



Playing the Fool? The Challenges of Conducting Ethnographic Research on Stripping

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“Can I hug you?” my friend’s boyfriend asked me. I had just arrived at a bar on the north side of Chicago, joining a number of my colleagues who had congregated for drinks to celebrate the end of a long week. I was a bit surprised by the question, not only because it was the first time I had ever met my friend’s boyfriend, but also because his request for a hug directly followed my answer to his first question: “What do you do?” Although I will never know for certain what he intended to convey—for all I know, he hugs everyone who tells him about their work—my awkward interaction with him nonetheless was congruent with other reactions I have received. From nervous giggles and high fives, to abrupt shifts in the conversation, I have been given the impression that many people are not only fascinated by or uncomfortable with the topic of stripping, they are also, perhaps to a lesser degree, curious about someone who chooses to write about it from an ethnographic point of view. By hugging me, did my friend’s boyfriend hope to gain access, through touch, to the real, “live” world of strippers in which my female researcher-body travels? Would his reaction have been different if I were an exotic dancer?

In this essay, I discuss stripping from a methodological perspective, drawing on my own Midwestern U.S.-based fieldwork to show why, contra to Bradley-Engen and Ulmer’s (2009) findings, smaller-scale ethnographic work is still needed in order for researchers to better comprehend recent shifts in the industry, as well as the place of stripping in popular culture, cultural imaginaries, and everyday life. Despite the increased prominence of representations of stripping in the public sphere and the apparent mainstream acceptance of “striptease culture” (McNair, 2002, p. 207; see also Attwood, 2009), I argue that the allure of stripping is still very much predicated on “liveness”—on the proximity of bodies to each other in and through live performance (Auslander, 1999). And since liveness also is central to the ethnographic enterprise, ethnographers, I believe, are particularly well-suited to studying this phenomenon.

At the same time, ethnography is never as simple or straightforward as one would like; it can be awkward, frustrating, and, at times, disconcerting. But tense and/or embarrassing moments also can be

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extraordinarily useful. In what follows, I first articulate what I mean by stripping, since, as a polysemous word, it can be used and interpreted differently. I then discuss ethnographic foolishness, as theorized by performance studies scholar D. Soyini Madison (2010), and explain the benefits of applying this research frame to my own work. Finally, I offer examples of how feeling foolish in the field has opened doors for me, leading to new and otherwise unattainable insights. Rather than viewing challenges as a hindrance to the research process, I suggest, following Madison, that fieldwork difficulties and uncomfortable moments often themselves constitute data—unsolicited hugs included. The data discussed below also contribute to broader understandings of sexualized leisure and labor practices that, I argue, are peculiar to the neoliberal period.

Defining and Historicizing Stripping: Burlesque, Exotic Dance, and the Pole

Many people use the term “stripping” interchangeably with “exotic dance.” But this equivalence is not entirely accurate, nor does it adequately account for the variety of stripping-related practices that exist today and their relationships to the past. In the early to mid-20th century in the United States, “burlesque” and “striptease” were two terms commonly associated with live entertainment that involved female dancers gradually removing their clothing in front of mostly male audiences (Allen, 1991; Buszek, 2006; Glasscock, 2003; Shteir, 2004; Zeidman, 1967). By the 1960s, burlesque had become a less viable way for dancers to make a living, with postwar legal changes in numerous cities, the growing popularity and affordability of televised, in-home entertainment, and new forms of titillation like *Playboy* magazine, feature-length pornography, and a new kind of stripping—exotic dance—contributing to a shift in the industry (Shteir, 2004).

Exotic dance emerged in the United States in the late 1950s and continues into the present day, replacing the generally lengthier, tease-oriented acts found in earlier burlesque shows (Shteir, 2004). Like their burlesque precursors, exotic dancers appear in various states of undress (depending on the venue and legal restrictions) in front of predominantly male audiences, but with less of a theatrical “fourth wall” in place between audience members and performers. According to Frank (2007), exotic dance often involves “varying states of nudity, physical contact, and constellations of erotic and personal services such as talk, fantasy, and companionship,” and dancers “may perform on stages or sell individualized dances to customers” (p. 502). Dancers also tend to be from working-class backgrounds and/or are sometimes enrolled in college. And they are often fairly young—from their late teens to mid-20s—with male clientele occupying much wider age and socioeconomic ranges.²

² This information is based on my impressions of individuals I have encountered in the Midwestern U.S. cities in which I have lived and worked, as well as drawn from conversations I have had with female dancers (I am unable to comment on male exotic dancers at this stage of my research). Although older dancers do exist, young dancers seem to be more prevalent, perhaps because of male customers’ apparent preference for youthfulness; political-economic conditions that contribute to younger women’s decisions to seek employment in strip clubs, resulting in a steady stream of new, young dancers; and/or the wear and tear on dancers’ bodies that forces some to retire early—all factors that make it difficult for aging dancers to earn a living. In terms of race/ethnicity, clubs vary. But some managers seem to want

Just as the 1960s marked a shift from burlesque to exotic dance, the late 1990s and the first decade of the 2000s marked another shift, with the rise of neo-burlesque and pole dancing as leisure and fitness activities for middle-class women, primarily in their early-to-mid-20s to early 40s.³ Coincident with the entrenchment of neoliberalism during the Clinton/Blair “Washington Consensus” years, neo-burlesque got its start in subculture form in cities like New York, Los Angeles, and London (Ferreday, 2008). Often involving the nostalgic reconceptualization of early-to-mid-20th-century striptease performances—evident through dancers’ musical, sartorial, staging, and/or choreographic choices (Ferreday, 2008)—neo-burlesque has spread across the United States and internationally, with predominantly middle-class female producers, performers, and consumers organizing and/or participating in shows, festivals, workshops, and classes, usually in gentrified urban areas, and with a very limited number of producers and performers receiving substantive remuneration.

Purportedly originating in the 1980s in Canadian strip clubs and maintaining its association with exotic dance today, pole dancing is “a form of erotic performance composed of a series of spins, climbs and other moves around a vertical pole which is attached to floor and ceiling” (Holland & Attwood, 2009, p. 165). But in addition to its continued presence in exotic dance venues, pole dancing is now commonly undertaken by women as a form of exercise (Holland, 2010). Poles can be found in fitness clubs and gyms, stand-alone pole studios, and in individuals’ homes, and pole performances and competitions are becoming more prevalent. Similar to its neo-burlesque cousin, pole dance tends not to be the main, or only, source of income for performers and instructors.⁴ But unlike neo-burlesque, which is primarily an urban phenomenon, fitness/leisure pole dancing also has increased in popularity in suburban and less populated areas, partly because of female entrepreneurs’ ability to emphasize the health benefits of pole dancing. Clothing removal is generally not part of pole classes, though some classes do incorporate exotic

to employ a mixture of women of different races/ethnicities in order to appeal to the broadest range of clientele.

³ This information also is based on my impressions in the field and conversations I have had with dancers. Again, younger and older participants certainly exist (with seemingly more, slightly older women drawn to burlesque than pole dancing), but most appear to fall between the ages of 20 and 40. In terms of race and ethnicity, both middle-class women of color and white middle-class women seem to be signing up for pole classes. Fewer middle-class women of color appear to be involved in neo-burlesque, though this is changing. Performers of color also have started voicing their concerns regarding the burlesque community’s white image and lack of performance opportunities for brown and black women. See, for example, *21st Century Burlesque’s* recent article series on “Race and Burlesque” (www.21stcenturyburlesque.com). Regarding gender, most pole classes and some burlesque classes are “women only” (and audiences at shows are usually at least 50% women). Increasingly, however, more men are participating in both activities, and a number of studios are offering explicitly queer-, trans-, and gender-inclusive classes. Finally, some working-class women also participate in burlesque and pole dancing, but, because of the cost, they cannot do so as easily as middle-class women.

⁴ Although the vast majority of middle-class women who engage in burlesque and pole dancing are consumers, a small number of female producers do earn wages: Some pole and burlesque instructors and professional performers manage to make a living solely from teaching and performing, but many also have other jobs.

dance apparel, like “stripper shoes” and revealing shorts and tops, music one might hear in a strip club, and a similar movement vocabulary (Holland, 2010)—all aesthetic aspects that, I argue, serve to maintain the pole’s connection to its sex-work roots.

As a form of dance-based sexual commerce oriented around (semi-)nudity, stripping is hardly new. But what *is* new is that middle-class women are producing and consuming it as a form of leisure, entertainment, fitness, sexual self-expression, and/or art, outside of the masculinized realm of gentlemen’s clubs, and often for personal enrichment, as opposed to remuneration. I attribute these shifts in the industry, in part, to neoliberalism, for three, related reasons. First, neo-burlesque and pole dancing, particularly in performance settings, constitute forms of low-paid or even “free” labor, reflecting an ethic of volunteerism in late capitalism through which the burdens of cultural production have come to be placed on individuals who do not expect to receive payment for their creative efforts (Terranova, 2000). Second, neo-burlesque and pole dancing embody a neoliberalized model of health, through which well-being has been transformed into a “personal responsibility . . . and leisure time is increasingly spent on the work of self-improvement” (Maguire, 2008, p. 3; see also Smythe, 1994). With increased insurance costs and the removal of social safety nets in the United States, health care has indeed become another area in which neoliberal subjects are expected to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” with women’s bodies and sexual health seemingly in need of even more work, discipline, and ongoing maintenance than men’s (Gill & Scharff, 2011). Finally, neo-burlesque and pole dancing fit Harvey and Gill’s (2011) notion of neoliberal/postfeminist “sexual self-entrepreneurship.” Asserting that the “modernisation of femininity” occurring in the post-sexual revolution/post-women’s movement years must be considered “alongside the acceleration and intensification of neoliberalism and consumerism,” Harvey and Gill use the example of the “sexual entrepreneur” as a way to explain how notions of sexual empowerment for women have become “intimately entangled . . . with consumer capitalism” (p. 52).

Thus, some middle-class women today seem to be defining and expressing themselves as sexual beings and/or artists through their production and consumption of stripping practices: Not needing to work at gentlemen’s clubs in order to reap the fitness benefits of a pole, or do a striptease in front of a live audience, they may pay to perform these acts in the context of a class, or even perform publicly—while taking personal responsibility for their sexual self-expression and aging bodies, and contributing to a new stripping economy predicated on free or cheap labor.

At the same time, exotic dance continues to draw young working-class women of color, white working-class women, college students, and some middle-class women (Hanna, 2010) who *expect* remuneration, but are at a structural disadvantage to receive adequate compensation. As “independent contractors”—not salaried and paying increasingly steep stage fees—exotic dancers are subject to the uncertainties and inconsistencies associated with freelance work (Fogel & Quinlan, 2011), something that has become the norm for many service sector workers in the neoliberal era. Indeed, policies calling for a more flexible “contingent” work force and an increase in low-paid service sector jobs, to which women frequently are “churned” (Collins, 2008; Peck, 2001), have had detrimental effects on female sex workers around the globe, making it even more difficult for individuals engaged in exotic dance to earn a living (Fogel & Quinlan, 2011). For wage-laboring exotic dancers, then, making money is still a driving force

behind what they do, and how they do it—though sexual self-care, fitness, and artistic expression certainly may factor into their workplace decisions as well.

Studying these phenomena together creates methodological challenges, not least of which is how to account for the current neoliberal shifts in the industry without losing sight of individual actors “on the ground.” One way to begin to deal with this problem is to put one’s body “on the line,” through ethnography (Madison, 2010). In my case, putting my body on the line has meant frequently playing the fool, continually figuring out how to learn from my own mistakes and limitations, and recognizing how my experiences in the field are shaped by my social position.

Theorizing Foolishness

In her recent book on performance, political economy, and activism in Ghana and the United States, Madison (2010) discusses the potential benefits for ethnographers in recognizing and documenting embarrassing moments in the field. She asserts that these moments may provide useful information; help ethnographers “locate” themselves, both physically and ethically, among the individuals with whom they live and work; and affect the write-up process, since researchers are in the position to choose what to include about volatile or unpleasant situations in which they participate.

Madison’s account of a particular moment in the field in which she felt silly and embarrassed highlights the importance of recognizing one’s own sense of foolishness. On a visit in 2005 to a small village in Northern Ghana to which Madison was returning to check on the water distribution system that was responsible for bringing clean water to the area, she arrived at a time when “all the pumps were locked” (Madison, 2010, p. 127), so no water was flowing from them. This meant that the villagers were forced to draw water from a nearby pond—an unclean, microbe-infested water source of last resort. Wanting to document this shift, Madison went to the pond with her video camera and canvas bag full of ethnographer’s tools (field journals, tape recorders, maps, etc.) in tow. As four women at the pond spotted Madison with her camera, she notes that they “started shaking their heads and pointing with more laughter, in a gesture [she] interpreted as, ‘Isn’t she silly’” (Madison, 2010, p. 136). She continues:

I smiled at them, shook my head, and shrugged my shoulders in a gesture of “Yes, I do feel silly with this camera and these bags, losing balance and tripping over my feet with every step, as you work pulling flat-board wagons and pouring water to live.” I shrugged my shoulders and put the camera down. They saw my embarrassment, then waved at me, smiled, and immediately went back to their lifting, pouring, and conversation. When the man with one arm saw me and hid behind a cart, I put my camera away and asked Issah to let him know the camera was now packed away . . . [the man] smiled and nodded his head at me in appreciation for putting away the camera. It was one of those moments where the ethnographer feels foolish and small and foreign against the magnitude of what Others must do within the challenges and demands of their home Places. (Madison, 2010, pp. 136–137)

Madison uses this example as a way to interrogate her own positionality and to theorize the role of foolishness in ethnography more broadly. Being truly present in the field means recognizing that it is full of both "necessity and purpose on one hand and awkwardness and shame on the other" (Madison, 2010, p. 137). Acknowledging foolishness can help one stay on the path of ethical and responsible behavior toward others and provide valuable information about what one perceives in the field, based on one's social position. More than simply advocating for self-reflexivity—an important but much-discussed facet of any well-designed ethnographic project—Madison seems to be proposing a kinesthetically informed honesty, through which one can probe and analyze one's own responses to difficult or unpleasant situations.

Although my research concerns and questions are considerably different from Madison's, I am nonetheless struck by what the individuals with whom I work "must do within the challenges and demands of their home places" (Madison, 2010, p. 137). How women reveal themselves onstage and the creative labor that goes into that process, how they acquire skills and pass those skills on to others, and how stripping performances affect various audience members and participants all frequently leave me feeling "foolish and small" (Madison, 2010, p. 136). And as an audience member at gentlemen's clubs, burlesque shows, and the occasional pole dancing recital/showcase (there are few stand-alone pole performances outside of the competition circuit, but pole acts are now becoming mainstays in burlesque and variety shows), I am aware of my status as a researcher, especially when I enter into the semiprivate spaces of strip clubs where men, coming for titillation, gaze upon and occasionally touch young female entertainers' nude bodies.

In addition to observing performances, I approach stripping as a participant-observer, or "co-performative witness" (Conquergood, 2002). As an able-bodied, middle-class, white woman in my mid-30s, I fit the primary burlesque and fitness/leisure pole dancing demographic. This means I have been able to participate in numerous burlesque and pole dancing classes and try my hand at performing burlesque in front of a live audience, giving me a small taste of what it means to engage with stripping as a bodily practice. But I have struggled with whether I should "put my body on the line" in an exotic dance context—either by performing in an amateur night contest or by attempting to obtain temporary employment as a dancer. Because I am in my mid-30s, I am considered old by business standards, and I am skeptical that the information I would gain through performance would be worth enduring viewers' scrutiny of my visibly aging body. For now, I have opted not to co-perform, realizing that to do so would be beyond my comfort level and might leave me feeling humiliated. Even though I do not enjoy feeling foolish, I nonetheless can tolerate a certain degree of discomfort; humiliation, however, which may be personally damaging and ethnographically unproductive, is something I wish to avoid.

My decision not to co-perform has methodological consequences, limiting my purview and necessitating even more caution in terms of how I approach and interpret the embodied experiences of others, particularly exotic dancers. At the same time, this limitation forces me to scrutinize my methodology. How *do* I access and travel within the various worlds of strippers? What does it mean for someone like me to participate in an activity like burlesque or fitness/leisure pole dancing and *not* exotic dance? And what can I learn about stripping through my methodological choices—choices that are related to my social position? Below, I reflect on the ways in which my interpretation of an amateur night at a

strip club was shaped by my participation in pole dance classes. Feeling foolish as a co-performer in class helped me gain a better understanding of what I observed later as an audience member, and it also has contributed to broader insights regarding the changing nature of stripping at this particular historical moment.⁵

From Pole Class to Amateur Night
My First Pole Classes

Recently, I signed up for pole dancing classes at a “women only” pole studio, and I attended classes regularly at this location for several months. As with any activity one has not done before, I expected there to be a learning curve. But I did not realize how steep that learning curve would be for me. During the first class, I remember feeling kinesthetically confused and frustrated, embarrassed by my lack of skill, and surprised by how much it hurt. The simple “firefly” spin—grabbing the pole with both hands, placing one ankle in front of the pole and the other behind, and spinning around in a relatively upright, sitting position—was shockingly difficult. I could barely hold on because of my lack of upper body strength, and my shins kept banging into the pole since I could not manage to situate the pole correctly between my legs. Subsequent moves were equally challenging, and my struggle did not go unnoticed: The instructor—an energetic, friendly former gymnast in her late 20s—frequently came by to help me, remarking toward the end of the hour-long class that I had a tendency to overthink the moves. I left the class that first day feeling sore, bruised, and a bit discouraged, and I seriously doubted that I would be able to endure many more classes beyond that one.

Despite my misgivings, I returned to class a couple days later, determined to give it another try. As soon as the instructor saw me, she smiled and said, “You’ve come back for more, huh?” Surprised that she remembered me, I responded “yes” and quickly moved toward a pole in the back of the room, hoping to remain in the background for the duration of the class. But as more women began to arrive, the instructor suggested that I take a pole closer to the front of the room, so that I could see the moves better. Following her suggestion, I gave up my wallflower position and moved myself to the front row, next to her.

As during the first class, it became apparent that I was the student most in need of attention. The instructor spent additional time demonstrating moves for me and helping me understand her instructions. I looked around the room, only to see the other students flinging themselves around the pole with speed, grace, and dexterity; dangling upside down when they were bored; and adding their own

⁵ By focusing on my own reactions and experiences as an observer and co-performer, I am not advocating for the privileging of these data over the information one gains through formal and informal interviews, archival work, analyses of public sphere representations, and historical, political-economic analysis, all of which will be included in my final dissertation. Rather, these data discussed here reflect where I am in my research process. While finishing up my graduate studies, I have been conducting preliminary fieldwork—observing and co-performing, making connections with practitioners, and conducting some formal and informal interviews. I will spend the coming year in the field, which will allow me to broaden and deepen my preliminary work and interview more practitioners.

flourishes to the basic spins and tricks that continued to stymie me. At the end of class, the instructor, perhaps sensing my frustration, asked, "How was it?" I heard myself tell her that I enjoyed it and that it was getting easier—even though I felt that I had failed miserably. She smiled and nodded encouragingly, indicating through her body language and demeanor that she would continue to offer her support.

After a while, I did manage to improve, reaching the point where attending pole classes was becoming an enjoyable part of my ethnographic inquiry and not just a bruise-inducing exercise in humility. But, more important, these experiences of feeling foolish in the studio altered my perception of stripping, as a bodily practice, in several related ways. First, I was humbled by the skill it takes to even participate in something like a pole dance class; until I tried it myself, I had no sense of how difficult and painful it was. The women in my pole classes and the exotic dancers I had seen in gentlemen's clubs made it look so effortless and easy. And I realized now that they had worked very hard to master pole dancing—with exotic dancers adding a layer of difficulty by doing it topless or fully nude, in front of a live audience.

Second, because these skills are not so easily acquired, good instruction and/or mentoring by other dancers seems key to improving on the pole—and the time and one-on-one attention students get in pole classes are luxuries most exotic dancers do not have.⁶ My instructor was able to take the time to work with students and provide individualized feedback, tailoring her remarks to each student. She noticed if and when students decided to come back, encouraged those who kept coming to stick with it, and challenged advanced students with increasingly difficult movement patterns. In classes with mixed ability levels, she managed to balance more advanced students' desires to move ahead with others' needs to proceed more slowly.

The instructor also encouraged me to move beyond my initial embarrassment, making it possible for me to return to class for the next few months, improve my pole dancing skills, and connect with other students and instructors. Because of her, I now am able to approach pole dancers with some sense of what they do and how they do it. And I also have a better understanding of the challenges exotic dancers face on the job. Regardless of whether they use or even have access to a pole (some clubs do not have poles, and, even when they do, not all dancers incorporate them into their performances), they still must learn how to walk sexily in extremely high heels, seductively remove their clothing, move in a sexual/sensual manner, and attend to individual customers. These facets of their work, like pole dancing, are not easy and require a certain level of expertise—expertise they cultivate largely onstage, in front of other dancers and their clientele.

Finally, the foolishness I felt in the studio came from being unable to perform certain movements, particularly as a beginner; being frustrated as I encountered the limitations of my own body; and the desire to perform well, in the roles of student, co-performer, and researcher. But as silly as I may have felt in this context, I never was subject to harsh judgments related to the appearance of my body or my (in)ability to express myself in a sexual manner on the pole. I learned tricks, spins, holds, and "sexy"

⁶ Although I have encountered several exotic dancers in pole classes, the classes do not appear to be attracting large numbers of them—though this was the case, at least initially, in pole classes in Holland's (2010) study.

dance moves that, while similar to the kinds of movements I have seen exotic dancers do, took on a more fitness-oriented focus in this space. Surrounded by other middle-class women in their 20s and 30s, all of whom had paid to engage in pole dancing as a form of exercise, this homosocial environment seemed far removed—and yet not entirely divorced—from the realm of gentlemen’s clubs.

Most women I have met in fitness/leisure pole dancing settings generally do not frequent gentlemen’s clubs, which is not surprising, given that these venues are designed to attract male audience members.⁷ They also do not seem interested in trying to make a living as exotic dancers after they acquire pole skills, and some object to the continued association of pole dancing with sex work (Holland, 2010). But through their participation in pole classes, some individuals may begin to wonder what it would be like to step out of the safe cocoon of the studio and perform on a pole at a gentlemen’s club. What dangers and pleasures might that involve? And how might one’s sense of one’s own body, age, sexuality, fitness level, and appearance shift in and through live performance?

Amateur Night

During the same period I was taking pole classes at the studio, I also attended burlesque shows, took burlesque classes, and went to strip clubs on a fairly regular basis. One Thursday evening, I attended “amateur night” at a full-nudity club to which I had been previously, and two female friends accompanied me.

Sandwiched between the regular dancers were four amateur dancers competing for a cash prize of \$150; some of them may have been vying for a job as well, since amateur contests can also serve as auditions. The first three dancers—one white woman and two African American women, all appearing to be in their late teens or early 20s—performed their acts in front of the seemingly uninterested, mostly male crowd. I recall feeling nervous for them: As was the case with other amateur contests I had witnessed, the newcomers looked anxious and timid, and the audience did not strike me as particularly engaged or supportive.

The fourth contestant was a white woman who appeared to be in her early 30s. Wearing conservative low black heels (two-inch “kitten” heels, as opposed to the usual four- to six-inch platforms), a pearl necklace, and a checkered skirt with a matching bra and top, she seemed very eager and nervous as she began her routine, mouthing the words to the hard rock tune she had selected as her musical accompaniment. I knew instantly that she had had some pole dance training: She exhibited a repertoire of spins, holds, and tricks; she moved well on and around the pole; and although her pace seemed a bit brisk, she clearly had a choreographic plan.

But even though she was skilled on the pole, the dancer had difficulty getting up from low squatting positions. She stumbled frequently, falling backwards onto her hands nearly every time she tried to get up, which caused some audience members to snicker. And when she attempted to shake her

⁷ There is, however, some crossover in staff; I know several instructors and performers who used to be or currently are employed as exotic dancers.

buttocks in a fast, side-to-side shimmy, keeping her legs straight as she bent over at the waist—a move I frequently have seen professional exotic dancers do—she apparently did not achieve the optimal amount of jigging: I looked on as a number of men laughed at her, with some shaking their heads and groaning in signs of disapproval. Finally, her song ended, and, fully nude save her little high heels, she stooped to pick up her costume and delicate purse, leaving the stage hurriedly.

My two friends and I exchanged glances, sharing looks of concern and discomfort. I felt embarrassed, both for the dancer and for myself and my friends, who, out of curiosity, had chosen to accompany me on one of my research outings. It felt awkward to be sitting in the audience while men around us laughed at a woman who had revealed herself to them. And I also realized that that could have been me up there, depending on where I had chosen to draw my co-performing line.

I cannot pretend to know how this particular dancer felt onstage, or what, exactly, compelled her to perform that night. But having taken classes myself, I felt I perhaps could relate, on a kinesthetic level, to her seeming desire to perform in front of a live audience, to show off the pole and “sex-entrepreneurial” skills she had mastered (Harvey & Gill, 2011), and to “try on,” if only for a night, what it would be like to work as an exotic dancer. Having performed in neo-burlesque contexts, I also could envision wanting to put together a themed costume, just as she had done, and, for stability’s sake, needing to wear more sensible shoes than six-inch platform heels. And I easily could imagine being extremely nervous, stumbling and falling down, not being aware of the numerous other moves and mannerisms that exotic dancers learn from each other, and being taken aback by the sounds of a disapproving, judgmental audience. In short, I could understand why a woman like her may have wanted to do this, and why she also had a few blind spots and limitations, given her background and skill set.

Conclusion

By claiming a certain amount of “kinesthetic empathy” (Martin, 1939) with an amateur dancer who, from an audience perspective, had a rough time in her first strip club performance, I am not intending to demonize exotic dance, which, as Frank (2007) observes, “is neither wholly liberating nor wholly oppressive” (p. 505). On numerous occasions at strip clubs, I have witnessed positive, respectful interactions between male clientele and dancers—though, clearly, this is not always the case. I also have been to a few burlesque shows—one loosely based on the plot of an Indiana Jones movie immediately comes to mind—where I was shocked by either audience members’ behavior toward the performers or the choices made by individual dancers, directors, and producers. Thus, even in neo-burlesque, which some individuals describe as an empowering activity, the story is often context dependent and more complicated than a simple empowerment/disempowerment dichotomy implies (Nally, 2009; Willson, 2008). One similarly could question the notion that pole classes are uniformly empowering for women: Classes are expensive, making it difficult for working-class women to attend, elderly women and women with physical disabilities usually cannot participate, and, although they clearly enrich the lives of participants, pole and other stripping-based classes “aren’t going to render [women] sexually liberated” (Levy, 2006, p. 199)—nor should one have that expectation (Holland, 2010, p. 32).

Thus, pole dancing, neo-burlesque, and exotic dance are not going to solve gender inequities. But they are also not turning women into "Female Chauvinist Pigs" (Levy, 2006, p. 99). Despite the ambiguity that unites them, however, exotic dance, pole dancing, and burlesque are not one and the same. For many middle-class women, pole dancing and burlesque are forms of leisure. Although some may cross over into gentlemen's clubs, toeing the sex work line, they need not do so. Exotic dancers, on the other hand, must work in these clubs for wages. And while exotic dancing may be a personally satisfying and overall positive experience, depending on the individual, it is also difficult, taxing bodily labor.

Through ethnography, I have experienced what it is like to be present in a variety of stripping venues. And as a thirtysomething middle-class woman, I am admittedly more comfortable in leisure/fitness pole dancing and neo-burlesque contexts than I am in gentlemen's clubs. I may feel "foolish and small" as I grapple with a new pole trick or try to affix fake eyelashes prior to performing in a burlesque show. But any fears I have also are contained within physical and social environments that are created to be welcoming, safe places for women. Here, in these places, women can practice what I would tentatively call *safe sexuality*. We learn how to perform dances for our own pleasure, witness dances performed by other women, use the pole to improve our bodies and our health, and perhaps even explore our own sexuality and desires in the presence of other women—all without needing to engage with stripping as a form of wage labor. And although there are very real risks involved with any kind of performance-based activity, middle-class women—myself included—can make a living doing something else, allowing us to leave our stripper shoes at the door, whenever we choose.

At the same time, I wonder, like Baldwin (2004), about the possibilities of performance to shift contemporary perceptions of stripping. What if some middle-class women, through their participation in classes and performances, actually are developing "kinesthetic empathy" for exotic dancers? How might that begin to change public sphere notions of what kinds of stripping are and are not considered acceptable for women to do, based on their social positions? And what if, rather than praising neo-burlesque and fitness/leisure pole dancers for their skill and artistry by pitting them *against* purportedly skill-less, lowbrow exotic dancers (as some scholars and journalists have done), all practices could be considered in terms of their aesthetic qualities and as forms of female creative labor? This is not to suggest that leisure and wage-labor stripping are identical; nor am I suggesting that scholars ignore exploitation, social and economic inequality, and discriminatory practices and simply celebrate stripping as an empowering activity for all women. Further, given the economic precariousness of wage-labor stripping, I am certainly not proposing that more women should pursue employment at gentlemen's clubs. Rather, scholars need to bring these phenomena together within a neoliberal context, continuing to utilize ethnographic methods, questioning one's point of view as a researcher, and interrogating what kinds of discomfort one is and is *not* willing or able to experience in the field. By doing so, we can better understand why and how stripping has persevered as a form of labor predominantly undertaken by working-class women and been transformed into a legitimate middle-class pastime.

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