativity (Donaghue et al., 2011), solely interviewed heterosexual women between the age of 17 to 30 (Pellizzer et al., 2016) or did not take sexuality and gender modelling into consideration when interviewing their participants (Whitehead & Kurz, 2009). I, on the other hand, chose to study the practice of erotic dances at one feminist dance school in Brussels, where dancers differ in age, gender, race, class, and sexual orientation. To research dance in its meaningful context (Sklar, 1991) and research individuals' lived experiences in ways that honour the complexity of human agency and the instability of identity, an empirical and ethnographic methodology is adopted in this article (Valocchi, 2005). As a participant observer, I therefore combined interview research with empirical findings to stress the complexity of erotic dances (Just & Muhr 2019; Holland, 2010). By working empirically and integrating the local context of these practices, I could investigate the many ways in which gender and sexuality are discursively intertwined (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004). Additionally, a queer theoretical framework enabled me, as a participant and ethnographer, to pay attention to the practices individuals engage in and how these practices construct their sexual and gender subjectivities.

The collected data is a combination of field notes of my observations as participant, combined with 12 semi-structured interviews, of which seven other student dancers and five teachers all active at the same dance school based in Brussels. In total I contacted 23 dancers based on their activity at the dance school and on the Facebook group of the school, where questions can be asked about the classes or information is given about the timetables and other activities. I also contacted certain dancers specifically, based on their age, gender and race, to have a correct representation of the diversity present during the classes. Of the 23 contacted dancers, 13 responded having the time and wanting to share their experience with me, while the others did not have the time or did not react. The respondents are between 25

and 45 years old and not all identify as female, cisgender, or heterosexual. Two of the interviewed participants are male, which corresponds to the total amount of male dancers at the dance school, but is a limited data collection nonetheless. I considered focussing on female dancers only, but this would entail omitting non-binary dancers and overlooking valuable experiences and information, especially since the aim of these interviews was to research the complex relationship between sexuality and gender identity when practicing erotic dances.

I prepared a handful of questions – touching upon sexuality, gender, embodiment, happiness, feminism – but mainly allowed the conversation to flow like the tides of the sea swell, going back and forth naturally, connecting my own experiences to the experiences of the interviewee to deepen and enrich the understanding of erotic dances. My positionality, as an insider in the school and as a participant of the dance classes, allows for a shared experiential ground with the other participants. In my experience, this was an important added value when talking about intimate and personal experiences, since it led to vulnerable and open conversations. Furthermore, my embodied location, being a bisexual queer white cisgender woman, and my accountability as a participant researcher means I had to be self-reflexive and critically aware of the limitations of my locations, truths, and discourses. An important focal point for me to be aware of was heterosexist questions and assumptions when observing and interviewing participants, considering this article has the objective to surpass a heteronormative feminist narrative about gender and sexuality (Braun, 2000). Additionally, seeing that the dance school brings together people from many different ethnicities, religions, and backgrounds (due to their location in the city centre of Brussels and because they offer solidarity prices for those who need it), I had to be aware of my own *Western gaze* on (erotic) dances, embodiment and sexual movements in order not to project my own conceptions and biases onto my participants.

As the proposed research project involves the study of sensitive and intimate information, extra precautions in relation to ethical standards were required, such as safeguarding anonymity and confidentiality. Therefore, all interviewees were thoroughly informed about the aims and procedures for collecting, analyzing, and using information. After being informed, they were asked to give their written agreement to participate. Moreover, in this article the participants were assigned a pseudonym and all potentially identifying information of the participant was removed or replaced, and audio recordings were destroyed at the end of the research project. Interviews were conducted in French, Dutch or English (depending on the preference of the informant), audio-recorded, transcribed, and critically analysed with the assistance of a qualitative software programme (NVivo). Throughout the research project, a constant dialogue between empirical evidence and theory will helped me to evaluate and re-examine the collected data. The collected data was analyzed with a focus on the rhetorical strategies and bodily productions of the dancers. Conclusions were not simply drawn from the interviewee's accounts, but also on their reasoning and their communication through dance and their body. This is significant to shift attention from the substance of identity positions to the very expression of such positions and, more particularly, to the form of such expression (Sklar, 1991).

Findings

On stage comes a person carrying a chair and wearing very high pink platform heels, an oversized black suit, and a pig's head on their head. The performer puts the chair in the middle of the stage, sits on the chair and the music starts playing. It's a French song about patriarchy and men acting like pigs. The person wearing the pigs mask opens their legs and starts dancing, on and around the chair, with a very fierce and sexual energy. The heels are kicked and slammed on the floor and against each other on the beats of the music. Halfway through the song they start stripping and rip apart their clothes, one by one, until they are only wearing heels, a pig mask, and a pink latex body.

This was the first time I saw a chair dance performance at Cabaret Mademoiselle. A small bar with an intimate stage, close to the audience where all kinds of performers such as drag artists, burlesque strippers, circus artists, and comedians go on stage. Later that evening, I discovered while chatting with some of the people at the bar that the person performing on stage that evening is a dance teacher at the dance school Brussels Art & Pole. I was intrigued, and the next day I looked up the dance school. Immediately after I had my first burlesque dance class, I knew I wanted to continue practicing erotic dances. Simultaneously, I also realized that this would entail talking and thinking, not only about dance and performance but also about my sexuality, sexual orientation, gender, and desires. These conversations made my interest and fascination with the practice of erotic dances grow even more.

Sparked by these encounters, I was eager to know why the participants chose these dances as their leisure activity or artistic expression. Their motivation is an important factor when studying leisure activities, especially erotic dances, since these dances are not taught from an early age nor are they a straightforward choice when deciding a recreational activity. Erotic dances still have a strong connotation with strip clubs and even prostitution, which can result in uncomfortable or negative reactions from outside when practicing or performing them. On numerous occasions, the students, and teachers with a background in sports and/or dance, emphasize the accessibility and incisiveness of the dance school and erotic dances. Their initial attraction to erotic dance was due to its possibilities and welcoming environment compared to other dances or sports they had previously practiced. Angel, the founder of the dance school explains why she's always felt most accepted practicing erotic dances, opposed to any other dance style:

Angel: I started dancing as a young adult and took some lessons in modern jazz, ballroom dances and tango. Unfortunately, I had to stop because I didn't have a masculine partner anymore and I wanted to go with a girlfriend of mine but they refused my entrance at the school. Because a woman could not lead another woman in the hierarchy of tango and ballroom dance.

Comedian, Flore, explains that she came upon pole dance because she's always loved dancing but never found a dance before where she could completely let loose, impersonate, and improvise. On the contrary, she always felt as if she wasn't fitting to the very institutionalized norms.

Flore: I did ballet for a long time when I was younger and I would have loved to become a ballet dancer but they always gave me the feeling I didn't belong. Because I wasn't elegant enough, or thin enough. Erotic dance isn't as culturally ingrained and institutionalised. This means erotic dances aren't as strict and rigid as classical or contemporary dance. There seem to be more possibilities, making the step easier to start taking classes.

Dancing erotically is all about showing, revealing, hinting, and suggesting your body and playing with the idea of desirability. This can be done through clothes, taking them off or putting them on, or through a certain expression when dancing. Observing how the movements and choreographies are being taught during the classes, I noticed that the teachers focus on explaining the movements but leave the 'sexiness' of the choreography open for interpretation. After technical movements are taught, teachers encourage expression and improvisation: 'You can be angry, sad, in love or very seductive. You chose how you feel and what you want to express with the movements or choreography I just taught you.' Whenever this moment of improvisation is installed during class, I feel very awkward and uncomfortable at first. My body has gotten used to repeat what is shown, but not move without an example. But over the years, I have realized just how important these moments of improvisation are in order to investigate what exactly I want to express when dancing

erotically. A quest I have not yet finished and which, in my opinion, should never stop. Just like words, movements have meaning and are given meaning by the person performing them. The intimate conversations with the participants come to show that when starting erotic dancing classes, one goes through a personal journey of sensual, sexual, and erotic exploration to discover one's own body, style, creativity and expression through dance. Part of the evolution these dancers have reported going through, is finding a way to express desire and knowing full well what it entails to sexualize and objectify oneself. Some explain how the practice of eroticizing oneself through dance has helped them reclaim their sexuality and obtain a control over their sensuality and sexuality. For example, Max demonstrates how she concluded that she could be both powerful and feminist and at the same time make sensual and sexual dance moves:

Max: I was always all about shapes and trying to define my own style that was more masculine and very powerful. Then I did my championship and one of the best known dancers came up to me and told me that for her I was the most sensual. I was totally in shock because I realized I could dance in a sensual and sexual way, without it being something negative and also without it being not feminist anymore. The beauty of erotic dance is just that: that it is a combination of both strength and vulnerability. For it to be a feminist act it has to do both. It is about daring to sexualise yourself, see yourself as a sexual human being which we all are.

Similar to this statement, Nathalia explains how during her performances she makes it impossible for the audience to sexualize her, since she is doing it herself.

Nathalie: When I dance exotic pole, it's not an invitation for people to objectify me, I am pushing and kicking with my heels and am expressing something that says: 'stay away!' When I'm sexualising myself, nobody else can. And I sexualize myself completely, so I'm pushing the limit way further than anyone could, so nobody else is capable of doing it even more. I'm not in a passive position, but active. I feel uncomfortable when wearing a skirt or a dress. That makes me feel uncomfortable, that's when I feel sexualised and objectified. Not when I'm dancing.

Not all the participants report evolving towards more sexually explicit dance moves and pursuing a liberation. Flore is a comedian and describes how through pole dance, she is figuring out what desirability means to her and how she can adapt it to her own being and style.

Flore: Doing a body wave, or booty shake or similar moves just are not my style. I am still discovering a lot of new things about myself and my sexuality because I don't feel sexy at all. I am looking for a place to explore what it is I want to express but that doesn't necessarily need to be sexy or sensual. It's trying to see how I can feel desirable when pole dancing but I don't put a certain category on it or an objective as if I have to be able to do a certain thing to be sexy. No, my objective is to figure out what sexy is for me.

While some talk about reclaiming their sexuality, as a reaction to slutshaming, others are on a different quest when practicing erotic dances. Like Flore, Sarah has never felt very sexual or sensual. Nonetheless, Sarah enjoys practicing these erotic dances, as a way to explore what her approach is.

Sarah: I never considered myself to be sexy. Even young I was always the shy and too skinny girl. So seeing myself as seductive and desirable is still something funny and new to me. Even now I often tell myself I'm not someone desirable or remarkable, at 42. And trying doing it in class is something really weird for me

because I literally feel as if my body is blocked from doing sexy movements. But dancing erotically has given me the ability to make a connection between my body and soul that was missing, and figure what it is I find sexy about myself.

These extracts show how different the dancers are in their style and in their approach on what it means to sexualise or eroticize oneself. Furthermore, some of the teachers and students describe how practicing these dances, have made them rethink schemas about desire and seduction. Pole dance teacher Angel explains how after seven years of practicing erotic dances, she is rethinking the codes of seduction, helping her to have deeper conversations and more intimate relationships with people.

Angel: I learned my own codes of seduction through erotic dance, which means I can now choose to just be me or if I want I can be seductive. I learned not be at the mercy of it and not let myself think that only by being seductive, this other person will like me. I learned I could be very brutal and hard and someone will still like me because of those aspects. Pole dance makes you able to master all that and master when you want to be seductive and when not, because it is something you also contemplate on when dancing.

Kate only recently joined the dance school and already says that dancing erotically is making her rethink not only her sexual orientation but even more so her desirability.

Kate: A whole new world opened up for me at the school, especially when it came to sexuality. I was quite prudish and sexuality was not discussed at home. But I have always had a kind of longing and curiosity for more. Surrounding myself with people who are much more open and liberated, has really been an eye-opener for me. It helped me embrace my own sexuality and not to think 'Oh, what is this. That's weird. That's not allowed.' For example, I have questioned my orientation since I started pole dancing. The dance school has really been a gateway for me to a new level of acceptance and exploration and rethink what desire is for me.

Nathalia on the other hand, who was already open about her sexual orientation as a lesbian before starting pole dance, explains how by exploring the sensual and erotic aspects within herself she understood these expressions aren't as scary or deterrent for her identity as she thought before practicing erotic dance.

Nathalie: Before I was scared of my sexual potential, I didn't dare to explore it as if as soon as I would explore it, something terrifying would happen. But actually nothing happened. I realised I was the only judge of my own sexuality and I was the only one holding back. And that has a lot to do with reclaiming my body and sexuality through dance.

As one would expect, a bigger percentage of the dancers are women, both as students and as teachers. The atmosphere at the dance school is what you could call very feminine, colourful and above all women friendly. For example, there is only one toilet – no urinary – and all menstrual items are provided in case someone has their period. Another deliberate choice is to have no doors, curtains divide the different rooms and there are no clearly indicated changing rooms. Consequently, everyone gets undressed scattered around and there is a lot of casual nudity. Eleonore illustrates how erotic practices bring forth interesting questions about nudity and sexual orientation.

Eleonore: In this place such a lot of intersectionality is visible and present. It makes you realise it would be pointless to separate for example female and male toilets,

because what about women who like women and will thus see a gender that they are sexually attracted to naked? And , on top of that , the fact that mothers arrive here and bring their kids is great. Children milling around, watching their mothers dancing around that pole in a super sexual way with their heels and in a thong. Great, isn't it? And then those children are taken care of communally, because that's what a community does.

The male students attending the erotic dance classes, as Manu and Chris do, point out that for them practicing erotic dances has made them aware of the male domination in the outside world and how hard it must be for a woman to constantly feel as if things are not made for your gender.

Manu: It is really hard for a man to understand how it is for a woman to live in a man's world, because we've never seen it other than that. Since I have been going to this dance school I feel like I can better understand the feeling. Being in a totally feminine world that is more suited for women than for men makes me rethink how it can be for someone to be the total minority.

Chris explains discovering inconveniences when dancing because the dance forms were not conceived by and for men.

Chris: It is often the other way round, that women physically experience that things are not made for their size or the size of their body. Therefore, women often encounter obstacles because it is made for a man's size. But pole dancing is a sport that's really designed for women's bodies. For example, flexibility in the hips is way harder for me and for a lot of boys and thus we have to train longer on this. There are also poses on the pole that are more difficult for me because I have a penis between my legs. It's funny that often the male body is the norm, but not at all in pole dancing.

Pole dance teacher Angel explains how this is another very important part of their approach and beseeches all the teachers to make sure they are proposing enough alternatives to do certain dance moves in order for everyone to feel comfortable and explore the boundaries of what is considered 'feminine' versus 'masculine'.

Angel: We chose to allow all gender to join our courses but not to differentiate teaching in order to adapt to men or women. This is because we believe that movements that make a man sexy and movements that make women look sexy are nothing but constructions. This is why our classes are not gendered and our movements aren't either. We find it very important not to say: 'Do a body wave like a girl or a pump like a pump'. We say 'make a body wave' or 'do a pump'.

Manu seems unsure about the lack of gendered movements, but does feel the freedom to try different shapes and dances in order to find his own style in the dance.

Manu: There are so many amazing movements for girls and the teachers teach them and when I reproduce them, some of them look great and others I think look ridiculous. For example doing a move like sensually touching your arm up and down: it looks great when a woman does it, but when a buff and bald guy with a hairy chest does it, it just looks ridiculous to me. So sometimes I swap to a move that I do like on me. I started filtering the moves and only doing those I like.

Not only the dancers who identify as men are deconstructing their ideas about masculinity and femininity, female dancers experience an exploration of gender binaries through the practice of erotic dances as well. Flore describes how she experimented with the idea of masculinity during a class where props could be used to express a sexy attitude.

Flore: Everybody used something sexy and I came in my big winter coat and danced with it and called myself the “Michelin man” and I made people laugh, which was my objective. I’m not going to dance in a way that doesn’t feel like me; I will make it my own and I feel at the school that I can do that. You have a million different versions of pole dance and I feel that at the school they really do their best to show this and they stimulate you to find your own style.

Nathalia has a very sensual and feminine aesthetic when dancing exotic pole but clarifies that she does not limit herself to femininity. She is also interested in transgressing the boundaries of what is considered beautiful.

Nathalia: I’ve been wanting for a very long time now, to create something monstrous, to move in a way that goes beyond how I’m supposed to dance as a woman. I love the moment in erotic dance, where the movements become ugly. I’m thinking of the feet in flex position, because you can feel you’re transgressing the norms. Norms about women, dance, bodies and so on. I search for something alive and not necessarily visual.

As mentioned by other participants, practicing erotic dances has led some of them rethink their sexuality, sexual orientation and/or desires. Max illustrates how their process of self-sexualization and auto-erotization has encouraged them to question the viability of gender.

Max: Through pole dance I lived a great journey through my own sexuality and gender. I can now proudly say that I am more non-binary than I am woman but I have been able to explore this and experience this through pole because it touches upon all those important aspects of evolving as person: body, strength, challenge, dance, people, community, sexuality, sensuality, personality. And because dance has the ability of being temporary and intense you really let go and dare to explore new things, movements, experiences and expressions.

Erotic dancers not only experiment with their own gender roles, but also with those of the audience. Moreover, erotic dances originated in male gaze environments, as pole dance did in strip clubs and therefore have the connotation of women pleasing men. But Nathalia explains how this for her is not the case at all and how dancing erotically specifically without the intention to seduce men, empowers her to unleash her own interpretation of sensuality.

Nathalia: As a lesbian, I know for sure that I am not dancing for a man. So it’s not up to anyone to tell me who I dance for or not, because I can tell you for certain that it’s not for the eye of the men. I believe it’s wrong to say: body wave is equal to satisfying a male gaze. You might be expressing a certain sensuality, but that doesn’t mean you are doing it for anyone and definably not specifically for a man. In a heteronormative frame, undulations done by women might be considered as seducing a man, but it’s not restricted to that.

Discussion

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the body of scholarly research on the revival and reappropriation of erotic dances. To fully grasp the subjectivity and the complexity of erotic dance, this paper intends to queer the relationship between sex, gender, and sexuality

in erotic dances by considering the nonnormative alignments across these variables when analysing the collected observations, experiences, and responses on the practice of erotic dance.

This paper illustrates that an important part of learning and practicing erotic dances involves the exploration of the production of sexed bodies to disrupt normative power relations. Erotic dances as performed at the Brussels based dance school where this research was conducted, create an open and safe space that allow for sexual exploration and liberation. More importantly, it gives the dancers the necessary tools to explore and set boundaries. The dancers mention exploring desire, seduction, and the personal significance of being 'sexy' through the movements of erotic dance. Desire is an essential element in this equation because it enables the dancer, the audience, and even the theorist to resist the tendency to reduce the dancer to their sexual identity. On the contrary, by showing complex inner experiences, desires, and feelings of sensuality and arousal, the dancer unsettles the heteronormative gaze that seeks to fix the female body to its sexual identity. This, according to the participants, does not entail that one cannot seduce and integrate the male gaze when dancing erotically, but awareness of this gaze is essential when performing. These results are comparable to conclusions made by critical feminist scholars studying the possibilities of empowerment when taking sexy selfies (Tiidenberg & Gómez Cruz 2015) or when performing as a camgirl (Dobson, 2008). Like my research, these studies demonstrate that young women have new ways of taking on politics and culture that may not be recognizable under more traditional paradigms, but deserve to be identified as socially engaged and potentially transformative nonetheless. The act of auto-eroticizing one's body, through self-shooting or webcam performance, is experienced as something other than 'out of control' or 'interiorized'. Rather, it has allowed for a new kind of body to emerge; one that emerges as agentic, sexual, and powerful through critical self-care and self-analysis.

From my conversations about gender with the students and the teachers at the dance school, I deduce that these participants gain a lot of insight and strength from being in this environment and dancing in a way that deems their identity ambiguous and unstable. This gives them the opportunity to make use of the culturally constructed systems and repertoires associated with masculinity and femininity, and constitute their own idea about multiple and changeable gender identities when dancing. More than simply imitating, the erotic dancers are gender modelling, which can lead to generative and innovative behaviour beyond the binary. The question remains why erotic dance is so significant, as there are many other dance genres and activities, like contemporary dancing, that offer the potential to perform gender modelling. Performing gender is crucial in erotic dance in particular because of the sexual dimension of the dance genre. By queering the relationship between gender and sexuality and showing the two are undeniably linked, the dancers consequently go even further in questioning, re-enacting, and parodying patriarchal and heteronormative constructions. Erotic dance can then be seen as a form of postmodern dance questioning gender identity and challenging us with alternative lifestyles (Hanna, 2010).

Social expectations are different for every dancer attending the classes, depending on their gender, sexual orientation, age, ethnicity, and other identifying social categories. Thus, every erotic dancer has different expectations and constructions to reclaim, reimagine, parody, or sometimes break from. It is the coexistence of these different interpretations and negotiations of the same patriarchal and heterosexual scripts that the participants mention as a liberating experience. According to Snyder-Hall (2010) this is exemplary for third-wave feminism, a line of thought without common identity, experiences, or definition. According to this perspective, each feminist must make a conscious decision about their own path through the contradictory discourses that constitute contemporary society. The erotic dance school thus becomes a site that calls attention to intersectionality and questions the political usefulness of sexual identities (Valocchi, 2005). Practicing erotic dance allows the dancers to grasp the multifarious and dynamic character of the female and male subjects and helps them resolve contradictory conflict within themselves about gender and sexuality. As a result,

the dancers resist essentializing their own 'authentic self' to a sex or gender and feel liberated from the limitations of identity-based analysis.

Conclusion

In this article I demonstrated that writing off erotic dance solely as a hype to commercialize sexuality, ignores the useful and subversive ways in which these erotic dancers investigate the production of their sexed bodies to disrupt normative power relations. By addressing the complexity of gender, sexuality, and performance, this research has been able to observe how the participants engage in discussions and practices about the body and desirability through the practice of auto-erotization. What seems to be contributing to the popularity of the practice and the feelings of empowerment when performing it, is the de-essentialisation of their gender and the creative and artistic possibilities within the world of erotic dances which allow them to negotiate, reinvent, or reinforce ideas about gender identity and sexuality.

Whilst this study has provided valuable insight in the practice of erotic dances, the small, self-selected group of participants are all active at the same dance school. This limits possible generalizations to a wider range of dance schools and dancers. Important to consider is that the dance school studied in this paper, focusses on the artistic expression and subversive potential of the dance genre and consequently, as any form of art, has the purpose to challenge and question ideas and preconceptions ingrained in society. Observing and researching other erotic dance schools that focus on pole dance as a fitness activity or acrobatic skill, distancing themselves from the stripper heritage and erotic aspect of pole dance, will lead to different conclusions about desire and gender modelling. In addition, deepening the understanding of the experiences and performativity of male dancers practicing erotic dances would be an interesting addition to the body of scholarly research of critical masculinity studies. Moreover, more ethnographic research is needed in dance schools with different approaches, but also venues showcasing erotic dances as artistic performances need to be researched to analyse the different messages presented by different dancers

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