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Erotic Dancing in Night-Time Leisure Venues:  
A Sociological Study of Erotic Dance Performers  
and Customers

By Katy Elizabeth Mary Pilcher

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for  
the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Sociology

University of Warwick, Sociology Department

November 2012

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<sup>1</sup> Geisha took photos of WORLDMISTRESS’s (one of the women dancers) performances. More information about this can be found in chapter three. Both participants wish to be identified in this thesis.

## Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university. I have published results of the research, as detailed below:

Pilcher, K (2012) 'Dancing for Women: Subverting Heteronormativity in a Lesbian Erotic Dance Space?', *Sexualities*, 15 (5/6): 521-537 (*Special Section: 'Working Outside the (Hetero)Norm: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ)Sex Work'*).

Pilcher, K (2012) 'Performing Erotic Labour in a Night-Time Leisure Venue: A Visual Analysis of Erotic Dance, *Sociological Research Online*, 17(2)19 (*Special Issue: 'Visualising the Changing Landscape of Work and Labour'*).

Although the theoretical insights made and conclusions drawn in these papers are similar to those discussed in some of the chapters of this thesis, I would like to stress that none of these journal articles are exactly replicated in this thesis.



## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the gender and sexual politics of erotic dance, through an ethnographic investigation of two leisure venues which provide erotic dance entertainment for women audiences in the UK. Using the research techniques of participant observation, qualitative interviews, visual methods, email interviews and internet research, this thesis examines the work roles of women and men dancers, and the interactions of women customers with dancers. In taking both a lesbian leisure venue and a male strip show for analysis, this thesis goes further than previous academic studies which often equate erotic dance with a male clientele base and women performers. The key findings of the thesis are related to three central themes. These are, firstly, the defining of both of the venues as a ‘women-only’ space by customers, and the ways in which this simultaneously both challenges and reproduces heteronormativity. Secondly, findings in both venues point to evidence of an erotic female ‘gaze’ being exercised by women customers. Yet I highlight how this is at times couched in problematic post-feminist conceptions of sexual agency, and further, how some customers articulated a critique of ‘gazing’ as objectifying erotic dancers. I argue that male dancers do not take on a ‘sex object’ role, and suggest that women dancers are able to exercise a gaze directed at women customers in some instances. The third key finding, evident in dancers’ accounts of their working experiences, suggests that their work practices are in many ways similar to concepts of work that are used to discuss service sector labour. I argue that the particular spaces in which dancers work is crucial to their capacity to exercise autonomy in their work role. Overall, the thesis develops a more complex analysis of participants’ engagement with erotic dance venues, highlighting the tensions around exercising agency in commercial sexual encounters.

## Chapter One

### Introduction: Erotic dance in the UK

Erotic dance is one of the most contentious issues in feminist sociological debates in the UK today. There has been much recent focus surrounding the licensing of erotic dance venues, following studies and activist campaigns that have brought about a change in the UK law (Bindel, 2004; Jones et al., 2003). Feminist campaigning groups OBJECT and the Fawcett Society were successful in campaigning for lap dancing clubs to be licensed differently from the 'cafe'-style licence that they previously held. The Policing and Crime Act 2009 now requires lap dance clubs to apply for a Sexual Encounter Establishment licence from the local council. This new legislation gives more power to local councils to decide on the number of strip clubs that may open in their area, and limit where they are located. This recent move in licensing hints at an underlying concern over the morality and acceptability of erotic dance venues in British cities and towns, as well as a concern about women's objectification that runs alongside this.

These activist campaigns, and the legislation to an extent, rest upon the assumption that erotic dance venues are primarily, or only, frequented by male customers who watch women dancers. Campaigning group OBJECT, for instance, argues that '[l]ap dancing clubs are venues where customers pay female performers to sexually stimulate them by grinding on their lap whilst removing most or all of their clothing', and are spaces where women dancers are in 'intense competition for the attention of male punters' (OBJECT website, 2012). While lap dancing clubs in the UK do employ women as dancers, this quotation not only ignores the fact that

lap dancing clubs are frequented by women ‘punters’, but that there are many other types of erotic dance venues where it is not only women who are the performers. Despite the contention around erotic dance clubs in the UK, there has been very little academic attention to these venues (notable exceptions include Sanders and Hardy 2010-11; Colosi, 2010a). There has been even less academic analysis of erotic dance venues that do not ‘fit’ the conventional conception of venues frequented by men who are there to watch women dancers. It is this gap that this thesis addresses.

While there is new legislation in the UK, erotic dance venues themselves are not a new phenomenon. Clubs specifically deemed to be ‘lap dancing’ clubs arose in the UK in the 1990s (Jones et al., 2003). The practice of erotic dance more broadly defined, can be traced back to burlesque and North African dance in the 1860s (Egan, 2006a). Loosely defined, erotic dance involves a dancer removing all or most of their clothing in a ‘sexually suggestive fashion to a paying audience’ (Bernard et al., 2003:2). Many erotic dance venues in the UK are known as lap dancing venues, implying a close encounter between dancer and customer in which the dancer effectively dances over the customer’s ‘lap’. Definitions of lap dancing and rules about levels of intimate contact vary however, between clubs in different countries, cities, and in the case of London, for example, according to the rules and regulations of different boroughs, with some councils stipulating that a dancer should be one metre away from customers at all times (Westminster, London, for example).

Much of the academic literature examines male clientele as the primary consumers of erotic dance and commercial sex work more widely, and women as the only performers of erotic dance. This lack of attention to women customers and male

dancers is somewhat surprising considering that a survey in recent years proposed that one in five women in the UK who have been on a 'hen' party have visited a male strip show (Mintel Reports, 2003). More recently researchers have looked at clubs where men strip for a *female* audience (Montemurro et al., 2003), although only Smith (2002), and myself (Pilcher, 2011), have looked at these clubs in a UK context. Existing research in the UK thus does little to understand the consumption of erotic dance by women customers. Further, there has been a lack of attention more generally in the UK to male sex work (exceptions include Smith and Pilcher, 2011-12; Whowell, 2010; Gaffney, 2007), with male erotic dancers virtually ignored in existing debates.

The assumption made widely, and in some academic accounts, is that erotic dance venues serve purely a male heterosexual client base. However, lesbian strip shows appeared in the UK in the early 1990s, but received little media attention until later that decade (Williams, 1998). Such shows are few and far between, with only London and Manchester having venues or events dedicated to erotic dance for women audiences by women dancers. Liepe-Levinson (2002:36) documents the existence of lesbian strip shows in North America, but says that most of these shows are 'subset within places and activities not exclusively dedicated to the presentation of strip events'. Aside from Brooks' (2010) research in North America, there has been little academic attention to lesbian strip show venues, and how they might differ from more conventional lap dancing venues. Coopers's (2009) and Hammers's (2008) studies importantly consider women's erotic encounters in a lesbian bathhouse in Canada, and quite how transgressive they may be. Yet the space they focus their research on is a not-for-profit, community-organised venture, and thus

this still leaves us with little understanding of women's erotic encounters in commercial leisure venues, particularly in a UK context.

Strip shows are a contentious issue for feminists, and there has been a wealth of important work concerning women erotic dancers and male customers, as is discussed in chapter two of this thesis. Much of this research has grown out of the 1970s and 1980s 'sex wars' (Wilton, 1995; Healy, 1996), which saw different feminists debating pornography, the sexual objectification of women, women's bodies, heterosexuality, and lesbian sex - specifically the 'contested meanings of lesbian penetrative and SM sex' (sodomasochism) (Farquhar, 2000:219), to name but a few of the issues. As will be discussed in more detail in chapters two and five, these debates polarised between feminists who critiqued practices such as pornography and SM sex for exploiting women's bodies on men's behalf, and those who rejected these views claiming they were 'anti-sex' rather than anti-sexual exploitation. Yet the problem with creating either/or arguments about sexuality and sexual expressions, as Liepe-Levinson (2002:12) argues, is that in turn 'we also promote varying concepts of a "good" or an "authentic" sexuality', when we may wish instead to explore the multiple and changing modes of sexual expression rather than positing one 'type' or expression as 'good' or 'right'.

This thesis presents an ethnographic account of both a lesbian venue where women strip for a female audience, which I have called 'Lippy', and of a second venue where men strip for a predominantly heterosexual female audience, which I have called 'LoveLads'<sup>2</sup>. It seeks to explore the potential fluidity and multiplicity of

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<sup>2</sup> Both of these club names are pseudonyms.

identities in these different venues, to see how much crossover there is between dancers and audiences at ostensibly heterosexual and lesbian venues. Gendered power relations are taken as a central theme throughout the thesis, which also entails looking for instances of the potential disruption of heteronormative gender and sexual roles. The reasons for the focus on these issues, and in particular, in taking two erotic dance spaces as areas for analysis, stems from my own theoretical and personal engagement with radical feminism, queer theory and my work experiences in the service sector. I want to take a step back, and outline how my personal journey has had implications for the choice of topic and also the theoretical and methodological influences and choices made throughout this thesis.

Throughout my undergraduate degree in Sociology, I was inspired by radical feminist conceptualisations of patriarchy, and was angered by the historical and contemporary injustices against women. Alongside my university degree I worked part-time as a waitress in a public house. Within this work role I experienced the sensory immersion in an occupation in which uninvited sexual attention from male customers was considered ‘the norm’ or ‘just part of the job’. Both my reading of radical feminist literature on gender, the body, and sex work, together with my own work experiences, led me to think about how erotic dancers, and sex workers more widely, might experience and manage sexual attention from customers when such attention is written into their work role. As may already be evident, I thus started the thesis with a power-over conception of power, and I expected to ‘find’ that women dancers would not enjoy their work roles and would experience unwanted harassment from customers.

Yet I also wanted to consider what might be different, if anything, when women are the customers in erotic dance venues. Some of my own colleagues and friends had attended male strip shows, and I wondered whether the experiences of women customers and dancers in these venues, and lesbian strip show venues, might be somewhat different from what much radical feminist literature said with regards to erotic dance and sex work being essentially disempowering for women. During the fieldwork I found that conceiving of power in a 'power-over' model was not an adequate means of characterising some of the subtle ways in which participants in these venues negotiated gender and sexual power relations. I looked to queer theory to try and explain the different ways that people can experience and perform gender and sexualities in less normative ways, in different spatial contexts and sometimes at different moments in the same erotic dance venue.

Throughout this thesis, I have attempted to connect these feminist and queer influences in both my theoretical discussions and in my fieldwork and methodological writings. I use the term 'queer' in the thesis as a verb; to 'queer'. Queering, for me, entails seeking to disrupt and destabilise dominant ways of thinking and being, and of conveying meaning. Theoretically, this has entailed considering the ways in which participants in these two venues might disrupt normative ways of conceptualising erotic dance, and to consider different ways of reading erotic dance performances, whilst still documenting the ways in which binary conceptions of gender and sexuality are understood and enacted by participants in certain contexts. Queering my methodology has meant that I have not been rigid or fixed in the methodological tools I have chosen to utilise in this research. Rather, I adapted the methodology as the fieldwork progressed, to explore

more innovative research methods as the best means for both questioning normativities and enabling participants to be involved in the research in ways that they considered useful, or appropriate, to them. As chapter three discusses, this has involved utilising both visual methods, email interviews and considering both venues' 'online' presence on their respective Facebook<sup>3</sup> webpages. Both methodologically and theoretically I sought to utilise queer theory to consider the ways in which participants in erotic dance venues might experience and perform less heteronormative, binary identities.

As will be outlined in the next chapter, however, academic debates around erotic dance have often split along a binary distinction, whereby erotic dance is defined as either empowering, or, conversely, as detrimental to the status of women in society. We currently know little, however, about how gendered power relations might work in clubs where women are the majority of the customers, and where there are women and men dancers who perform for women audiences. The potential ways in which these spaces might enable different gender, sexualities and work roles to be performed and experienced by participants, and the ways in which dominant conceptions of the operation of power in these venues might be disrupted, are therefore currently unexplored. My key research question in this thesis is therefore:

How are gender and sexual power relations enacted and experienced by participants in relatively 'novel' sexual leisure venues in the UK night-time economy?

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<sup>3</sup> Facebook ([www.Facebook.com](http://www.Facebook.com)) is the name of one of the most prolific social-networking sights in the UK, and potentially also worldwide. Founded by Mark Zuckerberg in February 2004, the site is estimated to have around 500 million active users, as of January 2011 (more details here: <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>).



In order to answer this question I undertook research in two night-time leisure venues where erotic dancers perform for women customers. I consider the ways in which power relations of gender and sexuality, the 'work' of erotic dance, and the spaces within which these performances take place, impact upon the experiences of customers and dancers in these venues, particularly exploring the fixity or the fluidity of power relations. The following sub questions have been developed to assist this task:

Can such venues provide scope for participants to adopt non-normative or transgressive gender and sexual roles? In what ways?

How do women customers define their experiences in these venues? Do they engage with the gender politics of erotic dance? For example, might they view their behaviour as mimicking men's roles as strip club patrons; as something different; as an example of female 'liberation'; as something that could be problematic?

What are the work experiences of women and men dancers at these sites, in terms of the gendered roles that they perform and their interactions with women customers? In what ways is their work similar to or different from what existing academic literature suggests about the experiences of women who dance for (primarily) heterosexual men customers? In particular, do their performances mimic heteronormative gender and sexual roles or potentially disrupt them?

These questions enable comparisons between the two venues to be made, and with previous research on more mainstream erotic dance venues. Following this introductory chapter the thesis will be structured across seven chapters, which I will briefly outline here.

Chapter two highlights further how these research questions have been drawn out of, but also formulated in response to, absences and weaknesses in the existing literature on erotic dance. The key research question of how gendered power is enacted and experienced by participants is initially addressed in this chapter, highlighting how much previous research has focused on the power relations of women erotic dancers and their male customers through quite a zero-sum conception of power. The chapter then moves to consider how gendered power might play out in non-conventional erotic dance venues, namely where women and men dancers perform for women customers. Throughout this discussion, four main themes are identified that previous scholars have engaged with to some extent in their analyses. These are the concepts of power; gender and the social relations of 'looking'; erotic dance 'spaces' and 'places'; and what conceiving of erotic dance as 'work' might tell us about gendered power relations in erotic dance, and workplaces more widely.

In chapter three I outline my research design. I consider my experiences of researching sexualised spaces, including some of the benefits and the perils that this entailed. I highlight how feminist and queer epistemological concerns are particularly suited to ethnographic precepts, such as the research being a 'two-way' process for the researcher and the researched, with the researcher giving a reflexive

account of the research journey. The research techniques of participant observation, interviewing, visual methods (including a photo-elicitation interview), email interviewing, and internet research, are discussed, along with the tools used to analyse the knowledge produced. It is argued that a multi-method approach was necessary for analysing the particularity of the experiences of participants in erotic dance venues. For example, customers interact with each other and the dancers not only in the erotic dance space but also on the internet via internet forums. Further, the use of a photo-elicitation interview enabled a dancer to give a fuller account of her work role than in an initial research interview. Therefore, these techniques enabled access to information that might not be possible to glean through another methodological tool. Different research participants also felt more comfortable engaging with certain research techniques than others, and so the utilisation of different methods maximised the number of participants.

The thesis then moves on to the three main analytical chapters, within which gendered power relations are taken as a central theme. Chapter four looks at LoveLads, the club where men strip for a female audience. The chapter explores some of the ways in which the show subverts heteronormative roles for women, through discussing women's alcohol consumption and their viewing of semi-nude, and occasionally nude, male bodies. Drawing on ideas about the 'gaze', and on the constructions of some bodies as normative, the chapter argues that women's attendance at, and activities within the venue do challenge heteronormative prescriptions for 'feminine' behaviour in some key respects, yet ultimately, male heterosexual privilege remains intact. Further, the chapter seeks to interrogate

customers' performances of gender and the reinforcement of their heterosexual femininity through their adoption of 'post feminist' sexual subjectivities.

Chapter five looks at the lesbian venue, Lippy, and questions how far heteronormativity is subverted in this venue which provides erotic dance entertainment for women customers. It is argued that lesbian lifestyle politics are shifting (Roseneil, 2000), but it has been difficult to gauge where erotic dance fits into this picture. This chapter highlights how dancers negotiate performing in a venue that is quite different from more 'mainstream' erotic dance clubs. I question to what extent heteronormative prescriptions for femininity can be challenged in this venue through looking at the potential for a female 'gaze', the construction of and interactions between gendered and sexualised bodies in the venue; and the way in which the venue is defined as a 'women's space'. The chapter also draws on the history of this leisure space, and the visions for sexual performances in the club held by current and ex-management and what this means for both dancers' work roles and customer's experiences, and the scope that both these parties have for subverting heteronormativity in their erotic interactions.

Using data on both venues, chapter six seeks to interrogate what the 'work' of erotic dance entails, and why it is not always conceptualised as 'work' in feminist analyses. The meanings that the work has for women and men erotic dancers, in terms of the gendered work roles that they perform; their perceptions of their workplace 'selves'; and their interactions with women customers are examined. This enables a comparison of dancers in both venues, and an examination of the similarities and differences in their experiences to previous academic accounts of

women erotic dancers. The chapter examines the ‘aesthetic labour’ (Nickson et al., 2001), ‘emotional labour’ (Hochschild, 1983), and ‘body work’ (Wolkowitz, 2006), which both women and men dancers perform to varying degrees. The gendered implications of these workplace experiences are discussed throughout this chapter for what this might tell us about autonomy in women’s and men’s erotic dance work, and workplace roles more widely.

The thesis concludes, in chapter seven, by drawing together the analytical insights from each chapter to answer the research questions. It considers how these insights contribute to, and potentially contradict in some instances, previous sociological writings about women’s and men’s engagement with erotic dance. The key findings centre upon participants’ definitions of the venues as ‘women’s spaces’; the complex ways in which customers and dancers negotiate and exercise a sexualised ‘gaze’; and how the particular venues that dancers work in is crucial to their ability to be able to experience autonomy in their work role. Throughout the concluding chapter I highlight the ways in which participants challenge and negotiate heteronormative gender and sexual power relations. The particular power relations at issue in erotic dance are explored in the literature review, which the next chapter now turns to.

## Chapter Two

### Literature review: How can we understand erotic dance?

Erotic dance raises important issues for feminist sociologists. The main debate on erotic dance has centred on the extent to which the activity reproduces the sexual objectification of women. In this chapter I interrogate the main ways that erotic dance has been analysed to date to consider how gender and sexual power relations have been conceptualised in previous research. I firstly outline the main ways in which erotic dance has been conceptualised in debates pertaining to women dancers who dance for male customers, as this is the focus of much research to date. I then move on to complicate these claims, illuminating the key themes of power, gender and sexuality, space, and work that emerge in empirical studies of erotic dance and sex work more widely. After these complexities of women performing erotic dance have been unpacked, I then examine more ‘novel’ venues which provide erotic dance for women customers, performed by both male and female dancers, and ask what previous empirical research might tell us about these venues, and consider what research thus far may potentially have omitted.

#### **What is the meaning of erotic dance in conventional erotic dance spaces?**

Most research on commercial sex work, including erotic dance, has focused upon the acceptability of this work for women workers. The feminist debate over the acceptability of commercial stripping is acrimonious: many ‘radical’ feminists have critiqued erotic dance for its problematic portrayal of, and harm to, women, yet ‘sex-positive feminists’ and some sex worker rights groups have highlighted the

empowering elements of erotic dance. Although dividing the arguments on erotic dance into two categories of ‘radical’ and ‘sex positive’ feminists is quite a crude generalisation, I use the terms here in the way that these two differing schools of thought are usually conceived of in popular debates (as radical or sex positive), and to demarcate the two polarised views on this topic. ‘Radical’ feminists are taken to be those who see themselves as combating the exploitation of women, ‘sex positive’ feminists are taken as those sex worker rights groups, academics, and campaigners who view themselves as pro-rights, and some may view ‘radical’ feminists, by contrast, as ‘anti-sex’.

Erotic dance, and sex work more widely, are seen as particularly problematic by ‘radical’ feminists who have argued that it perpetuates male power and contributes to objectification that ultimately harms all women, not just those engaging in erotic dance (Barry, 1995). From this perspective, erotic dance ‘signifies sexual inequality’ (Jeffreys, 2009:86), and reproduces the assumption that women should be ‘ubiquitously available sex objects’ available for male pleasure (Pasko, 2002:64). Radical feminists have further argued that erotic dance venues ‘facilitate and normalize men’s violence against women’ (Holsopple, n.d:16), and that they promote lewd and violent male behaviour (Bindel, 2004). From this radical feminist perspective, prostitution in particular, and erotic dance by default, are seen not only as sites of violence against women, but as ‘a form of violence by definition’, with violence and coercion being ‘intrinsic’ to the sex industry, ‘even if the worker is unaware of it’ (Weitzer, 2005:212). Erotic dance has also been critiqued by feminists for naturalising women’s traditionally subservient roles in heterosexual power relations (Wesley, 2002; Rambo Ronai and Ellis, 1989), and reinforcing

heterosexuality as ‘compulsory’ (Rich, 1980). Women dancers are often required to play a stereotypically feminine role, which is arguably ‘a game that they know well; in some form, they have been forced to play it for years’ (Rambo Ronai and Ellis, 1989:295).

It has also been argued by radical feminists within academia that erotic dance venues rest upon the intersection of patriarchy with capitalism by maintaining men’s classed and gendered status over women. Patriarchy is ‘a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women’ (Walby, 1990:20), and the sex industry is viewed by many radical feminists as the epitome of men’s patriarchal control over women’s bodies (Jeffreys, 1997; Barry, 1995; Farley et al., 1998). Patriarchy and capitalism are seen as intersecting for Jeffreys (2009), who argues that in the sex industry we witness ‘the commercialisation of women’s subordination’ (Jeffreys, 2009:1). Often from this viewpoint, as Zelizer (2005) points out, erotic dance is critiqued for commodifying sex; a relationship which might otherwise be equal and based on mutual affection, rather than intimacy being something which can be ‘purchased’. Erotic dance in this view is seen as reducing sex to just another commodity in a capitalist system. This radical feminist view of erotic dance utilises a ‘power-over’ framework in which women erotic dancers are represented as the ‘victims’ of patriarchy, with little or no agency to resist it (Lewis, 2000).

Social geographer Miller (2002) further draws on this interrelationship between capitalism and patriarchy, claiming that there has recently been a ‘moral overhaul’ of city centres in the UK, in which erotic dance venues have been ‘gentrified’ as ‘adult



entertainment'. Such a gentrification, in Miller's (2002) view, enables men's access to women's bodies by condoning sex-businesses. Even some feminists who may consider erotic dance as paid labour for women still analyse this within a framework which suggests that it provides work for women but only in a capitalist and patriarchal system within which women have few alternatives. Phoenix (n.d, online), for example, argues that '[i]nvolvement in prostitution is made possible for some women because, put simply, such involvement comes to 'make sense' because of the social and material conditions in which they live'.

Yet 'sex-positive' feminists, sex worker rights activists, and some academics have critiqued radical feminist claims that women dancers are *necessarily* disempowered by dancing for male customers in erotic dance venues. As Hubbard et al. (2008:376) note 'the idea that adult entertainment inherently reproduces male privilege needs to be questioned in the light of studies that highlight the agency of sex workers and exotic dancers'. Some dancers have written about their stripping experiences, claiming that rather than lacking agency, they are able to exercise control in their interactions with customers, maximising their monetary profits while maintaining acceptable boundaries (Rambo Ronai and Ellis, 1989; Hanna, 2005). From this perspective, 'sex workers are active participants in a social system—exploiters who trade on their own sexuality for commerce' (Murphy, 2003:308). Sex work activists argue that rights for erotic dancers and sex workers more widely, in the form of trade unions (for example, the GMB) and campaigns to decriminalise the sex industry, are required, because by making it a legitimate form of work, workers' rights and agency can be enhanced. This 'sex work' discourse is little evident in governmental policies in the UK, with no discussion of 'labour rights' or 'equal

citizenship' for sex workers (Sanders, 2005a:9). Many academic accounts based on interviews with erotic dancers, and accounts by current and former erotic dancers themselves, also emphasise the personal happiness and pride gained from successfully performing erotic dance and sometimes also the 'fun' or enjoyment women glean from performing it (Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Colosi, 2010a; Frank, 2002a; Forsyth and Deshotels, 1998; Skipper and McCaghy, 1971; Calhoun, Fisher and Cannon, 1998). Some dancers also claim that rather than reproducing problematic (hetero)gendered scripts for women, their performances actually critique and subvert aspects of normative femininity (Johnson, 2002; Frank, 2002b; Sundahl, cited in Liepe-Levinson, 2002); Pendleton, 1997).

### **Complicating one-dimensional conceptions of women's erotic dance performances**

Once we look beyond these two viewpoints, however, it appears that characterisations of erotic dance as either wholly degrading or empowering for women dancers are problematic. I identify the key sociological concepts and issues underlining the erotic dance literature as 'power'; 'gender and sexuality'; 'space' and 'work'. These concepts are being defined differently by researchers, affecting their interpretation of what is really 'going on' in conventional erotic dance clubs. I will deal in turn with each of these concepts as they are discussed in the erotic dance literature pertaining to women dancers and their male customers.

## *Power*

The way in which power has been conceptualised in both radical feminist, and sex worker rights approaches is as a zero-sum, one-dimensional model, whereby one party has power over another. Erotic dance for women is presented as entirely disempowering, or in contrast, liberating, when power may actually operate in more complex ways. Radical feminist accounts of erotic dance in particular paint a picture of women dancers as wholly oppressed victims. Jeffreys (2009:105), for example, argues that women are entirely disempowered in stripping roles as the clubs set the expectation that '[m]en can drink with their friends whilst staring into a woman's genitals or shoving their fingers into her anus or vagina'. Holsopple, a former dancer, suggests that male punters routinely 'attempt and succeed at penetrating strippers vaginally and anally' and that dancers frequently encounter sexually demeaning verbal abuse from customers (Holsopple, n.d:9). These accounts suggest that women dancers have so little autonomy over their working roles that they have to accept male violence to maintain their employment.

While it is vital to analyse the gendered power relations of erotic dance, as well as recognise the violence that can occur in the industry, Jeffreys' (2009) account in particular tends to reduce *all* women who work as erotic dancers to powerless victims with little agency to change their situation. Jeffreys (1997:5) refers to women who work in the sex industry as 'prostituted women', in a deliberate use of language to convey the male customer as a 'perpetrator' or 'user' of women's bodies and the woman as a victim with no agency who has prostitution 'done to' her. As Smith (2011:8) points out, this language reduces the sex working woman 'to object, not subject', with the radical feminist speaking on behalf of the sex worker for what she

needs, or what she *should* want and need (i.e. to leave the sex industry). Jeffreys' work draws only on the narratives of sex workers who have left the industry, and by not including the narratives of those women within the industry whose views may differ she 'ignores the immense political dangers that go along with refusing any group of people full subjectivity, even when one's aim is to help or "save" that group' (O'Connell Davidson, 2002:92). Such accounts which always conceive of the customer and manager as a violent male subject also leave little room to examine the complexities of women as customers or managers in erotic dance venues.

Academic and sex work activist Doezma (2011) has highlighted a commonality between radical feminist and sex worker rights arguments about sex work. She says that what these approaches both rest upon is a libertarian framework of how power works, as both perspectives see 'equality' and 'liberation', and a 'power-free sex' as possible to achieve. For radical feminists this would be through the abolition of prostitution, and for sex worker activists this would be through rights of workers and decriminalisation of prostitution. Doezma suggests that *all* power relations are *always unequal*, and therefore, that a 'power-free' sex is actually impossible, as all power relations exist along a continuum of choice and force. Doezma conceives of sex work not as a transaction in which one person is empowered and the other person completely disempowered, but as an encounter where two differentially empowered people try to work out something together which is of mutual concern.

This is similar, in one sense, to Foucault's (1998) contention that sexual liberation is not possible, because one discourse, or form of power, will always be superseded by another. Further, in Foucauldian thought power is multifarious, and it

is exercised rather than 'held'. This certainly provides a framework for considering how the power relations of erotic dance might not be inherently or totally one-sided. However, as Bartky (1998) cautions, whilst Foucault's model of power is useful for enabling us to conceive of power as productive, and as exercised by different people in different times and spaces, this does not negate a discussion of gendered power differentials and how these have an impact on the distribution and exercising of power.

Some empirical studies on erotic dance venues suggest that power works in much more complex ways than one party 'holding' all the power, reducing the dancer to 'object'. Murphy's (2003:306) study found that 'power circulates through a system of competing discursive relationships forming a dialectic of agency and constraint in which strippers are simultaneously subjects and objects'. Similarly, Wood (2000:7) in her study of dancers in North America conceptualises power as 'a contested, negotiated social resource'. Wood (2000:7) argues that women dancers are not the 'paper dolls' that they present to customers, but are 'interactive subjects' who interact with customers and negotiate gendered power relationships, rather than power operating as 'a monolithic social force oppressing women'. Bott's (2006) study of women dancers in Tenerife argues that women seek employment as dancers as a means of gaining power in their lives relative to other opportunities that are available to them. Bott (2006) documents how women become dancers as a way of gaining 'respectability' in light of scarce economic opportunities, where working in the 'respectable' adult entertainment industry sets them apart from the 'dirty' work of street prostitution. Erotic dance studies have also pointed out the power relations evident between women dancers (Price, 2000; Barton, 2007; Pasko, 2002).

These empirical studies therefore collectively point to the appropriateness of adopting a more Foucauldian conception of power when attempting to characterise the power relations of erotic dance. Foucault (1980) suggests that power is not a zero-sum game, but that one person can exercise power at the same time and without taking that power away from another. As Foucault argues, power is not held by one party, but is exercised, and not only through force. As chapters four, five and six of this thesis highlight, this framework of power enables a better analysis of how dancers can simultaneously experience feelings of power and disempowerment in different contexts and venues.

#### *Gender, sexuality and the social relations of 'looking'*

In order to understand the centrality of gendered power relations to erotic dance, we need to take a step back and look at how gender has been conceptualised in relation to sexuality, and women's sexual roles. Feminists such as Rich (1980) have provided a critique of heterosexuality as *the* compulsory social institution. Rich suggests that exposing the institutionalisation of heterosexuality is important, as we can see how it is not only through 'gender inequalities' that women have been oppressed, but how 'the enforcement of heterosexuality for women' has been 'a means of assuring male right of physical, economical and emotional access' to women's bodies (Rich, 1980:647). There is empirical evidence which points to erotic dance venues legitimating and reproducing the inevitability of heterosexuality, and indeed femininity, as compulsory elements of a woman's 'role'. For example, Wesley (2002:1196) argues that in erotic dance venues women use 'their sexuality to gain reward' and that they 'play the game' of using their femininity 'as an item of

exchange'. Further, Trautner (2005:772) suggests that women dancers 'must act like women by embodying traditionally female behavior and roles as well as by dressing and behaving femininely', and they therefore use femininity as a commodity in which they learn to work 'not only as women but as sexualized women'. As Liepe-Levinson (2002:9) also notes, '[i]n the scheme of most strip events, men pay women to perform "sexual acts" – to play what is commonly called the "sex-object" role'. Conventionally 'male spectators are protected by their dressed state, while the nudity of the female performers may suggest the cultural and physical vulnerability and accessibility of women to men' (Liepe-Levinson, 2002:9).

These accounts suggest a gendered power relationship in which the woman dancer is objectified by a male 'gaze' (Mulvey, 1989), which becomes a form of objectification that acts as a disciplining force against women dancers. Feminist accounts which suggest that erotic dance objectifies women's bodies draw on Mulvey's (1989:19) conception of 'the gaze', in which she argues that 'pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female', so that men exercise an active sexualised 'gaze' in which 'woman is image'. Yet some empirical research in erotic dance venues has complicated the idea that the gaze exercised by male customers necessarily disempowers women. Murphy (2003:310), for example, found that '[t]he dancers are simultaneously in control because they watch [the customers] and are controlled because they are watched'. A dancer in Pasko's (2002:61) study illustrates this relationship succinctly, as at the same time that male customers consume the dancer's performance as a sex object, the dancer felt powerful and 'beautiful' when a 'rich tourist or celebrity' came in to the club to look at her. This

mirrors a more Foucauldian conception of power, in that the dancer can exercise power, and feel empowered at the same time that the customer also exercises power.

Further, Murphy draws on Žižek's (1992) notion of the 'dialectic of the gaze', to argue that the gaze at one and the same time renders male customers powerful because it enables them 'to exert control over the situation, to occupy the position of the master' and yet it also implies 'impotence' because, 'as bearers of the gaze, they are reduced to the role of passive witnesses of the adversary's action' (Murphy, 2003:310). This suggests a relation of power in which even the male customer never completely dominates the interaction. This idea is supported by Sanders (2008a), who argues regarding sex work more widely that male customers' 'sexual scripts' are not necessarily based on a desire to exploit and harm women, and she has pointed to the multiple reasons why men engage with the sex industry, such as companionship, for example. Similarly, Wood's (2000:10) research suggests that for male customers, viewing nude female bodies is secondary to the primary motivation of receiving 'attention' from the dancer. Wood's (2000:10) 'attention hypothesis' stipulates that if men went purely to gaze at nude women 'there would be little difference between this type of erotic entertainment and erotic videos', as the 'interaction' is a key reason for men frequenting strip clubs.

There is arguably no fixed meaning to every erotic dance performance. As Jackson and Scott (2010:84) have pointed out, sex or sexual practices cannot simply be defined in terms of what we *do*, but rather 'what makes an act, a desire or a relationship sexual is a matter of social definition: the meanings invested in it'. In this sense, there is nothing inherently 'sexual' about erotic dance performances, or a



set 'reading' or interpretation of them, but rather their meanings are variable and contextually specific, and are made in the definitions dancers put on their labour, and also in the way customers interpret the performances that they see – as either erotic or not. Moreover, sometimes an erotic performer might be visually viewed or experienced as erotic by those other than the intended, or presumed, 'gazer'. There is therefore no 'ubiquitous' single gaze in the viewing of erotic imagery (Evans and Gamman, 1995). As Hubbard (2007:156) argues, we need to consider 'the diverse forms of desire that are aroused' in different spatial contexts.

Moreover, if we adopt a different conception of gender, exploring its potential deconstruction and reworking, we might recognise more fluid gendered power relations in erotic dance venues. For instance Butler's (1990) work has sought to expose the constructedness, rather than the rigidity, of both gender and sex. For Butler (1990:24), 'the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced'. Gender is the product of a 'repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being' (Butler, 1990:33). Therefore, it is the performance, the 'doing' of gender, and further, the repeatability of this performance, that actively brings gender into being, rather than gender pre-existing in a subject or stemming from a person's 'sex'. Butler uses the example of drag performances, to argue that drag is 'a copy of a copy' for which there is no original, to highlight that drag is a parody which 'is *of* the very notion of an original' gender (Butler, 1990:137). Butler's theory of performativity indicates that there is no 'fixed' link between sex and gender and sexuality, nor are they 'natural' states, for we have to work very hard to maintain them.

While some might think that erotic dance performances reproduce gender conformity, for Pendleton (1997), stripping is potentially transformative of gendered roles, because by performing femininity, dancers expose the instability of gendered and heterosexualised roles, showing that they are performative through their stage acts. Pendleton's point in particular highlights Butler's (1990) argument that gender is a performative act, and that it is the performance of gender, rather than anything fixed or 'natural', that brings it into being. This performativity, moreover, 'cannot be understood outside of a process of iterability, a regularized and constrained repetition of norms' (Butler, 1993:95). Gender performativity is therefore 'not a singular "act" or voluntary event, but a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint' (Butler, 1993:95). Even this 'iterability' 'does not always produce stability of meaning' (Alsop et al. 2002:103). Utilising this 'queer' framework of thinking suggests that there can be no 'one' reading of gendered performances in erotic dance, but rather, readings vary between individuals and in different contexts and over time.

Just as gender is a potentially unstable category, some former erotic dancers who write reflexively about their experiences support the idea that sexuality is also not a fixed category. These writers draw from postmodernist understandings of the fluidity of identity and power relations and legitimate the possibility of a range of sexualities and sexual expressions in erotic dance performances. It has been argued that normative gender and sexual power relations are in some instances actually critiqued *through* erotic dance (Pendleton, 1997; Johnson, 2002; Frank, 2002b; Sundahl (cited in Liepe-Levinson, 2002)). Johnson (2002:46) argues that erotic

dance clubs can potentially provide a space for women to develop a 'heterosexuality without heterosexism', where 'less restrictive gender roles' could be played out because sex is 'uncoupled' from reproduction and 'justified by pleasure alone' (Johnson, 2002:49). As Smart (1996:234) argues, we need to 'challenge the idea that there are actual, fixed or pre-given heterosexual practices', and that there is a somehow 'fixed heterosexual subject'. With regards to erotic dance, this would mean envisioning women dancers as not inevitably oppressed or replicating oppressive heterosexual scripts, but instead looking for the multiple ways in which heterosexuality, or rather 'heterosexualities' can be performed (Smart, 1996:234). Accounts such as Johnson's suggest the potential for erotic dance performances to expose the constructedness of gender and the instability of heterosexuality.

Yet imagining the fluidity of gender and heterosexuality is difficult, particularly as these concepts are viewed as more fluid by some writers than others. Further, gender and heterosexuality are seen as the linchpin of how western societies are organised. The intersection of heterosexuality and gendered power relations has been conceptualised as 'heteronormativity'. The aspects of heteronormativity at issue are exactly how we can conceive of what is potentially problematic, or progressive, about the gendered and sexual relations of erotic dance. Heteronormativity encompasses both the 'normative status' of heterosexuality as *the* sexuality, 'which renders any alternative sexualities 'other' and marginal'; and also hetero-patriarchy, through which (hetero)sexuality is 'systematically male dominated' (Jackson, 1999:163), and privileges the dominance of men over women. Undoubtedly, heteronormativity is effective because 'it defines not only normative sexual practice but also a normal way of life' (Jackson and Scott, 2010:85), yet this does not mean

that it is ultimately unchallengeable. Heteronormativity ‘is contingent upon being constantly reaffirmed’, hence ‘it can potentially be unsettled or renegotiated’ (Jackson and Scott, 2010:91). As with the dominance of heterosexuality which rests upon a binary construction of what it is not – homosexuality, heteronormativity is potentially unstable because it is contingent upon reaffirming its ‘normality’. The possibilities for disrupting heteronormativity therefore need to be examined, for thinking about whether less normative expressions of desire and gender roles can be fostered by the performance and consumption of erotic dance, or whether normative heterosexuality is more strongly played out than in other spaces.

#### *Erotic Dance ‘Spaces’ and ‘Places’*

Sexual experiences, activities, and perceived sexual identities cannot be comprehended without an understanding of the spatial contexts in which they are played out, as sexuality ‘manifests itself through relations that are specific to particular spaces’ (Browne et al., 2007:4). Leisure spaces are important in shaping and enabling the construction of particular sexual and gender identities. Our sense of sexual identity may be ‘developed from our sense of *where* we are’ (Hubbard, 2002:368). If spaces are not ‘fixed’, and are vital to constituting identities at different times in different ways, we can also begin to think about the role of erotic dance spaces in constituting potentially, new, novel, and less ‘heteronormative’ sexual experiences and identities.

The relation between spaces where erotic dance takes place and women’s erotic dance performances is complex. Social geographers have argued that spaces themselves, and not simply relations within them, may be regarded as ‘heterosexual’,

indicating that dominant sexual values can be spatially inscribed (Cowen, 2003). In terms of erotic dance venues, radical feminist activist groups, such as OBJECT have argued that the street presence of lap dancing venues normalises unequal heterosexual spaces. Frequented largely by male customers, with alleged increasing links between strip clubs and male businessmen using these spaces to conduct deals and meetings, it is argued by some radical feminists that:

‘Strip clubs recreate the gendered spaces for men that were challenged in second wave feminism. When businessmen use them it could be understood as a counter attack, in which men have reasserted their right to network for and through male dominance without the irritating presence of women, unless those women are naked and servicing their pleasures’ (Jeffreys, 2010:274).

However, just how stable constructions of heterosexual space are is debatable, as such constructions may depend on where the club is located and its interior design. Some writers have challenged the idea that even seemingly ‘gendered’ or ‘sexed’ spaces are necessarily fixed as such (Hubbard, 2001; Browne et al., 2007). They are also concerned that assuming that spaces are necessarily heterosexual does little to challenge the assumption that heterosexuality itself is ‘natural’ or cemented. Hubbard (2001) argues that

‘[f]ar from being ‘natural’ heterosexuality is something that is produced (and made to appear natural) through repeated spatial performances and flows of desire. These occur within different contexts of legal and moral regulation

which serve to define what sexual identities and practices are permissible or acceptable in public or private spaces' (Hubbard, 2001:59).

Space is not a given entity, but is a continual process of 'becoming', as spaces are made, re-made, and are deconstructed by the 'complex relations of culture, power and difference' (Hubbard, 2001:51). Space does not have 'particular fixed characteristics' (Valentine, 2001:4), but rather, space plays an active role in constituting identities in different ways, at different times and contexts, and is not just a backdrop to identity formation.

It is important to distinguish between geographical conceptions of 'space' and 'place' when thinking about erotic dance, and the venues within which it occurs. As Massey (1994:9, 167) notes, conventionally in geographical conceptions, 'place' has been conceived of as something 'local, specific, concrete, descriptive', but also emotive and nostalgic, for example in the phrase 'a place called home'. In this view of place as fixed, 'space' has been seen as something abstract and more global (Massey, 1994). However, Massey (1994) argues that both place and space are not static or fixed. Rather, 'places do not have single, unique, 'identities'; they are full of internal conflicts', and in this sense, the 'specificity' of place is 'continually reproduced' over time and through different social relations (Massey, 1994:155). The notion of a specific 'place' 'is formed out of the particular set of social relations which interact at a particular location' (Massey, 1994:168). In relation to venues where erotic dance take place then, there may be something specific about these places, but this specificity will change depending on which bodies and power relations interact in the place at a particular time. This may mean that a place appears

‘heterosexual’, or ‘masculine’, but it does not imply that the relations within that place are necessarily *fixed* as such. It is true that ‘bodies become sexualized, included, or excluded depending upon place and time’ (Johnston and Longhurst, 2010:3), but the fluidity of place suggests the changeability of the boundaries of, and interactions within, different ‘places’. It may be more useful to think of the places where erotic dance take place in terms of their ‘throwntogetherness’ (Massey, 2005:140). Seeing place as changeable, and the boundaries of a place as contestable, leaves more room to examine the ways in which places are constructed and negotiated by participants within them.

The places where erotic dance takes place, the venues themselves, are therefore important in shaping the experiences of those working within, as well as for those consuming the entertainment. Rambo Ronai and Cross (1998) distinguish between different lap dancing settings and how dancers who work there may have different experiences depending on a venue’s rules and facilities provided for dancers. Similarly, as Bradley (2008:513) comments, ‘*where* women strip may be more influential than the techniques of stripteasing in whether women consider their job exploitive or liberating’. Bradley (2008:512) found, for instance, that opportunities for erotic dance work in ‘highly lucrative and managed gentlemen’s clubs’ were ‘restricted for those who cannot attain the ‘high-class’, *white* ideal’. Specifically, Bradley found that women of colour and white working-class women ‘cannot attain the (white) ‘Barbie Doll’ body’ and thus their erotic dance employment is limited to ‘lower-tier establishments’, which makes their work ‘both less profitable and less safe’ (Bradley, 2008:512). This suggests, as McDowell (1999:40)

argues, that bodies themselves can be thought of as ‘places’, as the social significance attributed to a body often denotes its ‘physical placing in space’.

More widely, Halford and Leonard (2003) have argued in relation to the work of nurses, that space and place are an important element in people’s workplace experiences. Halford and Leonard (2003) suggest that a worker’s degree of access to different parts of a workplace can affect their status in a workplace. For example in erotic dance venues, whilst a manager may be free to roam the whole venue, dancers may be confined to the stage and dressing room areas. Further, ‘styles of bodily movement in space are also highly differentiated by profession and gender’ (Halford and Leonard, 2003:201). As Brooks (2010:78) found, black women erotic dancers in her study felt more comfortable performing in erotic dance venues that were managed by women managers, as opposed to male-managed clubs where they had to engage in ‘racial-passing’. Specific erotic dance venues where women dance, in terms of their set up, their health and safety precautions (Sanders and Hardy, 2011), the interactions possible between dancers and customers there, and the rules stipulated by management, can affect the levels of autonomy possible for dancers. These specifics of work experiences related to different erotic dance places need to be teased out rather than assuming that erotic dance venues are all the same, or necessarily exploitative or not.

### *Erotic Dance as Work*

As noted previously, the argument that erotic dance should be accepted as a legitimate form of work, rather than as a form of sexual abuse or domination, is contested. Therefore whether conceptualising erotic dance as work is appropriate,



and what using the concept of work could tell us about the lives of dancers and the power relations in which they are involved, needs to be examined. One key reason why we can argue that it is appropriate to consider erotic dancers as working is because so much work in contemporary society also involves the display of bodies and workers' emotions, and so erotic dance cannot be excluded on the grounds that it is so very different from other work roles. Researchers studying the service sector note how a worker's emotional labour (Hochschild, 1983), aesthetic presentation (Nickson et al., 2001), and work with their bodies and on the bodies of their customers (Wolkowitz, 2006), becomes part of the service product. Moreover, researchers investigating erotic dance, and sex work more widely, have highlighted similarities between some of the strategies dancers use to define and perform their role, and those of other workers. Pasko (2002), for instance, draws on Goffman's (1952) work to suggest that dancers perform emotional labour by engaging in a 'confidence game' with customers, through which a dancer seeks to gain power in their interactions with clients by manipulating them emotionally. In order to earn 'tips' a dancer must actively flatter the customer and make him feel special. Thus, as Brents and Hausbeck (2007:425) suggest, it 'is no longer useful to examine the sex industry as generalized 'other' to mainstream businesses', but rather to think about the similarities between the sex industry and other occupations, and to consider how capitalist consumption forms 'might have an impact on the sale of sex'.

It is also important to consider the work processes of erotic dance because it is the work element of erotic dance that dancers themselves often complain about in interviews with researchers. Liepe Levinson (2002:9) for example, argues that dancers she interviewed 'found the practical working conditions in a few of the clubs

to be far more disturbing than the strip show's general replication of sexual stereotypes'. Liepe Levinson's (2002:9) respondents spoke of managers expecting sexual favours from them, severe penalties for being late, being fired for being too heavy or too old, and the exorbitant fees that they paid to work in erotic dance clubs. Further, Fogel and Quinlan (2011:53) note the 'precarious' conditions of erotic dance for women workers, in that the work is often temporary, 'the income of strippers is unstable, unregulated, and unpredictable', and the work is 'characterized by an undefined relationship between employers and employees', with dancers being treated as self-entrepreneurs, or independent contractors, at the same time that their work is heavily regulated and controlled by management.

Empirical studies that conceive of dancers in conventional clubs as workers trying to earn a living document the complex ways in which dancers negotiate poor working conditions, at the same time that they might enjoy their work. Sanders and Hardy's (2010) recent survey of 86 dancers working in lap dancing clubs in the UK, for example, found that 76.4% of their respondents said they were 'happy' or 'very happy' with their job and 80.6% said they earned more money from this role than they would in other occupations. Yet at the same time, 55.6% of dancers worried about not being able to earn enough money on certain shifts; and complained about having to keep their job a secret; poor health and safety conditions in the workplace; having to compete with other dancers, all of which resulted in them also experiencing negative feelings about their work. Rather than accounts which suggest erotic dance is wholly oppressive, or totally liberating, this suggests that dancers experience ambivalence at the same time that they can gain enjoyment from the work in certain contexts.

Thinking about erotic dance as work also turns our attention to the erotic dance labour force. While erotic dancers are required to produce a particular aesthetic and emotional performance using their bodily labour, this is also mediated by their perceived class and 'race' status. As Agustin (2005:625) has stipulated, like other forms of work, 'the business segments by class, colour and ethnic group'. Of the research on North American erotic dance venues, it has been argued that access to work in different types of clubs is structured along class and race lines. Chapkis (2000:187) suggests that among many customers and club managers 'there is a bias in favor of white women', with many clubs operating informal quotas for the number of non-white women that can be hired. Wesely's (2003:658) research on a North American venue notes that non-white strippers had to be exceptionally 'good looking' in order to work in certain clubs. Such standards, Wesely (2003:658) argues, reproduce 'whiteness' as 'the feminine beauty ideal'.

North American research also reports that dancers who embody a particular feminine, middle-class white aesthetic ideal are preferred. Particularly in expensive clubs regarded as middle-class establishments, women are required to convey an image of feminine respectability, being seen as 'glamorous', but not 'trashy' (Frank, 2002a:207). Skeggs (1997:110) has argued more broadly that glamour 'is a way of holding together sexuality and respectability'. These class distinctions in sex work, together with reports of students dancing to fund their education (Sanders and Hardy, 2011), have led researchers in more recent years to argue that there has been a 'middle-class' turn to sex work (Bernstein, 2007; Roberts et al., 2007), coupled with a 'professionalisation' of the trade (Bradley, 2008). This has made it more difficult

for women to obtain work who ‘lack the embodied cultural capital necessary’ for working in clubs with scope to maintain bodily boundaries between themselves and the customer (Wolkowitz, 2006:142). Due to the alleged recent trend of the sex industry to attempt to ‘McDonaldize’ sex workers’ appearances and performances through creating standard ideals (Hausbeck and Brents, 2009), some women dancers are undergoing cosmetic surgery in order to create the required aesthetic ideal for work in better paid venues (Wesely, 2003; Bradley, 2008). These insights are drawn upon in chapter six where I discuss the appearance management techniques that dancers engage in.

### **Non-conventional erotic dance venues**

There are two types of entertainment venues rarely discussed in debates about erotic dance. These are venues where women customers watch women or men erotic dancers perform. These venues are little discussed because they are fewer in number than venues where women strip for male customers, but also because, I would suggest, the idea of women being the *consumers of* erotic dance presents an uncomfortable phenomenon for radical feminist analyses which conceive of the woman as the ‘victim’ with little agency in erotic dance encounters. This section seeks to find out what (little) we know about these venues in the existing literature. In this section I will discuss how the conceptual issues of the gendered power relations of erotic dance, ‘space’ and ‘place’, and work relations have been analysed in discussions of these more ‘novel’ erotic dance venues, and will think about what these venues might tell us about the fixity, or the possible fluidity of the power relations of erotic dance.

*Leisure venues where women watch male dancers*

While the number of venues catering for women customers is small compared to the much larger number of venues where women strip for a male audience, as discussed in chapter one, male striptease is a growing phenomenon in the UK. There are currently two main companies promoting male striptease in Britain<sup>4</sup>, hosting shows in leisure venues every weekend in cities across the country. Existing literature, particularly on North American venues, tells us that the spatial location of male striptease is acutely different from the places where women dance for men. Strip events marketed towards heterosexual women are often subset within mainstream leisure venues rather than in 'strip clubs' per se. This may be partly attributable to the size of the market for these events, and also a cost and profit factor as sustaining a venue dedicated primarily to male striptease for women customers may not be financially viable. For instance, in the Midlands, UK, in 2008 a club dedicated exclusively to male striptease for women and gay male customers closed some 10 months after it first opened. It is disputed whether this was due to prices within the venue being considered too high for customers to pay, the lack of a big market for this type of entertainment, or due to negative publicity from a local newspaper when the club closed temporarily for refurbishment<sup>5</sup>.

What is evident about venues within which men dance for women customers however, as Liepe-Levinson (2002:38) points out, is that shows which heterosexual women attend are in venues which are 'quite visible in terms of a public presence'. The venue's spatial visibility legitimises the entertainment, and so at the same time it

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<sup>4</sup> There were formerly three companies but two have recently merged. This information is from my own research into the proprietors.

<sup>5</sup> Sources not cited to protect anonymity of the venues.

also means the possibility of women gleaning sexual enjoyment from the show is ‘culturally dismissed or ignored’ as it is seen as ‘entertainments that do not *really* excite their consumers’ (Liepe-Levinson, 2002:38). This is also because the shows are often ‘subset within the larger activity of the birthday or social occasion’, which acts as a reason, or ‘excuse’, for the women’s attendance (Liepe-Levinson, 2002:38). As well as creating an expectation of consumers at these venues ‘not really’ gleaning any sexual arousal or desire from the activities within the space, it also sets up an expectation about the dancers’ performances – that their activities too are somehow not ‘sexual’ or ‘erotic’ but, rather, are viewed as ‘harmless fun’.

The spatial location and the arrangement of a venue’s interior, can affect the way in which erotic performances are experienced. For example, Tewksbury (1993) found that strip shows where women watch male dancers are often held within ‘socially acceptable’ spaces, such as a theatre or concert hall, with customers seated in rows facing a stage. This spatial arrangement is unlike more traditional strip shows for men which may be situated in cities, but ‘away from prying eyes’ (Hubbard et al., 2008). Erotic dance provided for men is held within strip clubs which may include tables set around a pole, or a stage with tables and chairs near it, or private ‘booths’ for more intimate encounters between customer and dancer. Frank (2003) suggests that an important element of male customers’ enjoyment of a strip club is not only the pleasure of viewing naked women’s bodies, but also from experiencing the change of scenery from everyday life that the strip club space provides. It is interesting, then, to think about the type of sexual experiences and feelings that women customers might, or might not, be able to enjoy when strip

shows are held in places which are seen as socially normative, rather than something that is a complete 'change of scenery' from everyday life.

Further, it seems that the gendered 'gaze' is not necessarily re-worked so that the male dancer becomes an 'object', with the woman customer becoming the 'gazer'. Rather than adopting the 'sex object' role that female erotic dancers often perform, male dancers may reconstruct this 'non-traditional occupation for men' (Peterson and Dressel, 1982:388), to emphasise hegemonic masculinity in order to 'improve' an occupation which was previously the exclusive domain of women (Tewksbury, 1993:169). While conventional gendered meanings position the naked female body as vulnerable, the nudity of the male stripping body, on the other hand, demonstrates 'male power, expertise and control through their overt demonstrations of their masculinity' (Tewksbury, 1993:173). Liepe-Levinson (2002: 184) claims that for men the stripping role is recast as one of masculine power and domination because the 'sex object' role is 'dangerous' for men to occupy as it could 'feminize' the male and include 'the possibility of his being gay', and thus make him less attractive to heterosexual women. The role of the male stripper therefore has to be 'masculinized'; 'made socially acceptable for men' (Tewksbury, 1993:179).

The literature suggests that there are some similarities in the work practices of male and female erotic dancers. For instance, male dancers may use 'make-up to diminish the glare of the lights against their features', trim 'excessive body hair', and keep 'in shape physically' (Peterson and Dressel, 1982:398). These practices are similar to what researchers of women dancers have found about their use of make-up and body grooming practices (Frank, 2002a). However, the ways in which these

bodily presentations are performed may differ depending on whether a 'feminine' or 'masculine' performance is required.

Further, it has been suggested that male dancers experience 'stigma' attached to the occupation of erotic dance (Peterson and Dressel, 1982:404), just as the enormous amount of stigma that women dancers face has also been highlighted in many empirical studies (Barton, 2002, 2007; Bradley, 2008; Egan, 2006b; Frank, 2002a; Mavin and Grandy, 2011; Thompson et al., 2003). However, while both male and female dancers may suffer 'stigma', the experiences of, and reactions, to such stigma may be gendered. As Rambo Ronai and Cross (1998:116) found in their research with women and male dancers in the Southeastern United States, men 'suffer from the consequences of a negative identity, similar to women', yet 'men and women have access to different gendered tales of self which leads them to fashion different gendered' reactions to this stigma. In this sense, both men and women suffer the 'stigma' of performing a 'deviant' occupational identity, yet they each suffer specific stigmas which are gender-dependent, with male dancers being 'not as concerned as the females with seeming to be like prostitutes', for instance (Ronai and Cross, 1998:116).

#### *Women customers of male erotic dancers*

Studies that have looked at women's attendance at strip shows as customers have highlighted the potential transcendence of female heterosexual roles that can occur in these venues. Peterson and Dressel (1982:185) claim that American male strip shows signal 'equal time for women' customers in heterosexual relations, as women can 'exhibit sexual behaviours with an aggressiveness usually associated



with the societal stereotypes of men'. Tye and Powers (1999:1) also suggest that groups of women who attend strip shows, and who are out on 'hen nights' in particular, subvert gendered expectations of female behaviour, as these 'bachelorettes' attempt to act similarly to men attending a 'stag night'. Women in their study went on 'girls' nights out' which included watching male strippers, drinking heavily and playing 'sexually suggestive games', which Tye and Powers (1999:7, 12) see as a 'declaration and celebration of female sexuality'. Often aided by heavy alcohol consumption, which encourages women to 'lower their inhibitions' (Montemurro and McClure, 2005), women can be loud, 'sexually aggressive' (Peterson and Dressel, 1982), and can 'show themselves as actively desiring' (Smith, 2002:83), in a manner which is inconsistent with traditional, heterosexualised femininity.

These sources seem to suggest that women's behaviour is in some ways similar to men's traditional behaviour in public leisure spaces, with women drinking alcohol, acting in a loud and brash manner, and consuming erotic entertainment. However, I have identified three different ways in which the literature suggests that women's behaviour in male erotic dance venues is limited in its scope for the transgression of heteronormative roles and which suggests that women's behaviour is not quite 'the same' activity as when men watch erotic dancers. These are the confinement of women's potential transgressive behaviour to particular locales; the question of whether women exercise a sexualised 'gaze' when they are the customers of male dancers; and how women's activities in erotic dance venues, coupled with the emergence of 'new femininities', may actually do more to reinforce normative heterosexual roles for women than to subvert them.

The potential transgression of gender and sexual norms for women, such as being loud and 'sexually aggressive' as an audience, is temporally and spatially specific, and may not translate into similar transgressions for women more widely. Montemurro and McClure's women customer respondents' alcohol-fuelled and 'liberated' behaviour in the erotic dance club where they watched male strippers did not translate into any transgressions of behaviour in their lives outside this space. Their respondents still policed their behaviour to conform to social expectations of femininity, considering themselves to be 'good girls who kept their sex lives and sexuality private' when they were sober and not in a night-time leisure space (Montemurro and McClure, 2005:284).

Alcohol consumption enables women to experience 'new and temporary subject positions' (Eldridge and Roberts, 2008:27), which do not necessarily centre around typically feminine behaviour. Yet this behaviour is temporally and spatially specific, and does not necessarily translate into any permanent transgressions of gendered behaviour in wider contexts. Skeggs (1999) has highlighted the negative reactions of customers and staff in different leisure spaces (particularly spaces defined as gay leisure spaces) to women's perceived lack of 'respectability'. Skeggs (1999) discusses this in terms of the class connotations of acting in loud, 'vulgar' manners in public, arguing that heterosexual women are perceived as 'matter out of place' in gay male leisure 'scenes'. This literature indicates the intolerance in gendered and classed terms of women engaging in non-feminine behaviour in public leisure spaces which do not market themselves specifically to women customers. It suggests that the fluidity of gender and sexual power relations which some women

dancers reported feeling in strip venues, as we saw in the previous section, is not necessarily experienced by women customers in strip venues.

McRobbie (2004) has further questioned to what extent women's participation in hen parties and similar events signals real 'empowerment' for women on a wider scale than just in these leisure venues. McRobbie argues that women's alcohol consumption and celebration of their presence in public space may mask women's more everyday lack of freedom or choices. She suggests that the choice for women to be a participant in night-time culture does not signal their freedom from harassment on the street at night, nor does it signal accessible childcare or equality with men more widely.

A way in which women's behaviour could be potentially transgressive is if they can exercise a sexual 'gaze'. As noted earlier, it has been argued that men objectify women's bodies through their consumption of erotic dance. The existence of an independent female erotic 'gaze' has been documented (Frank, 2002a; Moore, 1998). Moore (1998) suggests that the rise of a visible gay culture, and an increasing acceptance of homoerotic imagery, has provided space for a heterosexual female 'gaze'. However, as Deem (1996:108) questions, can women really 'gaze' 'in the same way as men'? Moreover, do women watching erotic dance even want to be able to 'gaze' in a comparable manner to men? Stacey (1994:24) suggests that by engaging with women audiences we can begin to question what an 'active female desire beyond the limits of masculine positionings', might look like. Stacey's (1994:33) analysis suggests that considering women's engagement with erotic

performances might ‘open up multiple or contradictory readings’, that are different from more conventional conceptions of an active male gaze.

We know from the literature on female sex tourists that there is some evidence of white, middle-class women being able to exercise a sexualised ‘gaze’ in public spaces (Sanchez Taylor, 2001; Sanders, 2011). While female sex tourists do not enjoy all the benefits afforded male sex tourists (such as a well-organised sex trade (Jeffreys, 2003)), we cannot ignore the fact that many of these women knowingly seek out and engage in sexual transactions with men who are economically disadvantaged relative to the women tourists (Sanchez Taylor, 2001). Not only does this suggest the freedom of (white, middle-class) women to ‘gaze’ and ‘desire’ male bodies, but they can also pay (through gifts or meals etc.) to engage in explicitly sexual encounters with them. Sanders (2010:118) has also recently examined how white western female tourists consume the commercial sex districts in Thailand through their normalisation of it as an ‘exciting/normal/must-see’ tourist experience. This importantly points to the potential of women to ‘gaze’, or to ‘do’ sex tourism, as Sanders (2010:118) phrases it, and suggests that simply assuming that men are the only consumers and ‘gazers’ in commercial sexual encounters does not accurately portray its actual extent.

However, when examining empirical research about women watching male dancers, it seems that an active sexual ‘gaze’ is not easily assumed by women customers. Male dancers are able to deny the ‘object’ role by taking on the role of active seducers. Montemurro (2001) suggests that the power of the female audience is limited because it is typically the male strippers who approach female patrons.

Typically, the woman is seated during a lap dance 'and takes a more passive role while the man gyrates' above her (Montemurro, 2001:299). Male strippers attempt to maintain eye contact with female patrons in order to feign a 'genuine' encounter, which obliges the gazing woman patron to 'return the dancer's "look in the eye"' (Liepe-Levinson, 2002:119), instead of gazing freely at the stripper's body. Liepe-Levinson (2002:9) argues that women customers' interest in objectifying male dancers is secondary to the fantasy of being desired and 'seen' by the male dancers. This suggests that some women customers are more interested in having their *own* desirability confirmed by the male dancers, and that the female 'gazer' is not enabled to control the gaze in ways entirely comparable to male gazers.

This leads to the possibility that, in some instances, women's activities in their consumption of erotic entertainment may actually reinforce, rather than subvert, heterosexual roles for women. Gill (2003:104) suggests that there has been a shift in heterosexual femininity as related to the gaze, in that there has been 'a move from an *external male judging gaze to a self-policing narcissistic gaze*'. Gill (2003:104) suggests that contemporarily, women are not only the objects of a male gaze but they now internalise the objectifying male gaze themselves, and discipline their bodies accordingly. This practice 'offers women the promise of power by becoming an object of desire' (Gill, 2003:104). This is linked to neo-liberal ideals of individual freedom which centre around women's 'choices', albeit 'choices' which effectively oblige women to 'be free' and 'have fun'. In Gill's (2003:104) view, women effectively 'choose' 'to become sex objects because this suits their "liberated" interests'; sexual objectification is now occupying a more sophisticated guise in which it can no longer be conceived of 'as something done to women by some men,

but as the freely chosen wish of active, confident, assertive female subjects'. Thus, we are seeing the emergence of 'new femininities' centred around 'sexual confidence and autonomy' (Gill, 2003:103). Importantly, this would signal that even if women are not passive in commercial sexual exchanges, and they can act in a manner that contradicts traditional feminine passivity, this does not necessarily mean their behaviour is transgressive. New femininities define (heterosexual) women as 'knowing, active, and desiring subjects' as a matter of course, in a shift from 'sexual objectification to sexual *subjectification*'<sup>6</sup> (Gill, 2003:103).

However, a continuity between older definitions of passive femininity and new ones of sexual agency and subjectivity, is that definitions still operate within 'a culture that frequently reduces [women] to their sexual value whilst ignoring their *sexuality*'<sup>7</sup> (Attwood, 2007:233). Whether women customers are exploring, or feel that they are exploring their own sexuality, rather than just what they are being effectively 'told' to feel therefore needs examining. For as Gill (2003:103) argues, 'only some women are constructed as active desiring sexual subjects', namely those who desire sex with men, and who are 'young, slim' and conventionally 'beautiful'. Storr's (2003) research further suggests that women themselves may police each other's (hetero)sexuality as a means of claiming their own as authentic and autonomous. Storr notes that at 'Ann Summers parties'<sup>8</sup>, what could potentially represent a challenge to traditional femininity with women actively discussing and engaging in sexual talk and activities, is actually an opportunity for women to draw boundaries around acceptable (hetero)femininity and police the behaviour of fellow

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<sup>6</sup> Italics, my emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Italics, my emphasis.

<sup>8</sup> Ann Summers parties involve a group of women playing games and purchasing sex toys and lingerie. More information here: <http://www.annsummers.com/page/PartyPlanHome>

women party attendees. I discuss this construction of (hetero)femininity through the policing of women customers' bodies in chapter four.

#### *Women customers in lesbian erotic leisure spaces*

Less has been written about the experiences of women customers in erotic venues catering for lesbian women. We might assume they are transgressive spaces, however, because it has been suggested that gay leisure spaces have enabled radical transformations in people's gender and sexual expressions. Valentine and Skelton (2003: 854) suggest that gay 'scenes' can be not only 'a transitional space where young lesbians and gay men can express their self-identities', but that they also offer 'a space where others can validate these identities'. However, there is much research to suggest that attending a gay 'space' does not automatically generate feelings of acceptance, or a 'community' feeling, among scene attendees. This section will look at literature which suggests there are few lesbian leisure spaces, and further, that gay spaces are heavily 'policed' by customers regarding 'who' is considered a legitimate customer of the venues. I will also discuss research on lesbian erotic leisure spaces and how much scope they might provide for a 'gaze' to be exercised by lesbian customers.

It seems that gay spaces are not necessarily transgressive, firstly, because there are few spaces specifically for women customers. 'Lesbian-only' leisure spaces in the UK are 'few and far between' (Hammers, 2008:550), limited mainly to sporadic lesbian 'events' held within gay male leisure venues (Valentine, 1995). Where lesbian spaces do exist, and specifically where they provide erotic entertainment for lesbian women, there has been a tendency by those who discuss them to desexualise

the interactions within these spaces. As Hammers (2008:551) notes, even where ‘the sex, desire and bodies that infuse lesbian-only spaces’ are mentioned in the literature, they are often portrayed in ‘strai(gh)tplaced’, essentialist terms, which erase the desire and interactions of bodies. Grosz (1994:70) argues that desire has ‘functioned only through the surreptitious exclusion of women (and hence lesbians)’. In dominant understandings, women are the ‘subjects’ of desire, and if a woman seeks to be a subject who desires, ‘she must renounce any position as feminine’ (Grosz, 1994:73, 76). The figure of the ‘mannish’ lesbian is the only stereotypical figure who, because of her presumed masculine positioning, is recognised as desiring. Thus any other displays of lesbian desire, and the potential exercising of a sexualised ‘gaze’ by lesbian women in erotic leisure spaces, is inconceivable within this framework.

It has also been suggested that gay spaces can be sites where there is a heightened policing of the bodies of those who attend them. Farquhar’s research suggests that some lesbian women in the 1970s and 1980s, at the time of the ‘lesbian sex wars’, were engaged in policing who ‘counted’ authentically as lesbian, particularly in relation to sexual practices (Farquhar, 2000:220). More contemporarily, Taylor (2007:161) draws upon Skeggs’ (1999) use of the concept of ‘misrecognition’ to argue that many working class lesbian women who frequent gay ‘scenes’ in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Manchester are, like ‘straight’ working class women who frequent these spaces, deemed unwelcomed by gay male patrons due to their perceived ‘failure’ to embody the ‘correct’ ‘gay signifiers’. This suggests a similarity in the policing of both lesbian and heterosexual women’s bodies in relation to leisure spaces. As noted in Gill’s (2003) work in the previous section, only *some* women can be seen as ‘active desiring sexual subjects’ in certain places



and times. What is significant, however, is how participants contest the policing of their bodies. For example, in Taylor's (2007) study, lesbian women rejected the categorisations of others who policed their bodies. In a Foucauldian (1980) sense of power then, this suggests that where there is power there is resistance, with participants in gay leisure spaces resisting the normative policing of their bodies by other customers.

What we do know about women's activities in lesbian erotic leisure spaces, where they exist, is that in some instances these places can provide a space for women to adopt novel sexual roles. There could therefore be changes in opportunity and experience for lesbian women, particularly outside of the commercial leisure sector, as the literature on bathhouses suggests. In Hammers's study of a lesbian bathhouse in Canada, for example, management constructed 'themed rooms' to 'intentionally organize the space in an attempt to stimulate desire and facilitate sexual activities' (Hammers, 2008:555). In some instances, this enables women customers to undermine constructions of women's sexuality as passive (Hammers, 2008:549). Cooper's (2009:113) research on the same bathhouse suggests that the bathhouse, at times, provided a 'space where women could become sexual agents, pursuing adventure without commitment'. This was partly attributable to the fact that it was organised by a not-for-profit feminist organisation. This suggests that a limiting factor for women's sexual agency could be if a space is managed as a commercial enterprise, with more of a focus on maximising profits over the pleasure of customers.

Yet at the same time, Hammers (2008:549) argues, the constructed spatial arrangement, in what is explicitly defined as ‘a *queer* space, which is, in theory, supposed to be impromptu and unruly – works to regulate bodies and narrow the range of emergent sexualities’. The explicit construction of a leisure space for women’s sexual pleasure can, she argues, somewhat paradoxically actually limit the desires and activities that can be aroused in certain contexts. This suggests that different erotic desires might be aroused for some women within these spaces, but for others the space is still too heavily structured to enable them to experience the space as erotic. Therefore, as Evans and Gamman (1995) argue, ‘there may be no such thing as an essential ‘lesbian’ gaze’, but rather, people identify differently with different erotic imagery, performances and spaces.

While some people may identify more with the bodies and performances presented in non-commercial erotic spaces such as the bathhouses above, there is some evidence to suggest that commercial gay leisure spaces can enable customers to experience performances within them as erotic. For instance, Rupp et al.’s (2010:289) research points to the enabling of ‘unaccustomed sexual desires’ to be aroused in commercial spaces which provide entertainment by drag queens and drag kings. Rupp et al. (2010:287) claim that the drag kings whom they studied raised ‘questions about what is ‘real’ beneath the costumes’ in their performances for customers, with drag queens ‘playing’ with categories of gender and sexuality in their performances. These performances, Rupp et al. (2010:187-9) suggest, enable the performers to ‘make a real impact’ on the customers’ ‘thinking about the boundaries of gender and sexuality’, and in turn, contest binary gender categories and heteronormativity. This example also supports Stacey’s (1994) critique of

Mulvey's (1989) discussion of the gaze in which the woman is object and the male gazer is subject. As Stacey (1994:134) argues, 'rather than being constrained by the negative construction of feminine identification', women spectators 'are able to make multiple identifications across gender boundaries'. Importantly, this also suggests that the gaze does not have to work in a binary fashion, in which the active expression of a gaze for women can only be conceived of where they assume a masculine position, or where they gaze 'like men'.

### *Erotic performers in lesbian leisure spaces*

What we currently know less about, however, is those who earn their living through erotic dance performances in lesbian leisure spaces. Liepe-Levinson (2002:36) documents the existence of lesbian strip shows in her research in North America. Brooks' (2010) more recent work involves a study of three erotic dance venues in New York City, one of which is a lesbian venue. Brooks found that black women dancers at the lesbian venue felt 'safer' performing for women customers than for male customers. Erotic dancer Sundahl claims in performing for a female audience she is 'not limited to ultra-feminine acts' (Sundahl, cited in Liepe-Levinson, 2002:125). However, these are the only studies that, to date, begin to explore the way in which women performers might alter or moderate their acts to cater for women customers.

The only specific mention of 'lesbian strippers' in the academic literature is the work of American legal academics McCaughy and Skipper (1969), yet their research does little to unpack the complexities of women's stripping performances and their relationships with the women that they form partnerships with. What we

know little about from existing studies is how women dancers perform for women customers in spaces specifically dedicated to the sexual entertainment of lesbian women, and what this means for the potential fluidity of the power relations of gender and sexuality and their work roles.

## **Conclusion**

Debates around erotic dance go to the heart of how we understand gender and sexuality more widely. Through thinking about the key concepts of power, gender and sexuality, space, and work which have emerged in existing empirical studies of erotic dance, and considering theoretically how these concepts enable us to identify more fluid and contestable social identities than once assumed, this chapter has highlighted the potentiality of challenging fixed gender and sexual roles for women in erotic dance spaces. I have argued that the relation between space and the transformation of sexual mores is not a simple one, especially for women. Therefore, while the possibility for the fluidity of gender and sexual roles in the performance and consumption of erotic labour will be considered in this thesis, this will not be at the expense of highlighting where problematic heteronormative roles are reproduced. My reading of the literature suggests that we need to know more about how gendered power relations work in erotic dance venues where women and men perform erotic dance for women customers. The next chapter highlights the research design developed to investigate these types of venues and their participants' experiences.

## Chapter Three

### Methodology: 'Doing' ethnographic fieldwork in erotic leisure venues

This chapter explains my decision to produce an ethnography of erotic dance venues, the selection of the two sites where I did fieldwork, and my methods for producing data. I pay particular attention to the links between my attachment to feminist and queer approaches to knowledge production, and my choice of research methods. Having been long immersed in the literature on feminist methodology, I also reflect on the ways that my own individual social positioning, and the ways I was positioned by the research participants, shaped the data production and the conclusions about the tenor of gender relations in the leisure venues that I have come to.

Below I will chart how ethnography has been utilised in feminist and queer ways by researchers. I will then detail the two research sites and my rationale for choosing these sites and how participants were sampled, before moving on to a discussion of how my epistemological concerns have affected the ethical implications of the research process. The chapter then outlines the research techniques used to construct this ethnography – namely participant observation, interviews, email interviews, visual methods and internet research, highlighting the pleasures and difficulties of doing feminist/queer research in sexualised spaces. The 'autobiographical I' is used as a self-reflexive approach to recognise that the knowledge produced in this thesis is 'contextual, situational and specific', and is produced according to my social location 'as a gendered, raced, classed, sexualised person' (Stanley, 1993:49-50).

## **Producing a feminist/queer ethnography**

There has long been argued to be an affinity between feminist scholarly aims and, within sociology, the ethnographic imagination. Skeggs' (2001) explanation of ethnography and what it means to 'do' feminist ethnography is the definition to which this ethnography of two erotic dance venues is guided by:

'I define ethnography as a theory of the research process – an idea about how we should do research. It usually combines certain features in specific ways: fieldwork that will be conducted over a *prolonged period of time*; utilizing different research techniques; conducted *within the settings* of the participants, with an understanding of how the context affects the action; *involving the researcher in participation* and observation; involving an account of the development of relationships between the researcher and researched and focusing on how experience and practice are part of wider practices' (Skeggs, 2001:426).

This affinity with feminism is appropriate because ethnography privileges people's own views of their experience (Bryman, 1988; Maynard, 1994; Reinharz, 1992); the role of the researcher in producing data through interactions (Letherby, 2011); the self-reflexivity of the researcher about the power relations that may underwrite her relations with research subjects (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995; Oakley, 1990; Skeggs, 1994; Letherby, 2011), particularly how knowledge is 'situated' because of the researcher's social location (Haraway, 1991); and the role of writing in the production of research findings (Skeggs, 1994; Letherby, 2011).

Each of these has of course come in for further problematisation as feminist scholarship has progressed, and some of these problems will be highlighted in this chapter.

This thesis seeks to provide an ethnography of the participants' experiences of erotic dance, both as performers and as customers. The picture I draw is inevitably affected by my own identity and how it shaped my reading of the participants' narratives and activities. As a researcher, a sexual being, a white working-class woman, the picture I paint of their lives is affected by how I am socially located. We can only ever produce 'partial knowledge' (Skeggs, 1994:79), because participants' experiences and the writing of knowledge by researchers are affected by social relations. We therefore need to consider 'the locations of different knowledge' (Skeggs, 1994:79), and be reflexive about how the particular relationship of the knower to the known has enabled a specific set of knowledges to be produced. These knowledges are contingent upon the particular time, space and context within which they were produced.

So far there has been much less attempt to address methodological questions in queer scholarship. Browne and Nash (2010:12) argue that 'there is, in fact, no 'queer method' (that is, 'methods' specifically as research techniques)', as "queer" lives can be addressed through a plethora of methods, and all methods can be put to the task of questioning normativities'. In this sense, it is not methods themselves that are necessarily 'queer', or indeed 'feminist', but rather it is the way in which they are utilised and the task that they are put to that denotes their epistemological framework. Valocchi (2005:763), for example, utilised ethnography to examine the

‘incoherencies and ambivalences’ that queer theory seeks to uncover. The research methods associated with producing an ethnography, namely participant observation, interviews and qualitative questionnaires, ‘enable authors to read moments of disruption, ruptures and fluidities’ (Browne, 2008:2.4). Rooke’s (2009) queer ethnographic research draws attention to how ethnography can be used to consider the lived realities of both hetero and homo-normativities, and can consider how people’s sexual subjectivities are not fixed, but negotiated and constructed over time. This thesis examines the ways in which participants can construct their sexual subjectivities while participating in erotic entertainment venues, as customers and dancers, and the limits to these constructions in different times and contexts. What both a feminist and a queer epistemology leads us to question is that if knowledge is socially located, and if identities are fluid and contested, ‘what meanings can we draw from, and what use can we make of, such data when it is only momentarily fixed and certain?’ (Browne and Nash, 2010:1). The claims I make to knowledge in this thesis are limited in that they are context-specific, and are dependent upon the very particular relationships between participant and researcher, both of whose identities and thinking are subject to change and reformulation.

### **Ethnography and erotic dance**

Ethnography has proved a productive approach to understanding erotic dance because activities within erotic dance venues revolve around interactions between dancers and customers in a relatively small space. Conversations and interactions can easily be overheard and observed, and it is relatively easy to strike up conversations with participants in the (usually) small and intimate club setting. Therefore, as



ethnographers see people's ideas and behaviour as situated, it makes sense to study attitudes towards erotic dance in the setting in which it takes place. Almost all studies of erotic dance, both in the UK and America, have utilised ethnography, or some observation and/or interviews in their research on erotic dance (for examples see Barton, 2007; Bradley-Engen and Ulmer, 2009; Brooks, 2010; Colosi, 2010a,b; Peterson and Dressel, 1982; Egan, 2006a,b; Frank, 2002a,b, 2003; Liepe-Levinson, 2002; Montemurro et al., 2003; Murphy, 2003; Pasko, 2002; Rambo Ronai and Ellis, 1989; Trautner, 2005; Wood, 2000).

I considered that speaking to participants themselves about their experiences, as well as observing the way in which gendered interactions might manifest in the two venues, was the best means of answering the research questions in hand, as well as giving a voice to those whom I sought to study. In both of the leisure venues that I studied, this ethnographic approach enabled me to observe both dancers and customers' behaviour during stage shows, in between stage acts, and before and after the shows, and I was also able to compare these observations with participants' own perceptions of their behaviour in interviews and email interviews. This 'qualitative' approach to research allowed for a 'thick description of events' (Geertz, 1973:6), particularly as the researcher was 'in the field' for a significant period of time, and interviews and email questionnaires conducted with participants enabled knowledge to be produced 'from the point of view of those being studied' (Bryman, 1988:46).

Where this study differs from previous ethnographies of erotic dance however, is that the techniques of visual methods, email questionnaires and internet research were also utilised in addition to the more usual techniques of participant observation

and interviewing. In an age where people engage with leisure venues not only in the venue itself, but also by talking with fellow participants in these spaces online, arguably not considering the ‘virtual’ dimension of these venues would omit a large contribution to participants’ experiences of the venues. Visual methods were also employed, as will be discussed in detail later, as a means of capturing different elements of the working lives of dancers and their interactions with participants than those that can be described through observations and interviews alone, and to make the research more of a ‘two-way’ process. I will evaluate how these different methods have contributed to constructing an ethnographic account of two erotic dance spaces throughout this chapter, to ascertain how their implementation has affected the knowledge produced.

### **Lippy and LoveLads: The research sites and their participants**

Before moving on to discuss the ethics of the research, and how they were guided by my epistemological concerns, I will attempt to give a clearer picture of the two research sites, and why the research was conducted in these spaces. A fuller description of the history and context of the two research sites is given at the beginning of chapters four and five, but here I give an account of which research sites I selected and why, followed by a discussion of who participates in these spaces and how I sampled these participants, and how I gained access to both research sites. The fieldwork entailed a focus upon two leisure venues within which erotic dance shows take place; one where male dancers perform for women customers, and one where women dance for women customers in a lesbian leisure venue. I chose these two venues to study in order to examine whether gendered power relations might

play out in different ways from the way the literature has characterised the experiences of women dancers who perform for (primarily) heterosexual men. As outlined in the previous chapter, much research on erotic dance focuses on the relations between women dancers and male customers. This thesis therefore seeks to think about what is potentially empirically different about venues where women are the primary customers of erotic dance and what this might mean for theories of gender.

### *Lippy*

In order to choose the sites where I was to conduct fieldwork, I first searched on the internet for venues where women are the customers of erotic dance. I found that there are only two venues in the UK that provide erotic dance primarily for women customers by women dancers. These erotic dance shows were held in a lesbian leisure venues, in two different cities in the UK, one in the North of England and one in the South. I decided to carry out fieldwork at Lippy, the venue in the South of England, which was a lesbian bar hosting erotic dance entertainment on the weekends. I also attended other lesbian and queer leisure events in the Southern city, initially to check whether they provided erotic entertainment in the form of stripping for women customers (and I found that they did not), and also in later trips to gain a better understanding of the specific context of Lippy, and to ‘map out’ the context of the lesbian ‘scene’ in this city. I attended six other gay leisure venues with respondents I had met at Lippy, and with my own colleagues, during October 2009-June 2010. One of these venues I attended once, but the other venues I visited around five times each.

As can be seen in the diagram of the research settings in Appendix A, Lippy is set over three levels. The entrance to the premises is on ground level, which also hosts a bar and seating area; the upper level consists of a games room and cloakroom; and the erotic dance shows take place in the lower level of the bar, on a small stage with two poles. The dancers' dressing room and staff office is accessible via a door to the left of the stage. A typical weekend evening at the bar involves customers arriving from around 6pm, with the erotic dance shows beginning at approximately 10.30pm and lasting for an hour. Two dancers perform three alternate routines on stage, before performing a 'double show' together at the end of the show. After the shows end this area becomes a dancefloor where customers can stay until 3am. Women customers at Lippy visit the bar both during the week where they can relax over a drink with friends or meet new people, and at the weekend to enjoy more of a 'party' atmosphere and where they can watch the erotic dance shows.

Quite a lot of the customers at Lippy were 'regular' customers, in the sense that I observed them or spoke to them at the venue on more than one fieldwork trip. It was impossible for a lone researcher to document, and/or recognise every time a customer frequented the bar more than once, yet I did try and record when I had seen or spoken to the same participant twice. Of the nineteen women customers at Lippy that I interviewed, only five were at the bar for their first time. Of the customers that I observed at Lippy, this was estimated to be around 1430 women. I could not 'count' all regular customers, but I did see many customers more than once and there was certainly more of a 'feel' in Lippy that many people knew each other or had met previously. Some customers came to Lippy in couples, or in small groups, but many came to the bar alone, as did I on many occasions.

Aesthetically, customers wore clothing that could be described as ‘casual’, with many women wearing jeans, t-shirts, trainers, and some women wearing dark blazers and jackets. As will be discussed in further detail in chapter five, there was a certain degree of policing among customers concerning the way that customers aesthetically presented themselves and whether they looked too ‘straight’ to ‘fit in’ at a lesbian venue. I will also discuss the implications of my own aesthetic presentation in both venues in my discussion of participant observation below, and how this might have impacted on my attempts to ‘blend in’ and ‘get closer’ to participants.

Before I carried out fieldwork in Lippy I utilised snowball sampling in my interviews with women who had participated in a lesbian venue in the 1980s in the UK that I have called The Cage. I wanted to consider the historical context of the emergence of lesbian leisure venues in this city, and how Lippy evolved over time. Snowball sampling is a form of non-probability sampling, employed when respondents are ‘difficult to locate’, and involves respondents who have already been sampled directing the researcher to potential respondents (Pole and Lampard, 2002:36). I managed to locate one woman via the internet who had participated in this venue, and she recommended two other women to interview, one of whom was the founder of Lippy. These preliminary interviews provided an invaluable opportunity to gain access to the founder of Lippy, whom I would not have been able to contact without the help of these participants. These women had also attended Lippy when it first opened in the 1990s and so could give an account of what the venue was like then, that I could compare to my observations of the club in its current context.

Gaining access to conduct fieldwork in Lippy was not a straightforward process. I found, as Bryman (2004:299) argues, that access is an 'ongoing' process. Management at Lippy were very receptive to my research initially. I sent a letter to the manager, and arranged to meet her in the club to discuss the research. The manager told me I could 'speak to whoever you want, everyone's very friendly here', but then later in the project when I attempted to secure an interview with her she cancelled one appointment, cancelled one when I got to the club to interview her, and avoided my emails requesting other interviews. This may have been because she was 'apprehensive' about talking to me (as Spivey (2005:422) found with participants in sexualised spaces), but also because as a manager she is very busy and perhaps I was not offering her anything she considered to be for her own personal 'benefit' by agreeing to be interviewed. I did not give monetary rewards, although I did offer to distribute flyers for the club in return for an interview but she assured me this would not be necessary. The manager introduced me to some of the dancers and I contacted other dancers myself via email, or on research trips to the venue, for interviews. Two of the five dancers that danced in Lippy declined to be interviewed because they were very worried about their identity being revealed, which is understandable in an occupation to which so much stigma is attached by wider society. My promises of anonymity were not enough to convince them to participate and so I respected their 'right to refuse participation' (British Sociological Association (BSA), 2002:3). It is important to note that the views of the three dancers that I did interview may not have been representative of all dancers at the club. I interviewed two dancers twice, one of which was dancer **WORLDMISTRESS** whom I interviewed for an hour on our first meeting, and for around two hours

during a photo-elicitation interview that we held at her flat at a later stage, in February 2011. WORLDMISTRESS was therefore more of a 'key informant' than some of the other participants in Lippy, and this is reflected in the great deal of analysis in chapters five and six of her dancing.

I also approached many customers to participate in interviews for the research, and some of these women were more 'key' informants than others. In Lippy, I spoke to women customers who were standing or sitting alone, or in small groups, so that I could easily discuss my research project and be heard above the noise of the music. Many conversations with customers started fairly casually, and the extract below from my fieldnotes in Lippy is quite a typical example of the way conversations were initiated with customers:

'A girl is standing behind me, kind of hovering so I say 'Hi'. She says she is waiting for the person on the stool next to me to move so she can sit down. She sits down and we start chatting' (Fieldnotes, January, 2010).

Some women respondents approached me to talk to as a fellow customer, and so I explained to them about my project as we talked. At Lippy, women often went on stage to participate in stage routines with dancer WORLDMISTRESS. I purposely asked women customers who had been on stage to participate in the project, although only one of these respondents agreed. Some women customers participated more in the fieldwork than others. Customer Katherine, for example, was a key informant throughout much of the early fieldwork in Lippy, before she rather problematically began sending me abusive text messages, as I discuss later in this chapter. Other

customers that filled out the email questionnaire were more ‘key’ than others in the sense that they gave fuller, more qualitative accounts of their participation in Lippy, rather than short answers. As I discussed at the beginning of this chapter, the knowledge produced on each venue and its participants is very much a product of the particular context of my interactions with participants and their experiences in particular moments at the venue.

### *LoveLads*

The second venue I chose to study was of a male erotic dance show where men stripped for women customers. The show is held in a mainstream nightclub that the stripping company rents every Saturday night until 10.30pm. Although this differs across male striptease companies, in the case of LoveLads, the company rented the room from the nightclub for a small fee, and made money from ticket sales while the nightclub made money from drinks sales. I already had some knowledge of erotic dance provided by men dancers for women customers, as in a previous research study I had already searched on the internet, and contacted various club promoters, to ascertain how many companies were operating strip nights or venues where men dance for women customers (Pilcher, 2011). When I first began this PhD research there were three main companies in the UK holding striptease entertainment nights performed by men for women customers in around ten large cities. I studied one of these companies in the Midlands, UK, for my Masters Dissertation. By the time I started my fieldwork for this thesis, however, two of the three companies had merged together, and so there were now only two companies operating in the UK – LoveLads (where fieldwork was carried out) and MuscleMen<sup>9</sup>. Both of these

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<sup>9</sup> Pseudonym.



companies held their largest strip show event every Saturday night in a large city in the South of the UK. As Lippy was situated in the South of the UK, and because both of the male strip shows held their largest show in the same city, it seemed both practically sensible to study two venues in the same city, and theoretically most useful to think about both sites in the context of the same city.

I attempted to gain access to MuscleMen first, as this was a company that I had not studied for my Masters Dissertation. I made three research trips to this venue, and dancers seemed keen to talk about their workplace experiences. However, access to this club was refused by the management. Similar to the supplementary trips I made to other lesbian leisure venues in my study of Lippy, these trips to MuscleMen did enable a greater understanding of how the LoveLads club is located and how it relates to other similar locales. Gaining access to carry out fieldwork at LoveLads was not an easy process. I first sent a letter to the venue that remained unanswered, and after sending five emails and phoning twenty-four times, I eventually managed to speak with a manager who arranged a meeting with me and granted me access to the venue as long as I told him before each evening that I wanted to visit.

At the LoveLads show the doors open at around 6.30pm, with women entering the club largely with groups of friends, helping themselves to food from the 'buffet', claiming their 'free' cocktail from the bar, purchasing more drinks before the show starts, and then taking their allocated seats before the stage show begins at 8pm. Shows take place on the ground floor on the stage area, as Appendix B indicates. A drag queen is employed as a Master of Ceremonies (MC) to create an 'exciting' atmosphere, and the male dancers are on stage for around two and a half

hours, with regular breaks in-between their stage routines. Women customers attend the show usually in large groups of women who are out to celebrate a 'hen party' or a birthday. In my time observing the venue I only observed three women attending the venue more than once, although dancers spoke of customers who were repeat visitors to the show. Repeat visits to the show may have been stifled by the expensive cost of a ticket to a show, rather than customers simply not 'wanting' to visit a show again. Chapter four also discusses the interesting ways in which women who attend the show and do want to attend again may discuss their anticipated second visit on the show's Facebook fan page. Of the women I observed watching the show, most of them appeared aesthetically to be 'dressed up' for a 'night out', as many wore high-heeled shoes, visible make-up, and dresses and skirts that were often short in length.

I took a similar approach at the LoveLads venue to the way that I approached field relations at Lippy, attempting to interview dancers and customers, and observe the venue, and carrying out email questionnaires where customers agreed to these over a face-to face interview. Yet my interactions with women customers at LoveLads were restricted to after the stage show had finished so I had less time on any given research trip to talk to the customers. Further, I found that my observations, and my access to speak with women customers, were 'constrained by the physical limits of the role' (Brewer, 2000:62). Due to management at the LoveLads show requesting that I sit upstairs on the balcony (see Appendix B), I had little interaction with women customers at this venue. What this seating location at LoveLads did enable, however, was access to areas where dancers and staff congregated. Management stipulated that I should sit on a chair positioned near to

the dancers' dressing room, and I therefore managed to gain access to the non-public 'back regions' (Goffman, 1959) of this erotic dance venue. At the LoveLads show I talked informally with management and dancers in the dressing room on three occasions.

Of the ten dancers at LoveLads, five dancers declined to be interviewed. At LoveLads the reasons male dancers gave for not participating were somewhat different from the reasons that women dancers declined interviews at Lippy. Three male dancers thought it sounded like a 'waste of time', and the other two did not believe that I was conducting research but was instead there for my own voyeuristic pleasure (as will be discussed later in this chapter). Due to the limited number of dancers at the club, it was not possible to interview any more dancers than I did for this thesis as I interviewed all those who worked in the two venues who consented to participate in the research. Observation and interviews at LoveLads were terminated, not because of my own wishes but because the managers stopped returning my emails and phone calls, and they had requested that I obtain permission from them before I attended on each research trip.

### **Ethics in researching erotic leisure venues**

Attentive to ethical concerns in empirical research, my fieldwork in Lippy and LoveLads addressed the ethical concerns of informed consent, privacy, harm and exploitation (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). All interview participants in each venue were told of my research intentions and gave their explicit verbal consent to be studied, and as far as was possible, customers were asked whether they consented

to participate. Participants and venues researched were guaranteed anonymity and pseudonyms are used (unless participants explicitly stated that they wished to be named in the thesis, as in the case of WORLDMISTRESS). This is to minimise the ‘harm’ which could come to participants if people who do not know they are involved in the erotic dance scene, which is often perceived as a ‘deviant’ activity, could identify them in the thesis. The privacy of participants was respected as I respected the right of customers and dancers to refuse participation in interviews and the visual element of the fieldwork (British Sociological Association (BSA), 2002:3).

In order to minimise potential ethical problems with utilising photography as a method, wherever possible, participants were given the right to consent to the image being used for academic research and publication purposes. Whilst I conducted interviews with a total of three dancers in Lippy, the other two dancers in this venue did not want photographs to be taken of their work. This is because they wished their occupation to remain completely anonymous from family members and friends. One dancer stated quite vehemently that ‘I’ve been dancing for nine years and you won’t find a single photo of me on the internet’. WORLDMISTRESS, who was the only dancer at Lippy who agreed to be photographed, saw every photograph that I took of her performances as I posted the images to her on a CD after each show and she stipulated if there were any specific images she did not want me to use. The LoveLads dancers said they were happy for me to take photographs of their performances, but photography was only permitted on specific occasions where management gave me permission to photograph.

There are also ethical issues around photographing in an environment in which others, namely customers, are prohibited from taking photographs, and where nude and semi-nude entertainment takes place. At Lippy, taking photographs of WORLDMISTRESS's performances created a distance from customers on some occasions, as I did not 'blend in' as a customer as only management and myself were allowed to photograph while stage shows took place. Further, after obtaining consent from managers and dancers to take photographs of their stage performances, I had to be selective in the photographs that I took in order not to take photographs of dancers who did not wish to be photographed. This was achievable with regards to dancers, as I could easily not photograph when dancers who did not wish to be photographed were on stage. However, it proved harder to omit customers from photographs as there were a considerable number of them at both venues. Within a large social space in which the researcher is 'in constant interaction with a considerable number' of people (Punch, 1986:36), it can sometimes be impossible to omit people from photographs, or to seek informed consent from everyone present. In such situations, consent was sought post hoc. Yet for some of the photos this was still not achievable. Careful consideration was then made as to whether the image to be used was really needed to illustrate a substantive point, and to whether including such persons in the research would cause them 'future harm', as recommended by the British Sociological Association's (2002:5) ethical guidelines. In this thesis I have included only images in which all the persons in the images gave their explicit consent, otherwise I have included images in which people's faces are indistinct and they cannot be recognised.

My feminist and queer epistemological framework also led me to consider power in the research process as a key ethical concern, both during fieldwork, in the writing, and in planning dissemination of the findings. As Skeggs (1994:79) notes, feminist research places an emphasis on power relations, and yet it is 'naive to assume power relations between researcher and researched can be non-hierarchical'. I attempted to establish 'more egalitarian field relationships' with participants (Wolf, 1996:35), such as by answering questions respondents had about the research 'as fully as required' (Oakley, 1990:47), and through creating more participatory elements to the research, such as through a photo-elicitation interview with WORLDMISTRESS. I am also intending to distribute journal article publications to as many participants as possible.

However, there are some aspects of power relations that are difficult to evade in the research relationship. One of these is the much debated argument, asserted by Stacey (1988:21), that a feminist ethnography paradoxically may subject the researched 'to greater risk of exploitation, betrayal and abandonment by the researcher than does much positivist research'. Stacey suggests that ironically such 'desertion by the researcher' could be *more* damaging for the researched in a feminist ethnography because of the intimacy of the close-knit, empathetic relationships being built, the participant may be exposed to a greater risk of feeling exploited or abandoned by the researcher than they might in a more impersonal research encounter (Stacey, 1988:24). I do not feel that any of my respondents felt 'abandoned' or completely 'deserted' by the researcher. I attempted, as Reinharz (1992:74) suggests, to reduce the possibility of the respondent feeling 'abandoned' by reminding participants of my research intentions. Reinharz (1992:74) further

asserts that there is always the chance that the research subject ‘will have expectations of the researcher which cannot be fulfilled’, yet this should not prevent us from abandoning research relationships merely because the researcher cannot be ‘all things to all people at all times’.

Certainly one of the benefits of doing research in sexualised spaces is that it enhances research opportunities, as participants in these spaces are interested in making potential erotic contacts and also new friends. This means that when I approached women to speak to about the research that it was not seen as ‘odd’, and in most cases participants were not upset if they came over to ‘chat me up’, so to speak, and I explained to them instead about my research. Yet one of the customers at Lippy attempted to make the research into a much more personal relationship than I felt possible to maintain. Over the course of four weeks, this participant sent me text messages at least ten times a day and wanted to meet up at least twice a week. I tried to remind her of my research intentions, and stipulated that I simply could not meet as much as she desired. Unfortunately, this resulted in a week-long barrage of abusive messages from her and she eventually cut off contact with me. This was distressing for me as well as for her and certainly raised questions about how to maintain boundaries with research participants whilst at the same time trying to break boundaries *down* in order to make the research process more of a ‘fair’ and open exchange and to establish a good rapport with respondents.

However, Reinharz (1992) has criticised Stacey’s dismissal of the possibility of achieving a feminist ethnography. Reinharz claims Stacey is ‘implying some agreed-on definition of feminism’ and thus ignoring the differing approaches to

ethnography within feminism (Reinharz, 1992:74). Skeggs (1994:88) also suggests that Stacey ‘overstates the power of the researcher and places the researched into a victim category’. Nevertheless, as Letherby (2011:71) argues, overall the researcher is still in a ‘superior’ position relative to the research participant as they exercise ‘a right to be regarded as a knower in a way that respondents do not have’. As Skeggs (1994:88) notes, research participants’ stories and experiences are the means through which the researcher constructs a career for themselves, which, as Skeggs says, is a ‘debt that can never be repaid’. It is important, therefore, to acknowledge where these power imbalances are operating, rather than assuming that because feminist methods have been adopted that the research process was necessarily more egalitarian.

### **‘Doing’ feminist/queer research: How the methods I used enabled specific knowledges to be produced**

In this part of the chapter I will discuss the techniques I used to compile an ethnographic account of the two erotic dance venues. I will evaluate these in order of their ‘productiveness’ in producing the picture that I gleaned overall of the two venues and their participants. I will firstly discuss participant observation, which I argue was the most important method for uncovering the experiences and activities of participants in sexualised spaces, followed closely by interviews, visual methods, and also email interviews and internet research. I will discuss the process of ‘doing’ these research methods, including how I recorded the data, and consider how this may have affected the knowledge I was able to produce. Throughout the discussions of these methods I will also consider how my epistemological concerns have affected



the knowledge produced and the research process, evaluating the pleasures and problems with doing research in erotic leisure venues.

### ***Participant Observation***

I carried out extensive participant observation at both venues in order to better understand participants' behaviour first-hand by participating myself in the activities they experienced, and to build better rapport with respondents. At Lippy, I carried out 130 hours of participant observation across a 10 month period between October 2009 and July 2010. I visited the venue on 29 occasions, spending 4-5 hours at the venue on each research trip. The club opens at 5pm, and I mainly visited the venue between the hours 7pm-12am, but on five occasions I arrived at 5pm, usually to find no customers until approximately 6pm. On the majority of Friday and Saturday evenings at the venue I observed around 70 customers. I visited the venue 8 times between Sunday-Thursday and there were usually around 10-15 customers present, and there were two Friday nights where the club was noticeably empty, with only around 10 customers visiting the whole evening (although these were on nights where large football matches were broadcast and the venue did not have a television).

At the second venue, the LoveLads show, 20 hours of participant observation were undertaken during 5 research trips between September 2010 and December 2010. I visited the club on Saturday nights, when management had given me permission to attend between 7-11pm. On each research visit to the two research sites I noted the approximate number of customers in each venue (see end column of

each table in Appendix C). At LoveLads, my own counting to estimate the number of customers was supplemented by one of the managers who told me the number of tickets sold for each performance. From management's data on ticket sales at LoveLads and my own counting, the estimated number of customers on each fieldwork visit were 120, 100, 70, 50, 135, with all of these visibly being women customers apart from three men customers observed on the first two visits. Of course, these are the total estimated numbers of people present at the venues, and it is not possible for a lone researcher to 'observe' in detail each and every person attending each stage show. My fieldnotes therefore document specific observations of women I could easily see from where I was sat or stood watching, and of where customers responded to the show in groups or as a crowd/collective audience.

I recorded my participant observational fieldwork data in a research diary, through the making of fieldnotes at both venues and through photographs taken. As Skeggs (1994:87) points out, 'a research diary kept during the research helps give a better idea of how knowledge is produced', and thus assists my feminist and queer epistemological commitment to making the research accountable and reflexive. Yet as Burgess (1984:134) notes, 'it is not possible to record everything that occurs in a situation and therefore researchers will be involved in making a set of decisions about what to include depending on their substantive and theoretical interests'. Undoubtedly my theoretical interest in the power relations of gender and sexuality will have affected some of the data that I collected in what I took to constitute important observations to make in fieldnotes, yet 'what' I observed and documented was also vital for answering the research questions that this thesis sought to address.

Some more pressing problems resulted in relation to data collection during participant observation, and these are discussed below.

My fieldnotes were, as Lofland and Lofland (1995:93) describe them, ‘a running description of events, people, things heard and overheard, conversations among people, conversations with people’. At the two clubs that I gained access to study, Lippy and LoveLads, many participants were aware of my study. I assumed, therefore, that taking notes in the field and asking questions would have been more practical than in covert studies of erotic dance venues, such as that of Erickson and Tewksbury (2000:276) in which they found it difficult to take notes on site. Taking notes ‘in the field’, however, proved difficult. In an environment where people go as a form of leisure, in the sense that they want to ‘unwind’ and ‘have a good time’, even asking people about a ‘study’ was sometimes seen as too ‘serious’ a subject to be discussed on a ‘night out’ (as discussed later as a reason why email questionnaires were often invoked). Moreover, where people are drinking alcohol, dancing and chatting, and where no other participant was ever observed writing down anything on paper, visibly taking fieldnotes would have disrupted the ‘flow’ and would have positioned me as an outsider. At Lippy, I stood watching the show along with the customers as there were no chairs, and not only would it have been difficult to take notes standing up, it would have looked rather out of place, and customers would have seen what I wrote. Also, I was sometimes in the role of ‘photographer’ during WORLDMISTRESS’s shows and so taking notes at the same time was not physically possible.

I managed to overcome some of these difficulties by taking notes on my mobile telephone by keying text into the phone. Although these notes were brief and fleeting, it did enable me to quickly document observations so I would not forget them. My mobile telephone was not seen as a device 'out of place' in either of the two venues, as women customers in both venues were often observed on their mobile telephones, tapping messages and looking at the screen, or using their mobile devices in LoveLads to take photographs of the dancers when they were permitted to. Further, as other ethnographic researchers have discussed (Sanjek, 1990; Norbeck, 1970), frequent trips to the toilets in a venue can enable a researcher to make fieldnotes unobtrusively. I kept a small notebook in my bag that I used to jot down observational fieldnotes in the toilets, and to elaborate on the brief notes that I wrote on my mobile telephone. I also recorded my own feelings and reactions to events and conversations that I observed in my notebook and then later in my research diary. This recording of my 'emotional' responses enabled me to work through personal anxieties to some extent, and to reflexively record my 'changing reactions' to people over time (Emerson et al., 2007:361). For example, in October 2009 I recorded in my research diary that I felt 'scared and intimidated' by one of the women bar staff members 'because she never smiles at me'. However, by March 2010 I had changed my perception of her, noting that 'Maria seems sceptical of people that are new to the bar, but she's always friendly with me now'.

Upon returning home from each research venue, I would record my observations of the evening, and would also type up the fieldnotes I had made on my mobile telephone, or in my notebook. In Lippy, in particular, the photographs I had taken of WORLDMISTRESS's performances not only acted as data themselves, but

also assisted in ‘jogging’ my memory of the evening. However, one problem of writing up a research diary immediately after I returned home late at night from the venues is that I was often very tired after an evening of research in a noisy place. At LoveLads this was slightly less of an issue, as I would often leave the venue at around 11.00pm, returning home by midnight. The show at LoveLads ended at 10-10.30pm and I would spend an hour or so after the show attempting to talk to women customers about their experiences of the show, and gaining their email addresses if they agreed to further questions after the show. I also on two occasions interviewed dancers after their stage show had ended. My decision to leave at this time at LoveLads was often due to the dancers leaving, and customers not wishing to talk to me for longer than a fleeting conversation. At LoveLads also, many of the women who had watched the stage show left the venue at around 10.30pm after the stage show had ended, and the general public were let into the venue. This is analytically interesting for how it reveals that many of these women attended the venue primarily, and only, for the stage show, but this also made it difficult to speak to the customers after the show.

To give more of a ‘feel’ of how I carried out the participant observation, and how I experienced the spaces and their participants on my first visit, I am going to include here two extracts from my fieldwork diary of the times when I first visited the Lippy and LoveLads venues. In doing so, I hope to highlight a number of issues about doing participant observation in a sexualised space, namely, the strengths and weaknesses of this method particularly in relation to attempting to do it in a ‘feminist/queer’ sense; how I was able to record observational data; and also how the observational data enabled particular knowledges to be produced (and potentially

excluded others); and to give a greater sense of the research sites themselves and what it was like to be in them. Here are the extracts from my fieldnotes:

*Lippy first fieldwork visit Thursday 15<sup>th</sup> October 2009*

‘So tonight is the first time I’ve been to Lippy. I’m taking Tessa, my housemate with me and we both spend an hour deciding what to wear. Tessa usually wears tight dresses and heels when she goes to a bar but she doesn’t think she’ll fit in in a lesbian bar. She decides on an orange vest top, black leggings and black boots. I decide on jeans, a t-shirt and some boots. I feel like I might be underdressed but I’m comfortable as I wear this outfit during the day. We arrive outside the bar about 8pm. It’s down a side street in a central area of the city, it looks more like a beauty salon to me from the outside than a bar. There isn’t a bouncer at the door and we head straight to the bar, which we can see in front of us. We stand waiting to order some drinks and the bartender recommends we get an £8 pitcher of cocktail that she has concocted, we do and she seems pleased when we like it. Another girl with long brown hair in a ponytail wearing a tank top is also working at the bar. There is a female bouncer with long dark brown hair standing to the side of the bar. RnB music is pumping loudly out of a speaker behind us. There are pictures of semi-naked women on the walls, or perhaps it is the same woman? The bar is quite quiet and it feels quite small, even though hardly anyone is in here. Five women are sat on sofas in a corner but there are no other customers apart from us. After about 5 minutes a girl with shoulder length brown hair approaches Tessa and says ‘I have a friend that would love

you, she's very pretty – green eyes and blonde hair, can I give you her number?'. Tessa giggles and says 'Ooh I don't know', to which the girl replies 'Ok well I'll give you this card to a gig she's DJing at and if you fancy it come down, she'd love you'. After the girl walks off Tessa says to me that she's flattered that she 'got hit on'.

I leave Tessa at the bar for a minute while I go to the toilets, they are down a small corridor and are very badly-lit. In the toilets a girl with short blonde hair is saying to the toilet attendant how 'disgusting' it is that 'there's blood all over the wall in that toilet, who would do that??'

I go back to the bar and sit with Tessa on some bar stalls. Two women come into the bar and they ask the bartender about the possibility of pole dancing at the club. She says they'll need to speak to [inaudible] then goes away. I notice the woman with long blonde hair go downstairs with a blonde woman (a manager?) for presumably an audition. Another girl later goes down maybe for a similar reason.

At about 10.30pm someone announces over a microphone that downstairs is open, so Tessa and I go downstairs. There are not many people downstairs, apart from a woman DJ playing loud RnB music and four other women dancing separately. No-one seems to know each other. Tessa and I dance.

After about five minutes a very tall woman, dressed all in black with a black cap keeps dancing with us and making a very loud high-pitched 'wheeeee' sound. I decide it's time to ask the bartender downstairs who the manager is so I can speak to them about doing research, and ask if they received the letter that I sent. I ask the bartender downstairs (girl with brown short hair and glasses) who I should talk to about the possibility of doing some research

here. She says the general manager is with someone else so she'll tell her when she's finished, I say thanks. After about 10 minutes the manager comes out onto the dancefloor, the bartender directs her to me and the manager shows me into her office. We chat for about 5 minutes. She seems keen on the research and says 'come here as much as you like'. She says there are no pole dancers on Thursdays now as they can't afford it and asks me 'Where are all the girls?'. We chat a bit about our lives and families and then she says 'well let's go and party'.

As I leave the office Tessa is waiting by the bar and we join in with the dancing. The manager grabs my arm when that song line 'oops up side your head' comes on to get me to join in. Her and other customers are sat on the floor in a line waving their arms about to the music. Tessa and I join in. It's fun but a bit surreal, it feels more like we are at a birthday party than in a bar! Tessa and I decide to leave soon after this (at about 11.15pm) as she has work early the next morning. I thank the manager and say I will email her to let her know when I'm next coming. She says 'great to meet you and waves'. We go back up the staircase and walk past the main bar to the exit, the music is still playing loudly upstairs and it has got a bit busier....'

*LoveLads first fieldwork visit Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> September 2010*

'I arrive outside the club where the LoveLads show is held just before 4.30pm, as I have agreed to meet Keith here to discuss the possibility of me doing research. The area outside the club is busy with tourists and passers-by but there is no-one around inside the club and doors locked. I call Keith's



mobile a few times but he doesn't answer. I feel a bit silly and hope he wasn't just humouring me on the phone when he said we could meet. I wait for around 15 minutes, alternating between ringing the doorbell and phoning him. Eventually he answers the phone, and says he's on the top floor and will be down in a bit to let me in.

Keith arrives at the front door, shakes my hand and we go inside. He asks how I'm doing and says 'so what's this research about then', I explain about the project. We inside the main area of the club which is a large dark room with a stage and two women are setting up chairs and putting labels on them. He introduces me to these women - a woman and a younger girl who looks about 16. He says to them that 'this is Katy she's doing her PhD on strippers' and they say 'ooh' and they giggle. I tell her that I'm doing research in other clubs too. Keith directs me upstairs to the balcony area and into the dressing room, a small, white-walled room, with two grim looking toilets and a clothes rail. Keith says 'we've got the girls sitting upstairs now so we've had to move to in here'. He asks about the research and I tell him it would involve me watching the show and talking to people, he says 'yeah that's fine, I tell you what, Mike is here you could go and chat with him now'. I say that would be great. During our conversation Keith is hanging costumes on the rail, I notice a sailor and an army costume.

We walk to where Mike is sitting (upstairs near bar) listening to his iPod. Keith says 'this is Katy she's doing her PhD in business', I say 'sociology', and he says 'ah yeah, so she wants to talk to you about why you love the show so much'. I start talking to Mike as Keith disappears back into the changing room. I tell him I have some general questions I can ask him and he

says we have loads of time before the show so I can do a full interview. I tell him his responses will be anonymous and he says 'oh good I can be really honest then' and laughs.

At end of the interview Mike says he's off to get a Burger King. I go back downstairs to find Keith who is setting up chairs still. I ask if I can help and he says 'No I wouldn't make you do that. How about you go grab a coffee and come back in about 15 minutes when the show starts and we'll pop a chair up the top for you there', and he points up to the balcony where the dressing room is. I ask if it's possible to sit downstairs and he says there's not enough room. As I turn to head outside as Keith suggested the young girl who was setting up chairs says 'try not to get too excited' and I laugh and say 'ok I'll see' and she says 'it's really not that exciting', I say 'see you in a bit' and go out of the main club room towards the exit. As I approach the door there are now 3 bouncers and a huge queue of women outside. I ask a bouncer if they will let me back in without queuing and he says that Keith has already mentioned that I will be coming so that's fine. I go outside and take in the view of the queue. There are what looks like around 60 women queuing in a long line, dressed in various fancy-dress paraphernalia and being very rowdy and noisy. Some of them have bottles of alchopops and a slurping from them as they laugh and joke with friends. I find a bench and sit taking in the atmosphere for 15 minutes before I return into the club. It is such a transformation from just over an hour earlier when there was no-one to be seen inside or immediately outside the venue.

I go back into the venue, moving past the queue and slip in as the bouncer recognises me. As I walk into the main club space women are flooding the

venue. The lights are on and the music is pumping, pop songs and RnB music seem to be the music of choice. The bar is crammed with women lining up to claim their 'free' cocktails and the bartender looks flustered. Women customers are taking their seats that have been carefully labelled by name by the two women I met earlier. Keith appears next to me with a microphone as I stand watching the happenings, and says 'Ladies the buffet is now open. Make your way to the VIP area for some top notch grub'. Keith asks if I can go and sit upstairs and points to where he has placed a solitary stool outside the dressing room so I make my way upstairs. Although I feel a bit odd sitting on a stool on my own, it is a good place to watch the activities below. The atmosphere feels like a party, women are filling their plates with cocktails sausages and crisps as they drink through the straws of their cocktails. I want to join in! I sit watching the women downstairs and after about 20 minutes the lights dim and the song changes to 'you can leave your hat on' from The Full Monty film about male strippers. The women in the crowd start to become excited, singing along and smiling. Some are standing up waving and clapping as a Drag Queen approaches the stage. The atmosphere is fun, exciting, and I am looking forward to the show now...'

These extracts give an insight into my first impressions of the research sites and hopefully help to convey what being in these venues felt like. Chapters four and five will elaborate in more detail the experiences of observing while watching the dancers performing onstage. I want to highlight some points of comparison in my two accounts, and think about the implications of my first observational impressions

of the venues in terms of the ease of ‘doing’ participant observation and what we can ‘know’ about the venues and participants from this method.

Firstly I consider the atmosphere in both the venues and how I was able to interact with customers. In the extracts above we see that although the music in Lippy is loud, there are very few people in the bar, which contributes to my impression of the venue as ‘quiet’. Yet the customers that are there are friendly, and Tessa and I are approached by a number of customers. In LoveLads, by contrast, the music is loud and ‘rowdy’, and I experience this as enjoyable, noting that I want to ‘join in’ rather than sit in my solitary position on the balcony on a bar stool, which limits my possibilities for interacting with customers. Lippy therefore immediately lends itself more to the feminist aims of my research, such as trying to break down boundaries between myself and participants and have more of a two-way conversation with respondents, as I was able to interact with them as a fellow customer. At Lippy then, due to me being able to interact more with customers *during* the stage shows, I was able to establish more rapport with women customers, which often involved me staying at this venue longer than at LoveLads, and also going on to other leisure venues after Lippy with groups of women in order to talk more about their experiences within Lippy; to gain more of an idea of the different leisure contexts that they visited; and also because I found the company of these women enjoyable.

In LoveLads, by contrast, while I was not prevented from speaking with customers, it was difficult to establish rapport with customers after the show had ended as I could not enjoy the noisy atmosphere of the show alongside them. As

Thurnell-Read's (2009:132) research on British male stag tourism documents, and also Montemurro and McClure's (2005:286) research on women's hen parties, the consumption of alcohol is central to the 'bonding' of participants during hen and stag parties. I was wary, as Thurnell-Read (2009:131) found, that 'the consumption of alcohol was a prerequisite of entry into the group', and that drinking might be necessary to build rapport. However, at Lippy women customers drank alcohol, but there was never a feeling that 'getting drunk' was a central 'aim' of their night out. Where respondents bought me an alcoholic drink I accepted it with thanks, but I never consumed more than two alcoholic drinks on any given research trip. I therefore never felt 'drunk', and do not feel it impeded my data collection process.

At LoveLads, however, alcohol consumption, and the desire to 'get drunk', was very evidently a central theme of the evening, as evidenced by women customers drinking vast quantities of alcohol and by the encouragement by management and the drag queen MC for the women to 'get wasted' and 'buy drinks' (as noted in multiple fieldnotes). Customers at the venue also received a 'free'<sup>10</sup> cocktail on entrance to the venue. I therefore assumed that as part of my participant observation at this venue that I would need to drink with women respondents. However, as the management required that I sit up on the balcony, away from where women customers were seated during the show, I did not drink any alcoholic drinks as it was not a necessary part of the observation. Both where I was seated, and perhaps not engaging in drinking and chatting with women *during* the show, did hinder the rapport I was able to create with women customers at LoveLads and in

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<sup>10</sup> Covered by the price they had paid for their ticket for the strip show.

turn the amount and quality of data collected about their own experiences, as discussed previously.

Yet my close rapport with participants at Lippy made documenting the research diary, and extending my fieldnotes difficult, as I would often not return home until 3am or 4am. It did, on the other hand, enable me to gain a more detailed insight into the leisure experiences of the women customers at Lippy, and in some cases meant they were more agreeable to being formally interviewed or answering research questionnaires. For instance, one respondent from Lippy, Debbie, did not wish to be interviewed when I first met her on a research trip in December 2009. However, by February 2010, when I had met her on five different evenings and had attended other leisure venues, she agreed to answer an email questionnaire and convinced another respondent who she was friends with to do so also, as she said 'I've realised that you're alright and that the research isn't fake'. This suggests that my extensive participant observation at Lippy, but also my extended interactions with respondents beyond this venue; enabled respondents to 'trust' me and the research project to a greater degree. As I returned from research trips to Lippy in the early hours, I often had to write in my research diary and extend my fieldnotes after I had been to sleep, as this meant I was more 'awake', but I did not feel that it significantly hindered my memory of events. Further, the longer research trips at this venue meant that I had more extensive fieldnotes and entries in my research diary than was possible to obtain from LoveLads.

I considered that in order to make the research a two-way process, I would assist dancers in their work wherever possible, when asked. So, for example, at

Lippy, dancer Violet wanted me to stand at the side of the stage during her stage shows and collect her clothing that she removed as part of her show, in order that she could quickly ‘grab’ it from me as she finished her routine and another dancer took to the stage. Further, in interviews with Violet, which were conducted in the dressing room of Lippy while Violet was getting ready to go onstage, she wanted me to assist her with her costuming while we talked. This involved various tasks, from helping her style her hair to taping on her nipple tassels. This assisted in building rapport and trust between the dancer and researcher, and enabled the research process to represent less of a power imbalance in which the researcher extracts data from a respondent, giving little in return for the respondent’s time and information.

Further, at Lippy, I also occasionally performed the role of a minor staff member even though I was not being paid for my time. For instance, I was once asked to carry a birthday cake to a group of customers, and occasionally to carry other items from one member of staff to another, such as cleaning cloths or bits of paper. This enabled me to help out participants who were kindly giving their time for the research, who appreciated the assistance during busy periods, but also to ‘blend in’ more with other staff. Due to my extensive participation at Lippy, this also means that the knowledge produced about dancers’ experiences is affected by the fact that dancer Violet and dancer WORLDMISTRESS became ‘key informants’. As I pointed out in the fieldnotes extract above, in Lippy there were photographs on the wall of a ‘semi-naked woman’. I later learned that this was WORLDMISTRESS. During my time observing Lippy, WORLDMISTRESS became very much the ‘face’ of the venue, as her images were displayed throughout the venue and she became a regular performer at the bar, not only for her dance routines but also hosting charity

auctions and events. Thus, I need to acknowledge that while WORLDMISTRESS became a key informant for this thesis, she was also a key part of the public display of the venue, and the knowledge produced about WORLDMISTRESS's experiences of performing in this venue may not be representative of other dancers there.

At the LoveLads club, as noted in the fieldnotes extract above, I was told to sit on a chair and remain there for the duration of the show. I therefore could not participate as fully in the social scene, either with dancers or customers. There was one occasion, however, when the manager, Greg, asked me whether I would perform a stage act from 'Grease', the film, playing the female lead character in a dance on stage, which he said would entail 'me lifting you up, spinning you round and throwing you through my legs'. I felt uncomfortable with this and did not want to perform onstage in front of 70 customers when I had no experience in acting or dancing and so I declined. This perhaps hindered my access somewhat, as dancers potentially may have felt that I was more involved or willing to help their show if I had participated. The manager did not talk to me as much after that episode, and declined a formal interview. Arguably, however, if the performance had 'gone wrong' in some way, I could have hindered my access further. This is potentially one of the disadvantages with using participant observation as a method, in that as the researcher is often seen by respondents as a participant, and if that participant does not 'fully' participate in some senses, it can limit the data they are able to obtain. Yet my role was not there to be a performer but an observer.

Arguably, however, my presence at the venues will have affected the behaviour of the participants. As I noted above, dancer Violet was able to utilise my



presence to collect her clothes from the side of the stage, a role that customers and staff members did not usually play for her. Further, at LoveLads, as I discuss in more detail in later chapters, the some of the dancers performed press ups, and arm crunches directly in front of me, and while holding on to the bar stool in which I was sat. These examples show the way in which performers ‘perform’ for the researcher and how my feminist attempts to build up rapport by helping and interacting with dancers does actually change the research setting somewhat and in turn, what can be ‘known’ about it.

I have also noted in the fieldnotes extracts from my first visits to the venues that I liked the atmosphere in both venues. I enjoyed the feelings in both venues of being able to enjoy oneself relatively uninhibited. Yet throughout my observational research I sometimes encountered participants whose beliefs and actions contrasted sharply with my own. Frank (2002a), who interviewed male strip club customers, and O’Connell Davidson (1994) who interviewed male clients of sex workers, said they had to endure participants’ sexist and racist derogatory statements about women. I too encountered remarks from a range of participants that I found offensive, either to women, or occasionally to myself. For example, on one occasion when I was stood outside Lippy I was harassed on the street by a group of men in a car who called me a ‘fucking dyke’. Further, at the LoveLads show, I found the manager Greg’s remarks onstage very derogatory and sexist. To quote a few examples, when Greg was hosting the show he once said ‘hands up all the slappers’. O’Connell Davidson similarly notes that whilst talking with a male respondent who discussed his use and abuse of young women in Thailand, despite being outraged by his behaviour, she felt ‘constrained to appear neutral and non-judgemental’, so she

would not affect the respondent's account and because she realised that he could be a useful means of securing access to later research she may wish to conduct (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994:216).

Emotionally, and as a feminist and a woman, not being able to openly condemn derogatory comments about women was something that I found greatly distressing, especially because my neutral stance could be interpreted by the respondent as sanctioning such behaviour. However, as O'Connell Davidson argues, 'if we insist that researchers are morally obliged to directly challenge the sexism and racism of their subjects during the research *process*', rather than in their published works, 'we will make it virtually impossible to undertake empirical research with such people' (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994:217). Therefore, following O'Connell Davidson's response to such incidences, I attempted to minimise the intrusiveness of my own opinions in interviews and interactions in order to uncover the feelings of the respondents, and I instead challenge their opinions in the main body of this thesis.

I initially also felt uncomfortable with the remark of the young woman in the extract from LoveLads, when she said 'try not to get too excited', as I felt to some extent that she was suspicious of my motivations for being at the venue. Carrying out participant observation entailed me visiting both clubs as a lone researcher, and there may be certain 'taboos' around women entering erotic dance clubs alone (Barton, 2006:3). Barton (2006:3-4) found that bouncers sometimes would not let her in to a strip club on her own as they believed her to be a 'prostitute', and some managers denied her admission to protect male customers from a 'wife coming in'. I do not

think this is what the young woman at LoveLads was implying, but nevertheless she seemed bemused that I was coming to the club unaccompanied. Further, on one occasion at LoveLads one of the door staff asked me ‘what are you doing here on your own?’, I replied that I was going to research the venue and interview dancers as part of my PhD research at Warwick University, to which he replied ‘Pah, research, yeah right! You just want a good look! Here’s a calendar so you can look at all the guys’. This staff member questioned the integrity of my research status, but also positioned me as a voyeur. Beusch (2007) experienced similar problems with respondents potentially mis-framing the research intentions of his online interviews conducted with gay men participating in Nazi Fetish websites. Beusch (2007:7.3) began to question whether ‘it was assumed that I was actually conducting research or was my claim to be a ‘researcher’ read as no more than a role in an online SM game...?’. Arguably though, although I felt uncomfortable being positioned as a voyeur by this staff member, it is the very job of the door staff to create an environment in which women can play the role of sexual voyeurs. In this sense, he was simply treating me in the same way as he would other customers at the venue.

Interestingly, this confusion and disbelief that I was at the LoveLads show to conduct research, rather than to ‘have a look’ at the male dancers, was echoed by dancers in the venue after I had been to the venue on three occasions. At the end of one stage show, I was about to leave my seat when dancer James (who I had not interviewed) came over and asked if he could ‘have a word’ with me in the dressing room. As I went into the room, five dancers were clustered in there and they all stopped to look at me, before James said ‘We were wondering why you don’t fancy us, are you a lesbian?’. I replied that I was there for research rather than to ‘gawp’, to

which they all laughed but still seemed confused. As I left the room I heard someone say ‘She’s definitely a lezza, how could you not act interested at all?’. This episode confirmed that I was not seen either as a participant at the venue, or indeed as a researcher.

These instances also lead to the question of my ‘gaze’ as a researcher who was observing in a sexual environment, as a sexual person, and what this means for the fieldwork. I want to think reflexively about my own position as a potential sexual gazer, in a feminist attempt to consider my own location vis-à-vis observing the dancing. Interestingly, my aesthetic presentation at the research sites may have been related to the way I negotiated my identity as a sexual person in these spaces. Although I wore similar outfits to both venues, these may have had different implications in terms of the way that I was seen as exercising a gaze or not. I wore jeans and a t-shirt in both venues, yet as I was doing the research I felt that in LoveLads this was more of an attempt in some senses to desexualise my bodily appearance, whereas in Lippy it was more to fit in with customers who were quite casually dressed. In LoveLads, as many of the women customers wore short dresses and high heels, perhaps my aesthetic presentation could have contributed to the male dancers assuming that I did not ‘fancy them’, and may also have been why staff members attempted quite overtly to position me as a voyeur, and question me about my sexual attraction or not to the male dancers, because my ‘gaze’ or intent to gaze, was not obvious to them. Further, the dancers at LoveLads were not able to experience me being a participant in the crowd and thus attempt to command my gaze.

WORLDmistress, however, in shows at Lippy, managed to position me as a potential sexually interested customer when she was on stage. WORLDmistress makes eye contact with customers, comes out into the crowd and touches customers and smiles at them, and she proceeded to do all these elements of her stage act with me also. In this sense, I was able to experience being a full audience member and a recipient of her performances, and experience what holding the attention of a dancer, and watching her performance in close proximity, feels like. I did find many of the dancers at both venues attractive, yet I would argue that it was WORLDmistress's performances that enabled me most to feel like I was exercising a 'gaze' of some kind. I was both uncomfortable with this and enjoyed it at the same time. I was uncomfortable precisely because of some of the reasons given by other women customers (who I quote in chapter five), which is because I felt as though I should not enjoy this 'looking' as it was not a subject position I was used to adopting. My experience with being positioned as a potential gazer by WORLDmistress, and by the fact that I could experience watching the women dancers at Lippy in closer proximity than the male dancers at LoveLads, will have affected the knowledge I can produce here. My observations, for example, of the women's dancing at Lippy and the careful ways in which they perform certain moves on the pole were possible to document because I could see them much more clearly than I could the dancers at LoveLads, and also because I was able to experience what being closer and making eye contact with dancers while they are performing felt like.

## *Interviews*

Researchers studying erotic dance have documented some of the successful formal interviews they have secured. For example, Egan et al. (2005) conducted 30 qualitative interviews with male customers in erotic dance venues, and Wesely (2003) primarily utilised in-depth interviews with erotic dancers. I also considered that interviewing participants in erotic dance spaces themselves about their activities and experiences within them, would be the key way to deduce their own 'meanings, motives and intentions' (O'Connell Davidson and Layder, 1994:31). Yet securing formal interviews was not always straightforward, even though I had access overall to study both venues. The only other study of women customers at a male strip show undertaken by Smith (2002), also documents the perils of attempting to solicit interviews in these venues. Smith (2002:84) notes that she was not permitted by the club management to approach customers during or after the show, and after handing out around 500 flyers to customers, she managed to only interview eleven women for around five minutes each.

I managed to undertake face-to-face interviews with three dancers at Lippy (two were interviewed twice), one deputy manager at Lippy, six customers at Lippy, and five dancers at LoveLads. Even these successful interviews were difficult to obtain in some instances. The interview with the deputy manager at Lippy was secured after five failed attempts to interview the main manager, and the interviews with the dancers at LoveLads were often conducted in areas of the club where loud music was playing which made talking, and recording the conversations, somewhat difficult. Interviews typically lasted between one to two hours, with the majority of

interviews lasting an hour, and the shortest interview being thirty-seven minutes with one of the male dancers, Vince, as he only danced at the show on one of my fieldwork trips and wanted to be interviewed immediately after the show had finished before he caught his train home.

I generated questions to ask in interviews that would assist in answering the key research questions of the thesis. I also was mindful of questions that ‘worked’ in the sense of allowing participants to speak quite freely, rather than give simple ‘yes/no’ answers, as I had previously interviewed women customers of a male strip show venue in an earlier study (Pilcher, 2011). The interview schedules for my interviews with customers, dancers and management can be seen in appendices D-H. These questions were more of a guide rather than any fixed interview schedule, and I asked questions in an order that flowed from what participants said in their answers to avoid a disjointed conversation. I started each interview, with a general question, as evident in question number one of each schedule. This was to let participants speak about what issues they wanted to draw attention to at the beginning of the interview, and to see how they defined their experiences themselves. I asked similar questions, where appropriate, to women customers in both venues, and to women and men dancers, so that their responses could be compared to some extent. With the interviews with dancers, I always ended interviews by asking what their ideal working situation or set-up would be like. This enabled dancers to speak about how elements of their workplace could be improved, and to draw upon experiences in their current and previous workplaces that they found useful or enjoyable. Three dancers (two women, one male), said that this was the most interesting question, with Naomi stating after she had answered the question that ‘That’s a thought,

perhaps I should tell them [the managers] about the problems with the pole and see if they'll sort it out?'. In some cases then, hopefully the interviews provided a reflexive and productive space for participants to consider their engagement with erotic dance.

I analysed interview transcripts together with entries from my research diary and fieldnotes throughout the data collection process, and data was coded as the research advanced. This process uncovered further points needing clarification and elaboration and enabled me to generate further questions for later interviews that were not explicitly asked in earlier interviews, particularly in the case of dancers, who were easier to contact for clarification as opposed to customers who often only attended the venues for a one-off occasion. I carried out second interviews with dancers Violet and WORLDMISTRESS and these were much more of a conversation, with a few questions that I had pre-generated to clarify points from their previous interview. WORLDMISTRESS's second interview took the form of a photo-elicitation interview, as I discuss below, and so questions focused around the photographs that we looked at together. Both this interview, and the second interview with Violet, were much more free-flowing and open-ended, and I felt that the knowledge produced from these was more fruitful as a greater level of rapport had been built up between myself and the dancers by the time of these second interviews and they seemed more relaxed speaking with me about their work.

As many of the interviews took place within the two leisure venues, where customers and staff were engaged in constant conversation, and where loud music was playing, I was initially worried about the quality of the Dictaphone recordings. In Lippy, this was not a problem as interviews with dancers were recorded in their



‘dressing room’ where it was relatively quiet, and the photo-elicitation interview with WORLDMISTRESS was held in her flat. In LoveLads however, all interviews were carried out when loud music was playing. Luckily the Dictaphone I used picked up all the sound from our interviews. As was evident in my fieldnotes, and from the interview transcripts at LoveLads, I felt frustrated by the level of noise as I could not hear what the dancers were saying in some instances (I am slightly hard of hearing). This resulted in me often repeating questions when I could not completely hear the interviewee’s response (although I could better make out their responses on the recording). To take one example, here is an extract from my interview with Mike in September 2010:

Katy: What would you say a typical night involves for you here?

Mike: Erm it’s just literally fun and games for 2 hours, I have a drink take my clothes off and get paid to cut the story short, I always leave with a smile on my face.

Katy: Sorry that song is so loud I couldn’t hear what you were saying fully, did you say you have a drink? Do you drink alcohol here?

Mike: Yeah, well, there’s one guy here, we’ve done the routines so many times that we’ll never really forget the routines it’s like muscle music, one of the guys part of his routine is that he goes on acting drunk and he come up to me the other day and says I’m gunna go on stage and act drunk but really I’m fucking smashed. And he walked off it was so funny he started getting really proper raunchy on stage which isn’t like him. Normally we have like a few drinks sort of thing before we go on stage. We don’t have to but we just choose to it just makes you relaxed and stuff, and occasionally you might

have a bad audience and it just makes it easier to get by cause you care less what they're gonna think, ah I don't give a shit.

As is evident in this extract, the loud music which resulted in my needing to clarify the respondent's answer, somewhat inadvertently, proved quite fruitful. In interview transcripts of the interviews with male dancers I often noticed that the dancer's second response to the same question was more direct, to the point, and seemed to articulate more strongly what they 'meant', or they elaborated in much greater detail the point that they were making.

Even when an interview has been secured, what can be 'known' depends very much upon the level of rapport that can be built between participant and researcher. As Jones (2002:137) notes, particularly with research that discusses intimate topics, or where participants may be discussing a subject that is considered a taboo or stigmatising, the challenge is for the researcher to provide a permissive context in which to discuss intimate relationships and experiences. Yet, attempting to provide this context is sometimes quite difficult. The power differentials between the researcher and researched are complex and multiple. I attempted to provide a context in which both dancers and customers felt able to talk without fear of judgement on the part of the researcher, or fear of how the information they gave would be used. I tried to make it clear that I wanted to find out more about their leisure and work experiences in the erotic dance venues, but that I was not there to say what was right or wrong about their activities. In order to make the interviews more of a two-way process, I answered participants' questions 'as fully as required' (Oakley, 1990:47),

and told them as much or as little about my personal life and previous experiences of research in erotic dance venues, as they wanted to hear.

Moreover, people's narratives and the stories they tell researchers about their lives 'do not pre-exist', but are 'created' in the particular interactional context (Jones, 2002:124). Narratives are produced with a particular audience in mind, and thus the stories told to me by my respondents 'might have taken a different form if someone else were the listener' (Riessman, 1993:11). My own social location will have affected what respondents will have said to me in interviews. For example, some women were distrustful of my motives, particularly in Lippy. This seemed to be because of the status of my own sexuality. When approaching women customers in Lippy for interviews some said to me 'so you're not a lesbian then?', or 'are you only here for the research, do you not like it here?'. In these instances, having not previously been an active member of the lesbian 'scene' that I wished to study, I was not 'recognised' by participants in an environment where many people knew each other. This not only left me feeling at times like somewhat of an 'outsider', but in some instances may have hindered the chances of people feeling comfortable in interviews. Similarly, as Matejskova (2007:140) states in her research on gay nightlife, I also was 'aware that some of my informants might have been more cautious with me than they would have been with a gay researcher'. I attempted to overcome these instances by being open and honest about my own sexual identity and about the intentions of the research. As a woman who has been in a relationship with a man for nearly four years I could be portrayed as 'straight'. However, I see my own identity as more fluid than that. I therefore informed potential respondents

that I was in a relationship with a man but that I did not define as 'straight'. Some respondents did then appear to be able to look past these issues.

### ***Visualising Erotic Dance***

My adoption of visual methods is compatible with my feminist epistemology. As Strangleman (2004:187) points out, one of the interesting elements of the photography of work 'is the way in which its subjects can be actively involved in the creation and analysis...of the visual'. Specifically with regards to erotic labour, utilising visual methods can assist in creating a more empowering research process for a community of workers who are often spoken *about*, rather than their own voices being communicated (see O'Neill, 2004; Sanders and Hardy, 2011). My visual methods had similar aims in that I wished to make erotic dancers' own voices heard through the visual. I sought to use the potential of the visual to create more of a two-way, collaborative research process.

However, this was more successful at Lippy than at the LoveLads venue. I was able to use still photography as a research method in the LoveLads venue and I took around 50 photographs there, but unfortunately I had to sit upstairs at the show quite far away from the stage, therefore many of the photographs that I took are of a limited quality. Further still, although male dancers were happy for me to take photographs of their dancing, just as they were happy for customers to, they did not see the 'point' of talking about the images of their work in photo-elicitation interviews. While I tried to employ feminist principles of collaboration between researcher and participant, this can be difficult if the participant does not wish to

‘collaborate’ in this way. Interestingly, the male dancers’ refusal to engage with visual methods was linked to their dismissal of their dancing as ‘work’ (as will be discussed in more detail in chapter six). All five male dancers that I interviewed said that they saw their dancing as a ‘hobby’ or a ‘bit of fun’, and felt that talking about their dancing using visual cues was ‘silly’ or ‘pointless’ as they did not see their dancing as in any way ‘meaningful’, and certainly not as a form of work.

At Lippy I was able to utilise visual methods extensively in fieldwork with one performer, *WORLDMISTRESS*. This use of the visual sought to bring ‘about a research collaboration between the investigator and the subject’ (Banks, 2001:89). *WORLDMISTRESS* and I discussed the images I had taken of her performances via photographs that I showed her on my laptop computer screen. Throughout research trips to this venue I took 122 photographs of *WORLDMISTRESS*’s performances on stage and of a charity auction that she held in the club of some of her modelling photographs. I would argue that this assisted my role as an ethnographer at the club. Taking photographs at Lippy enabled me to stand at the front of the audience during the dance shows, allowing me to view both the shows and the audience reactions, and dancers’ interactions with those stood closest to the stage.

In some cases, then, as Pink (2007:73) suggests, ‘playing a photographer role can put researchers in an ideal position to observe the culture or groups they are researching’. Researchers should be mindful, however, of when photography is not appropriate, or when it can actually present a barrier to research. Aside from excluding those participants who would not want their activities in the venue to be photographed, in Lippy, by ‘playing a photographer role’ I was immediately

positioned differently from the customers and dancers, as I was the only person permitted to take photographs in the venue aside from management. This may have distanced me somewhat from the very people with whom I was attempting to establish rapport. Further, as my discussion in this chapter has indicated, we cannot simply observe, or photograph, a culture or group and speak *about them*, but rather the meanings of people's activities are multiple and subject to change depending upon spatial context and on the way in which participants themselves define their experiences.

Being WORLDMISTRESS's photographer, however, did make me more useful to her in one sense, as WORLDMISTRESS was able to utilise the photographs I took on her website to promote her professional career. Therefore, not only could I use the images for research purposes but the participant could appropriate them 'for *their* own ends' (Pink, 2007:67). Another example of respondents being able to utilise photography in this research for their own ends was through the photographs they took of *me*. As Pink (2007:79) notes, 'being photographed by the people with whom one is researching is probably a common experience amongst ethnographers. Yet it is infrequently discussed'. Upon arriving to interview WORLDMISTRESS for the first time, before I had photographed her myself, I found that she had booked a professional photographer to take photographs of the interview (pictured below).



*Figure 1: Research interview*

As the above image shows, WORLDMISTRESS was keen to hold my Dictaphone, to make it clear when the image was taken that this was an interview context, and not just two people sitting chatting in a nightclub. WORLDMISTRESS wished to put me ‘in the frame’ so to speak, in order to visually document our interview which could then be published on her website to highlight that she had taken part in academic research and indicate that her performances were deemed meaningful in an academic, as well as a performance, context.

By becoming a *subject* in a photograph themselves, a researcher can, to some extent, ‘feel’ what respondents might feel when they are aware that photographs are being taken for research purposes. When the camera was aimed at me I felt more aware of my own role as an interviewer, how I carried myself and how I was

potentially being ‘read’ by WORLDMISTRESS and her photographer. The relatively artificial set up of the interview became more apparent when I was aware that it was being visually documented. For example, I became more conscious of how I was sitting, where I was looking, what my facial expression was potentially communicating. The fact that WORLDMISTRESS had positioned our seats on the club’s stage also made me aware even more of how much of a performance an interview situation is, in that both the respondent and the researcher are engaged in varying levels of ‘impression management’ (Goffman, 1959). As I argued earlier in this chapter, the interview is a performance of a particular identity, or workplace ‘self’ for the respondent being interviewed. However, being photographed as a researcher in an interview also drew particular attention to my own identity work and management of my ‘role’ as an interviewer that was taking place in the interview situation. Therefore, as Pink argues,

‘the ethnographer being put in the frame reminds us that as visual ethnographers we are not the only people who actively use photography to explore, construct and understand other people’s experiences and worlds. Indeed, we can learn much by attending to how other people use photography to insert us into their categories, projects and agendas’ (Pink, 2007:82).

This highlights not only how power is negotiated in the research process, as research participants are sometimes able to manage the research power relationship in order to suit their own agendas, but also how a particular performance is required by the researcher in the use of, and participation in, visual methods. Both of these examples illustrate how photographs taken *of* the researcher, can not only facilitate access to



study certain respondents, but can also enhance respondents' own career agendas through the researcher performing the role of visual subject.

I also conducted a 'photo elicitation' interview with WORLDMISTRESS. Photo-elicitation, loosely defined, entails inserting photographs into a research interview (Harper, 2002:13). We discussed the images I had taken of her performances via the photographs I showed her on my laptop computer screen. Arguably, interviewing utilising photographs to elicit responses from interviewees produces a unique interview encounter, and sometimes evokes responses that may not have been possible in conventional interview situations. As Harper argues, images may 'mine deeper shafts into a different part of human consciousness than do words-alone interviews' (Harper 2002: 22-23). WORLDMISTRESS did seem to delve further into her performing experiences and to recall elements of past performances that were not as evident in the conventional interview that I had previously conducted with her. Some of the photographs we discussed also prompted WORLDMISTRESS to 'seek out photographs to employ as part of the narratives that [she was] developing verbally' (Pink, 2007:88), that her partner, Geisha, had photographed. Looking at the images enabled us to 'try to figure out something together' (Harper, 2002:23).

Photography was therefore a vital method to use in Lippy, particularly for realising how 'meanings' of interactions, and what we can see in a photograph, are not self evident. People 'read' images in different ways, and so the meaning of a picture is never determined in advance. The photo-elicitation interview was therefore useful to compare the way I had 'read' the images I took of WORLDMISTRESS's

performances, and to elicit what ‘meanings’ she herself thought came out of the images of her performances. As Sanders et al. (2009:171) note, visual methodologies enable participants ‘to tell their stories in their own way’.

Moreover, photographs also have an element of ‘randomness’ in the sense that they often provide information the photographer, or indeed the person *in* the image, may not have intended (Pinney, 2005). For example, in the interview with WORLDMISTRESS, I had mistaken a dark mark on her finger in an image to be a thimble, as the costume she was wearing in this image was to depict a 1950s domestic housewife. However, WORLDMISTRESS herself said she does not have a thimble, and it took us a while to decipher what it might be. In the end she deduced that it might be a plaster or tape to cover a blemish or cut on her finger. So what I had ‘read’ to be a meaningful ‘prop’ as part of her performance, had in fact turned out to be something fairly insignificant to the performance. Still photography, along with more conventional ethnographic data, was also useful for answering one of the thesis’ key research questions in that it vividly conveys the complexity and skill of dancers’ diverse gendered and sexualised performances, not only in their stage acts but also in their other interactions with customers. Visual data can portray workers’ emotional and aesthetic labour (Hochschild 1983; Nickson et al., 2001) in exceptionally graphic terms, for instance the choice (or absence) of costume; a specific sexualised interaction with a customer; the skill of a particular dance move or facial expression, as is particularly evident in chapter six of this thesis.

### *Email Questionnaires and Internet Research*

Both venues market and promote themselves on the social network site Facebook. Not only do they use their Facebook webpage as a marketing tool, but relations between dancers and customers, and between customers which take place within the club space itself, are in some cases also extended 'online'. Tsang (1994:119) notes that online interaction has in some ways replaced socialising and meeting potential partners in gay leisure venues, arguing that 'electronic cruising has replaced bar hopping'.

At both Lippy and LoveLads, women customers placed importance on meeting people within the venues, but at Lippy, the Facebook page provided an extra opportunity to talk to fellow patrons, and at LoveLads, the Facebook page was seen by customers as a further means of interacting with dancers, and talking with other customers about the dancers. My empirical research has therefore extended outside both clubs' physical space in a way other ethnographies of erotic dance have not. Conducting research online is not an alternative to visiting the club spaces and talking with participants face-to-face, but in an age where customers and dancers engage in online interactions related to the clubs, it is an element that cannot be ignored in research on erotic dance venues.

Both Lippy and LoveLads had a website, so I took these, together with their Facebook pages, as sources to analyse. LoveLads also had a previous website that was constructed when the show was first set up by the previous manager, Carl, so I also analysed material from this site. As Bryman (2004:467) notes, '[w]ebsites and

webpages are potential sources of data in their own right'. It appeared that both clubs utilised and updated their Facebook pages more regularly than their websites, and this was the place where customers, and potential customers, publicly discussed their experiences of nights at the venue and used the space to ask questions and voice concerns. The websites, on the other hand, appeared to provide more factual information about each show, rather than being a place where customers could publicly interact with staff and other customers. Thus I regularly downloaded into a Microsoft Word document all the information on both venues' websites and their Facebook pages as they were updated (October 2009-January 2011 for Lippy, and April 2010-January 2011 for LoveLads), for later analysis. The Lippy website also provided useful information on the history of the club space which was analysed alongside interview data from the founder of the club, Mary.

On the Facebook pages of both venues, dancers, other staff, and customers (or potential customers) regularly interact. Akin to Sanders (2005b:71), who also used the internet as a source of information about sex work, I took on the role of 'lurker' in that I 'observed interactions on the message boards without revealing my presence or intentions' to those exchanging messages on the public discussions (except where I contacted customers for interviews as I discuss below). Again, as Sanders (2005b:71) did, I also 'decided against disclosing my identity as it could potentially alter the behaviour of the participants, fracture the strength of the shared community and probably provoke hostility'. I considered whether this was an ethically justifiable stance for a researcher to take. Certainly the internet 'is a public domain and those who post information realise that it is not private in the traditional sense of a personal conversation but accessible for anyone to read' (Sanders,

2005b:71). However, as Hine (2000:23) argues, ‘online interactions are significantly real for participants to feel they have been harmed or their privacy infringed by researchers’. In order to minimise the risk of ‘harm’ to my participants I never posed as a ‘customer’ or engaged in conversations on the Facebook pages, and web comments taken as quotations from participants have been fully anonymised so the participants online cannot be identified.

Monitoring the Facebook pages of both venues provided invaluable data which could not have been gleaned through participant observation in a venue or solicited through interviews or questionnaires alone. As mentioned earlier, participants in online forums may feel ‘freer’ to engage in conversations online, both with and about erotic dancers, or about the venue in general, than they would in face-to-face interactions. For example, Facebook provided a public platform for women customers to comment on images of dancers, sometimes in sexually graphic tones, in a way that customers may not have said to a dancer themselves face-to-face. This does not mean, however that we can conceive of cyberspace as ‘a space detached from any connections to “real life” and face-to-face interaction’ (Hine, 2000:64). On the contrary, as Hine (2000:64) argues, the internet ‘has rich and complex connections with the contexts in which it is used’. Interestingly, some of the most prolific participants who commented on images of dancers on the LoveLads Facebook page were also those who were observed attending the show more than once, and they then spoke about their experiences of the different times they had attended the show online. In taking both participant observation and online observation as tools for research, I demonstrate the nuances in customer’s online and offline engagements with other participants in erotic dance venues.

In addition to observation and conversations in the club spaces with customers, the internet also provided a useful space for contacting potential respondents. As the environment of both venues was noisy, and in LoveLads some customers were heavily consuming alcohol, it was necessary both practically in terms of data recording, and ethically, in terms of consent to giving information, to conduct some interviews outside of the venues, largely via email as this was what respondents said would be easiest for them. It was also necessary to utilise the technique of email interviewing where respondents felt uncomfortable discussing the practice of watching erotic dance face-to-face with a researcher, and because of the hindrances I encountered with accessing women customers because of my spatial location in LoveLads. Conducting face-to-face interviews also proved difficult due to the geographical spread of many participants who were visiting the clubs as a 'one-off' experience. Email interviews allowed access to non-regular customers, and provides what Bryman (2004:485) calls a geographically 'unrestricted compass' for conversing with respondents. The questionnaires sent to potential respondents on Facebook stemmed from a more systematic approach to sampling. The LoveLads and Lippy Facebook webpages contained a list of members, which acted as a sampling frame which I gradually worked my way down to contact potential respondents. I also 'purposively' sampled those women customers who appeared very 'active' commentators on the Facebook pages of the two venues – those who commented on photographs and posts that the venue's page moderator had posted, as these women would prove theoretically interesting for their very public declaration of admiration of the dancers in the case of LoveLads, and in their conception of the club as a 'women's space', in the case of Lippy. I was also able to 'snowball' sample

where women customers recommended others for email interviews, including regulars who were not at the club that night.

This method also enabled my feminist approach to research to be applied, as the research intentions could be very openly stated in the email, reassuring respondents that they could refuse to participate, and showing the research to be a ‘two-way’ process when respondents emailed me back with questions that I answered fully. The qualitative character of the questionnaires allowed participants to write more freely and at length about their experiences in both clubs, and it enabled me to email participants back to request further clarification of certain issues. Replying to an email questionnaire may also have given respondents more time to think about their responses and reflect upon their time at the venue, and many of the email participants gave long and detailed responses to the questions asked. People may be more willing to reflect on details about their lives and experiences in the relatively anonymous sphere of the internet than they would in face-to-face encounters with researchers. Where I sent potential participants Facebook messages with a questionnaire attached, participants could see my photograph, and I also accepted ‘friend requests’ from potential respondents who seemed to want to ‘check out’ my profile before they answered my questionnaire. This is perhaps more of an open exchange than email communication allows for, as with emails participants may have potentially ‘forgotten’ who I was when the email arrived in their inbox, or may have felt that the research felt too ‘formal’ than a Facebook communication. With my emphasis being not upon the volume of replies, but on the quality and engagement of the respondents with the questions they were being asked, by sending a ‘faceless’, impersonal questionnaire to participants I had sampled purely online it

may have precluded the level of rapport that was possible with some of the online participants. I felt that as participants on Facebook were being generous enough to answer my questions, the least I could do was enable them to 'see' who I was and ask me as many questions about the research as they so desired.

However, a key limitation to utilising email and Facebook questionnaires is the poor response rate (Mann and Stewart, 2000). I contacted 148 people from LoveLads, and 120 from Lippy using Facebook and email addresses that customers in the venues gave me in person, yet I received only 13 completed qualitative email questionnaires from customers at Lippy, and 14 from customers at LoveLads. Where I contacted women within the venues I gave them a choice of a variety of means of how I would contact them (telephone, meeting up, post), yet email correspondence proved the most preferred means of contact. I initially assumed that because the email questionnaires were prompted first by my meeting the potential respondents in person, discussing the project aims with them, and then emailing them the questionnaire, that I would receive a higher response from these customers than I would from the Facebook participants where I was effectively a stranger sending them a questionnaire in the hope that they would answer it, but this was not the case. I received more responses from the messages I sent to women on Facebook whom I had never met in 'real' life. The low response rate could be a product of the utilisation of the social networking site Facebook, which contributed to the 'complexity of establishing credibility as a researcher when contacting people online' (Sanders, 2005b:73). I had intended to include a link to my research profile in the messages I sent to respondents, as I had done in the emails sent to respondents. The problem was that Facebook blocked me sending more than five messages per



day to Facebook members with a link attached as it considered it to be 'spam'.

Without the link attached, I was able to send around fifteen messages a day before Facebook sent me a message threatening to 'disable my account'. I thus tried to describe my research and state my authenticity and affiliations as clearly as possible within the message, but I felt that had these respondents been able to click on my research profile it may have given the messages I sent a greater sense of legitimacy. As Sanders (2005b:73) found with her research requests posted on online forums, the feedback from some of the forum users was that her initial messages requesting participants did not go far enough to 'authenticate' her identity.

Moreover, the low response rate from respondents in both venues could have something to do with the fact that the questionnaire was about women watching erotic dance. I considered this as a possibility after being struck by Hermes' (1995) reflections on her research with women magazine readers. Hermes was looking for the meanings women gave to reading magazines, but actually found that women do not find them that meaningful; magazines for them were just something to flick through when doing menial tasks, or out of boredom to pass time, and they quickly forget what messages the media was trying to convey. So perhaps even a small number of the women I contacted for an interview or to complete a questionnaire for this study simply did not see the point of answering questions about something they just considered to be like any other 'night out'. For Lippy customers also, some customers may not have wanted to identify themselves as lesbian in a research project especially if they had not told family members and friends about their sexual identity, even though the project promised anonymity. These potential reasons are explored further in chapters four and five when considering the themes emerging

from the responses that I *did* receive from women, and thinking about what is potentially ‘absent’ in the data, or what is *not* said as a potential way in which women customers manage the ‘impression’ of their engagement with erotic dance (Goffman, 1959).

### **Data analysis**

As evident in this chapter, I attempted to take a reflexive approach to the research process, being ‘open’ about my ‘personal biases’ and recognising how my own social location is integral to the production, and also the analysis, of data. As Hammersley (2004:243) notes, researchers construct just one version of the situation, but multiple ‘explanations of the same phenomenon are always available’. Certainly my epistemological standpoint will have influenced the way that I interpreted the data. Throughout the analysis of the data I was sensitive to the interview material as a form of identity work, not simply a transparent window on the informants ‘actual’ experiences. I also paid attention to the extent to which wider dominant discourses surfaced in what informants said.

Arguably, narratives told to researchers by respondents are a performance as the respondent ‘performs’ a particular ‘self’ that they want the researcher to know about. Perhaps more acutely in research with people who ‘perform’ for a living, in this case erotic dancers, narratives about the performers’ life may have been rehearsed or told repeatedly to ‘justify’ or give a certain ‘spiel’ of what their work role involves. For example, male dancers were not keen to draw on popular sex worker rights discourses of sex work as work, as they did not wish to be defined as

‘sex workers’. Further, women dancers were keen to resist popular right-wing discourses that stigmatise erotic dancers as morally and physically ‘dirty’ by drawing on discourses of erotic dance as work, and to redefine their work role as that of a ‘professional performer’ rather than a ‘stripper’. This is *not* to argue that these accounts are not ‘truthful’ or that interviewees were deliberately trying to ‘deceive’ in their accounts, but to suggest that we have to look beyond the words spoken to also consider the function and role that people’s accounts of their work roles play in their construction of their particular working identities. For as Beusch (2007:3.4) states: ‘[t]hat the interview encounter can be a space for identity work need not imply that participants engage in the projection of intentionally false identities’.

In a ‘queer’ sense, I looked for potential moments of instability and disruption in the data, or moments where participants may act or speak against dominant (hetero)norms. For example, I have attempted to indicate the ways in which women participants contest powerful discourses of femininity in their interview narratives and also in my observations of their activities in the clubs. Some of WORLDMISTRESS’s performances, as discussed in chapters five and six, attempt to ‘trouble’ conventional constructions of femininity, as do some of her accounts of her performances. This also enabled me to see where participants construct counter-narratives to resist heteronormative gender ideals.

I used CAQDAS software; NVIVO, together with coding notes and interview transcriptions manually, as I found that using these techniques together proved to be the best means for capturing the nuances of the data. In addition to analysing those themes considered important in academic accounts of erotic dance, I have coded

some themes in terms of the categories used by the participants, so the coding assists in identifying respondents' own interpretations of events. I first engaged in 'open coding' through 'breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:61). Codes at this stage included 'performance', 'gendered power', 'sexual experiences' and 'work'. 'Axial coding' was later conducted, whereby data were 'put back together in new ways after open coding' so that connections between categories could be made (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:96). At this stage, a new code of 'self' was added, as both dancers and customers often spoke of their 'self'.

Coding through a computer can also enhance the transparency of data production as the computer can 'take note of all the main decisions made during analysis', and thus 'how concepts have been created, adapted or refined through the analytic process' can be overtly seen (Dey, 1993:60). Using NVIVO assisted with my thought process and theory generation with its ability to create 'memos'. Memos which draw 'connections between emerging concepts' represent 'the first step in the emergence of theory' (Bryman and Burgess, 1994:5). I used memos as a way of noting my thoughts concerning links between codes in the data, to 'map' my thought process, and to ensure that theories and ideas generated were firmly grounded in the data. Following Gregorio (2000:9), I utilised the node 'gold dust' to import the 'juicy' or most important quotes. Being able to keep important quotations in a separate list makes it easier to retrieve them later than more manual processes may allow, as the computer can quickly scan-through this node to find the particular quotation required. Further, using NVIVO allows the researcher to identify possible connections between codes *more* than in a manual process as the programme itself

‘invites the analyst to think about codes that are developed in terms of ‘trees’ of inter-related ideas’ (Bryman, 2004:420). Using NVIVO in combination with manual ways of coding enabled me to not ‘miss’ important themes and narratives, and enabled the data to be ‘thoroughly interrogated’ (Welsh, 2002:7).

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has shown how the research methods that I chose were not only vital for answering the research questions of the thesis, and for producing certain knowledges, but also for carrying out a fairer and more collaborative research process for participants. Becoming a participant observer, for example, was an invaluable means through which I could actually feel and experience what it is to be a customer in an erotic dance space. Further, I was able to observe dancers’ work experiences and customers’ activities and look for potential disruptions of heteronormative gender and sexual norms, which could then be compared with how participants defined their experiences and feelings themselves through interviews and email questionnaires. The visual data not only enabled a greater means of conveying to the reader what these leisure venues, and erotic dance performances within them, look like, but also enabled the researcher to analyse costuming and dance routines to a greater extent than taking notes in the field can enable. The photo-elicitation interview with *WORLD MISTRESS* enabled a greater depth of her own interpretation of her dance performance to be given, and also for me to question some of the more mundane, day-to-day elements about work practices that were evident in the photographs that may not have seemed ‘important’ to consider in a conventional interview.

I have demonstrated the ways in which I applied, or attempted to apply, feminist and queer precepts to the research process through my choice and application of different research methods. In utilising both feminist and queer approaches I gave weight to the ‘politics of knowledge production’ (Browne and Nash, 2010:20). I have highlighted how my own ‘emotions and involvement’ and experiences of doing the fieldwork (Stanley and Wise, 1983:160), and my social location, will have impacted upon the knowledge I have been able to produce, and how participants’ accounts are temporally and contextually specific. Further, taking a queer approach to viewing identity as not fixed, but fluid and subject to change, has enabled me to document the ‘permanent instability’ of both my own role in the research process and how participants’ identities and experiences changed throughout the research process. In the following three chapters, I attempt to highlight the way in which participants construct and re-construct their subjectivities and their differing experiences in erotic dance spaces. In the next chapter we see how women customers experience the male strip show at LoveLads, through the use of observational, interview, email interview, and visual data.

## **Chapter Four**

### **Transgression or regression? Heterosexual women's experiences at LoveLads**

This chapter seeks to analyse what, if anything, is potentially 'radical' or 'subversive' about the LoveLads show. The chapter firstly looks at the history and context of the LoveLads show, before moving on to consider two main issues: women's interactions with each other in the audience and the forging of female friendships, particularly through their alcohol consumption practices, and, secondly, women's relations with the dancers, specifically their sexual interactions. By looking at women customers, together with some of the male dancers' responses, the chapter seeks to highlight some of the key ways in which the show subverts heteronormative roles for women, through discussing women's alcohol consumption, and their viewing of semi-nude, and occasionally nude, male bodies. Drawing on ideas about the 'gaze', and on constructions of bodies as normative, the chapter argues that women's attendance at, and activities within the venue do challenge ideas about 'feminine' behaviour in some key respects, yet ultimately, male heterosexual privilege remains intact. Further, the chapter seeks to interrogate potentially new, 'post-feminist' subjectivities that women customers may be adopting (McRobbie, 2004; Gill, 2009), highlighting that women's performance of heterosexual femininity within this leisure venue is intimately linked to ideas about the requirement of young women to be seen to exercise an 'active' sexual desire

## **LoveLads: History and current context**

It is estimated that there are around 300 'strip clubs' in the UK (Adult Entertainment Working Party (2006) cited in Hubbard et al. (2008:370)), where women dance nude, or semi-nude for a male audience. Yet there are only two main companies providing male dancers for women customers in the UK, LoveLads and MuscleMen. LoveLads holds one show per week within four different nightclubs across the UK. The LoveLads company rents the nightclub spaces every Saturday night so that the strip shows can be held there. Unlike other 'sex-related businesses', which are often located in 'liminal urban spaces' or 'danger zones' associated with commercial sex (Hubbard et al., 2008:368), the club in which the LoveLads show is situated is clearly visible as a night-time leisure venue, positioned close to public transport links in the heart of a UK city. It is not immediately obvious that a strip show is taking place within the venue. The only visual 'clue' is the queue of women outside dressed in fancy dress paraphernalia, most often resembling the 'hen party' fancy-dress tradition of wearing mainly pink feather boas, hats, veils and sashes.

Unlike many venues where women strip for money, male strippers dance within socially normative environments. As Tewksbury (1993:174) argues, male stripteases are seen as 'shows' to which you could 'take your grandmother'. This does little to challenge the image of female stripping or overt expressions of female sexuality as 'dirty' or 'sleazy', whilst reinforcing male sexual expression as 'something better, something more socially normative' (Tewksbury, 1993:174). Furthermore, as Liepe-Levinson (2002:51) argues, 'strip events for women are usually subset within places that feature other kinds of entertainment, not specifically



dedicated to the sexual amusement of females'. This was the case at LoveLads, with the show staged within a venue that is otherwise used as a nightclub. It is therefore interesting to consider the sexual possibilities available for women customers in a venue that ordinarily is set-up for purposes other than the sexual entertainment of women customers.

Founded in 1987 by a male entrepreneur, LoveLads began as a series of modelling auditions, and only later became a male strip show. The founder, Carl, sought to set up a modelling agency for male models, yet he claims the auditions proved to be 'so popular with local women passing by' who came to watch the men auditioning on stage that he decided to start a stage show. Claiming to be 'the man who gave women eye-candy', or 'the power behind the pouch' (LoveLads former website, 2011), Carl developed a 'girls' night out' which involved groups of men performing onstage at a variety of night-time leisure venues for women audiences, firstly in the UK, and within a few years, internationally. This early manifestation of the show marketed itself towards providing erotic titillation and pleasure for women. Some of the LoveLads marketing paraphernalia from the late 1980s stated that the show is kept 'to the highest standard, and engaging the best looking boys with firm, toned and defined physiques' (LoveLads former website, 2011). Further, it was claimed that 'Every time [LoveLads] appear, thousands of screaming women drool, taking deep breaths, as [LoveLads] strip off fantasy costumes revealing their buff muscular physiques' (LoveLads former website, 2011).

Nowadays the show has grown, with the strip troupe performing set shows in four nightclubs across the UK every Saturday night, along with international tours

every few years. The strip show is currently managed by Greg and Keith, who have been managing it for around eleven years and seven years respectively. At the LoveLads show the doors open at around 6.30pm, with women entering the club largely with groups of friends, helping themselves to food from the 'buffet' and getting their 'free' cocktail from the bar, purchasing more drinks before the show starts, and then taking their allocated seats in front of the stage on the ground floor before the stage show begins at 8pm (see Appendix B for a floor plan). A drag queen is employed to host the show and to create an 'exciting' atmosphere, and on nights where a drag queen was not available one of the managers, Greg or Keith, would host the show. The male dancers are on stage for around two and a half hours, with regular breaks in-between their stage routines. Dancers get changed into their costumes in a small dressing room located on an upper balcony away from the audience (see Appendix B).

### **'Down it in one': Alcohol drinking rituals and the 'girls' night out'**

One of the key ways in which the LoveLads venue potentially challenges traditional heteronormative prescriptions of women as passive is through the women customers' visible consumption of large amounts of alcoholic drinks and their brash and bold demeanour within a public leisure space. Some of the women customers' behaviour in LoveLads might be characterised in the contemporary media as the behaviour of 'ladettes'. The term 'ladette', as Jackson (2006:345) notes, is often used in the media 'to refer to girls that are a bit "laddish" in terms of being a bit loud, maybe a bit boisterous, a bit jokey, they go out drinking and things like that'. However, their behaviour is not considered 'masculine', or to be completely 'like

men's', as 'ladettes' 'are very much (hetero)sexualized', and generally style their appearance and clothes so as to appear sexually attractive to men (Jackson, 2006:345). Women customers' heavy alcohol consumption, or 'binge drinking' as it is often called in the UK, and women behaving like 'ladettes' in LoveLads, potentially contravenes conventional notions of femininity which situate women as passive, and instead equates their behaviour more with men's traditional public drinking practices.

Yet quite how far this behaviour is transgressive for women is questionable. As Gill's (2003) work highlights, heteronormative prescriptions for femininity are subject to change over time. In this sense, being loud, drunk and sexually aggressive, may be the new 'norm' for contemporary femininity. As Gill (2003:103) argues, the 'new femininities', or new ways of being a 'girl' or young woman in contemporary Britain centre around ideas about women as sexually autonomous and confident, when in fact women may actually be self-objectifying themselves rather than gaining any 'real' power or autonomy. Moreover, women engaging in similar behaviour to men's traditional activities in public spaces (drinking, watching erotic dancers etc.) may not directly signal changes in the way that women are perceived, for as Young (1980) argues, women cannot act like men as it will be read differently because women's bodies carry different (gendered) meanings. Further, as Hubbard (2011:7) notes, there exists a contemporary 'double standard' in 'the gendering of alcohol consumption' in that 'women face more opprobrium than men when they drink, despite appearing less likely to perpetuate violence or nuisance'. Such opprobrium stems largely from the media, who still seek 'to position women outside of drinking culture, a blatant attempt to reclaim drinking spaces as male via a 'backlash'

discourse' (Hubbard, 2011:7). This suggests that when thinking about women's behaviour in LoveLads, quite how far their behaviour as loud, drunk, and 'sexually aggressive' can be seen as 'transgressive' needs to be questioned, as the women may in fact be reproducing newer prescriptions for normative femininity.

Many of the women customers at LoveLads drank alcohol as part of 'hen party' drinking rituals. The 'hen party' event can be traced back to the late 1960s in the UK, yet its current form; as 'an almost essential and much hyped pre-wedding ritual' (Eldridge, 2009), came to the fore in the 1990s in the UK. The celebration of specific occasions such as 'bachelorette parties' in North America<sup>11</sup> (known as 'hen' parties in the UK), or birthday celebrations, now represent a unique, culturally 'sanctioned opportunity for women to be drunk and to act drunk in public' (Montemurro and McClure, 2005:280). The majority of women customers at LoveLads were attending the show as part of 'hen party' groups, as evident from the sashes worn across their body stating phrases such as 'bride to be'; 'mother of the bride'; 'maid of honour'; and I also observed one group with the phrase 'boozy bridesmaid' written across three of the women's sashes. Eighty percent of the women customers who responded to email questionnaires said that they had travelled from their hometowns to this show specifically for a hen party. Not all the customers at LoveLads were part of a 'hen party' group. On a typical night at the show there were only around three parties that were celebrating a different occasion such as a birthday, and even more of a rarity were women who had not come to see for any particular celebratory occasion. From my observations at the show I estimate that of the average 95 customers on any given night at least one party were not visibly part

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<sup>11</sup> A 'bachelorette' party is where a bride and her female friends celebrate the bride's 'last night of freedom' before her wedding ceremony held most commonly to a man (otherwise known as a 'hen' party in the UK).

of a hen party or other such celebration, and two of my respondents stated that they visited the show 'for our own fun' (Bella), rather than to celebrate a specific event. These groups of women that were not visibly part of a hen party were of a smaller party size than most of the groups of women observed. Two of these groups had five women in them and the rest had four women. Of the hen party groups that were observed, the average group number size was eight women customers.

Alcohol consumption is certainly a large part of the evening for women customers at LoveLads. Upon entry to the show, customers receive a 'free cocktail' as part of their ticket price (which can range from £35-£45 depending on the number of people in the group), with customers who have purchased 'VIP' tickets priced at £45 receiving a 'free glass of Champagne'. Customers are from this moment encouraged to purchase alcoholic drinks from the bar in set 'drink and toilet breaks' throughout the evening as stipulated by the club's host. Women were also observed purchasing large quantities of alcoholic drinks, particularly 'pitchers' of cocktails and bottles of wine, and I heard women encouraging their friends to drink by shouting phrases such as 'down it' and '21' ('21' and 'down it' are colloquial terms meaning to consume an alcoholic drink in one mouthful).

Similarly, as Montemurro and McClure (2005:279) point out of their hen party respondents in North America, women customers at LoveLads also 'relied on alcohol to lower inhibitions so that they were able to feel justified in engaging in deviant behavior'. Alcohol was utilised by Montemurro and McClure's respondents to decrease their worries about being 'too sexual' in public, or of 'being perceived as promiscuous', and to enable them to engage in behaviour that they would not

normally partake in 'when sober' (Montemurro and McClure, 2005:284). This latter point was certainly echoed by one of my respondents, Vanessa, who commented that 'I wouldn't normally watch strippers but I'll do anything when I'm drunk'. This explanation for her behaviour enables Vanessa to retain her status as a 'good girl', as Montemurro and McClure (2005:284) term it, because she justifies her engagement in a sexualised activity in public as an effect of her alcohol consumption, as something she would not 'normally' do otherwise. Similarly, on one visit to LoveLads I observed a woman customer dancing on the stage when the dancers were backstage. A male bouncer told the woman to 'get down', and the woman proceeded to pull up her skirt, pull her underwear aside and expose herself to the bouncer. The woman's friend then shouted to the bouncer: 'she's only mucking about, she's wasted'. This episode highlights an overt and sexualised display of the female body to counteract the bouncers' power. Such an act could be interpreted as a direct challenge to ideas about women's 'feminine', passive respectability, yet using alcohol consumption and being drunk or 'wasted' as an excuse suggests that this is behaviour that is temporally and spatially specific.

There was some evidence in LoveLads of alcohol consumption assisting in challenging heteronormative femininity in a different way, in the sense that women in hen parties and other groups of women engaged in 'female bonding' (Eldridge and Roberts, 2008:323). As Montemurro and McClure (2005:286) argue, alcohol consumption can make 'it easier for women to bond and feel comfortable hanging out with people whom they did not really know', both within the hen party of which they are a part, and with other women at the show. Five women respondents at LoveLads characterised their attendance at the show as a 'girls night out' and said

that it was an opportunity to forge new friendships with women and cement existing ones. One respondent, Olivia, said ‘I go with the intention of having a good night with my female friends but you do end up making new female friends as everyone ends up chatting to each other’. The space at LoveLads is different from spaces which are traditionally male-dominated and enables women to act in a manner that counteracts normative prescriptions for femininity as well as meeting women who they may not meet in other leisure spaces. As Vanessa, a customer at LoveLads explains in her email interview:

‘It’s weird really, when I go out normally in town I never talk with other girls, there’s sort of a rule, you just stick with the boys and girls that you’ve gone out with. Or you chat to lads but that’s cause you wanna pull them. But in here I can talk to any girl cause everyone’s really friendly and that just feels normal here’ (Vanessa, Email interview, December 2010).

Many of my fieldnotes also document women appearing to talk, laugh and joke with women who were not obviously in the ‘group’ they had arrived with. On a number of occasions when I was washing my hands in the bathroom at the venue I was approached by women who struck up conversation about the dancers or other aspects of the show. Women appeared to congregate in the bathroom and talk about the show with their friends and other women they had met that night. This suggests that within the club, perhaps fuelled by the atmosphere that alcohol helps to create in ‘loosening up’ the customers (Montemurro and McClure, 2005:284), women can engage in interactions with other women that they may not ordinarily meet. This sense of belonging to and interacting with a group of women that women would not

ordinarily encounter is similar to Stacey's (1994:100) observation about when women first started to attend the cinema, as Stacey suggests that '[t]he feeling of a shared group identity was a central component of the 'atmosphere' referred to repeatedly in descriptions of the appeal of the cinema'. I also observed women meeting new people on the LoveLads 'fan page' online who had commented on photos of dancers, and then engaged in more extensive conversations with each other, in some instances arranging to meet other women at the club. Some messages also requested that other women they had met in the club space get in contact with them so they could arrange 'nights out together'. This suggests that this venue, in part due to alcohol consumption, but also because of the 'girls' night out' atmosphere, presented a rather unique opportunity for some women customers to forge new friendships within the club space and this extended into online interactions also.

### **Manufacturing women's friendships and 'sexual aggression': The construction of the show by a host**

This idea of female friendships and the 'girls' night out', as well as being experienced positively by the women customers, was also a necessary ingredient for the atmosphere of the strip shows. The success of the show relies very much upon women acting sexually 'aggressively' and contradicting notions of essential womanly modesty, together with women feeling as though they are part of a collective where they can express themselves 'as women'. All five dancers spoke of how audience participation, namely women screaming, and shouting, was a key



ingredient for the success of the show as it affected the atmosphere in the venue.

Dancer Mike explains:

‘It’s so much easier to perform in front of a crowd that are up for it than a crowd that are just sat there like ‘oh shit’, you know a bit nervous and things like that...the louder they are the better really, it just makes you feel better...and if they’re quiet it’s so awkward and you feel bad, it’s like you take your shirt off, and you’re like, they didn’t like that that much, I need to put some clothes back on, someone throw me a jacket!’ (Mike, interview, September 2010).

Rather than women exercising independent sexual autonomy or power, women’s loud and extrovert behaviour is positively *encouraged* by the dancers and the club’s host in order to make the atmosphere easier for the male dancers to perform. This confirms Smith’s observation of a Chippendales male strip show in the UK as she notes that ‘in many ways the show is *enacted by* the audience’<sup>12</sup>, as ‘the singing, the dancing and chanting produce the momentum’ (Smith, 2002:82). The women’s extrovert behaviour produces the momentum for the atmosphere to appear fun, lively, and to enable to male dancers to feel comfortable performing.

The encouragement of the women to behave in this manner also has another function: to enable the women to ‘feel’ as if they are in an environment in which it is ‘ok’ or ‘safe’ for them to behave in ways that might seem unusual for their gender. In order to solicit such behaviour from women customers the show at LoveLads is

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<sup>12</sup> Italics, my emphasis.

hosted by either a drag queen, Delilah, or the club's manager, Greg. The hosting of male strip shows by a drag queen is common in the UK (Pilcher, 2011). The approaches of the drag queen and the manager are slightly different, with the drag queen acting as 'one of the girls', and Greg emphasising his masculinity, although both use crude language as part of their gendered performance. Through Delilah's performance an atmosphere of 'all girls together' is created. As a figure who represents an outward appearance of exaggerated femininity, by dressing in a sparkly dress and high-heeled shoes, and through their general banter throughout the night, Delilah was the central figure actively encouraging the screaming and brash behaviour from the women customers.

Delilah sings songs with the audience, uses crude humour, and talks to the audience, all of which contributes to the idea that this is a 'girls' night out' that enables women to watch erotic entertainment. For example, Delilah used phrases such as 'Do my tits look big in this?' to make context-appropriate the use of sexualised language about body parts. This is further evident through her songs which she encourages the audience to sing along to. On one occasion, Delilah sang the phrase 'I don't wanna clean no dirty socks, I wanna see some great big cocks [pause] going down my throat', and asked the audience to repeat it. This phrase signals both women's rejection of domesticity through their refusal to clean men's 'dirty socks', and encourages women to forget their domestic duties and men's shortcomings and instead to focus on the risqué sexual acts and pleasures of the show. Delilah then chants 'Men can't cook, they can't clean but we love them when they're mean'. This stereotyping of male traits is similar to a discourse that Storr (2003) identifies at contemporary Ann Summers parties in the UK; that 'men are

useless – but we love them anyway’ (Storr, 2003:32). For Storr, this discourse acknowledges men’s shortcomings but does little to challenge ‘either the shortcomings themselves or, more importantly, the social structures within which they occur’, suggesting in effect ‘that sexual inequality is an inevitable element in heterosexual relationships’ through which women’s unequal domestic role is merely the ‘natural order’ of things (Storr, 2003:32).

There are rarely drag queens or any hosting figures at strip shows for male audiences which could indicate differences in the ways these venues construct the desires and behaviour of customers, and also the gender and sexual identities that can be played out in these different contexts. The drag queen encourages women to respond to club events as ‘a unified community’ (Liepe- Levinson, 2002:69), leaving women little room to act independently or experience sexual acts as private or counter-normative. It could be that clubs for men assume that the men already know how to respond to the show unaided, without their behaviour needing to be mediated by a host.

Interestingly at the other venue I studied, Lippy, where women were the customers of women dancers, no-one hosted the dancing. Women dancers seemed to feel that this hindered their work, as they felt women customers did not know how to act, and that they needed a host to direct their responses to the shows.

WORLD MISTRESS for example, says that having someone to host erotic dance shows and introduce the performers enables the host to ‘rile the audience up a bit’. In this sense, there seems to be an assumption from the dancers in both LoveLads and Lippy that the women audiences’ interactions need to be directly shaped by a host,

which in turn reproduces the somewhat problematic assumption that women's sexuality is passive, and needs to be excited, and supervised, or that women do not know how to express sexuality in a public, or non-romantic way.

The hosts at the LoveLads show reproduce gender, sexuality, class and 'race' stereotypes, suggesting that heteronormativity, and other traditional social stereotypes, remain intact rather than challenged. To cite a few examples, on one occasion when Greg hosted the show he started with a 'warm-up game', telling the audience that 'I'm gunna do to you what I first do to a girl when I meet them – split them in half'. He then named one side of the audience 'bitches' and the other side 'hoes' and told them to 'scream' in competition with the other side, saying that 'you're gunna have to go one step further if you wanna win – get yer tits out'. These offensive remarks towards women are reminiscent of what Whelehan (2000:84) has equated with the sexist irony evident in 'lads mags' and a post-feminist notion of these types of phrases being merely a 'joke' that 'old' feminism just does not understand because it 'had no sense of humour'. As Whelehan (2000:67) cautions, irony is a powerful tool due to its 'linguistic ambiguity', as 'you can be seen to project a particular point of view only to claim distance from, or even opposition to it' at a later stage. At LoveLads the audience are encouraged to 'laugh along' with this offensive language, without it being challenged at any stage, highlighting what McRobbie (2004) calls the 'double entanglement' of anti-feminist and feminist ideas in ways of performing 'new' post-feminist identities. Further, Delilah utilises humour that directly draws upon classist and racist stereotypes to elicit laughter from the audience. Two particularly problematic examples were on one night where Delilah told the audience that 'you're gunna see some big black cock tonight', and

when she mocked a woman's attire by claiming 'it looks like you've got that down Primark love'. Although said in jest, these remarks do little but reinforce problematic classed and racialised stereotypes of black masculinity as hyper-sexualised and class as linked to subtle aesthetic taste.

### **Naked male bodies as 'sex objects'?**

A further way in which heteronormative gender roles are cemented, rather than challenged in the venue, is through women's interactions with dancers, and the performances that male dancers give. Heteronormative masculine roles are cemented in the club, *even though* men are seemingly positioned as sexual objects. Through their costumes, routines, and bodily aesthetic, male dancers are constructed to embody, or at best perform, heteronormative prescriptions of masculinity. As the image below depicts, male dancers are presented as brave, muscular, and strong in performing a potentially dangerous routine with fire on stage:



*Figure 2: Male dancers perform with fire*

As Tewksbury (1993:174) argues, while a ‘female strip show script would be expected to play almost exclusively on exaggerated stereotypes of vulnerability’, in contrast as we can see in the image above, the male strip show script ‘instead focuses on images of potential dominance’ in order to confirm the dancer’s masculinity. In this sense, traditional gender binary roles are reinforced, and further, through maintaining a gendered performance male dancers are elevated to a position of potential dominance. Tewksbury’s (1993:173) argument suggests that conventionally when women are positioned as sex objects they are ‘presented as passive, disempowered objects to be controlled by the consumer’, yet this is certainly not the case when men take on the ‘sex object’ role in LoveLads where their performances demonstrate male expertise and control. The male dancers wear costumes that relate to traditional male occupations, such as firemen, policemen, sailors, and builders. For example, in the image below, although the male dancers are semi-nude, through their costuming as army soldiers, their bodily movements which involve ‘punching the air’ and ‘stomping about the stage’ (as I noted in my fieldnotes), and through their muscular appearance, male dancers are positioned as strong and controlled, rather than their semi-nudity implying any vulnerability or passivity.



*Figure 3: Male dancers wear army costumes on stage*

As Dyer (2002:263) argues, the white male body can only be a legitimate site of spectacle and erotic display if it is a ‘built body’. A body’s nudity implies its vulnerability, in both a physical and social sense. Male nakedness ‘may also reveal the inadequacies of the body by comparison with social ideals. It may betray the relative similarity between male and female, white and non-white bodies’ (Dyer, 2002:263). Thus, the male ‘built body’, with its ‘hard and contoured’ appearance, literally acts as a form of ‘armour’ to maintain the man’s image as invulnerable (Dyer, 2002:265). Furthermore, the male stripper’s masculinity is further confirmed through the fact that the built body is achieved as a ‘body project’ (Gill et al., 2005); as a body that has been worked upon through effort and discipline, a body that has been achieved rather than being naturally given.

Part of this work on the body for white male dancers also involves not only being ‘built’, but being ‘tanned’. I discuss further male dancers’ aesthetic work on their bodies in chapter six, but to take one example here, dancer Mike told me that

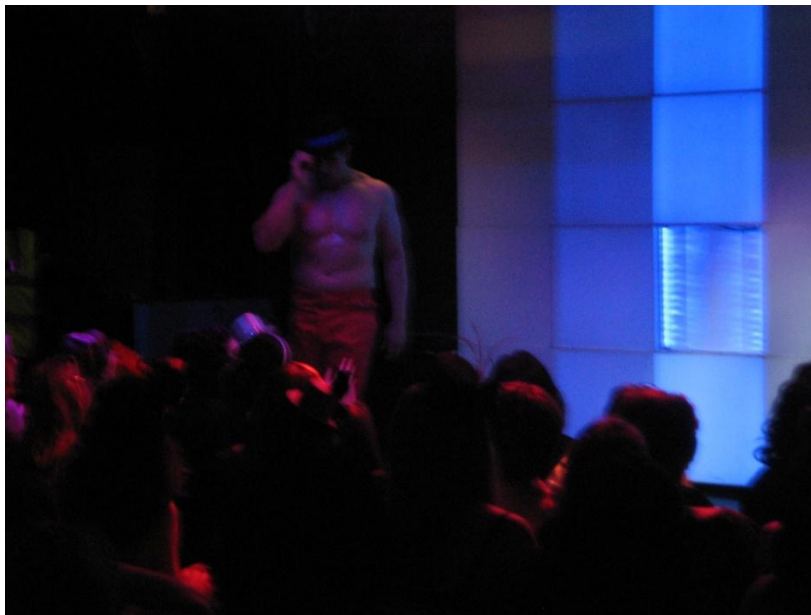
‘we need to look bronzed, it just makes us look better and less like a scrawny white guy’. His statement confirms Dyer’s (2002:269) discussion of the ‘hero’ body in films, in which the hero’s built body reifies him to a superior status, but his ‘tanned’ skin colour ‘implies that white people are capable of attractive variation in colour, whereas blacks who lighten and otherwise whiten their appearance are mocked for the endeavour and are generally held to have failed’. In this sense, through the ability to work on the body and build muscles and alter skin colour, the tanned white male built body ‘affirms whiteness as a particular yet not a restricted identity’ (Dyer, 2002:269).

The white male stripping body is further cast as a heteromasculine subject in LoveLads through the demonstration of his virility through the show’s display of erect penises. Apart from one visit to the show, on every other occasion at least one male dancer would display his erect penis to the female audience, often hiding it under a cloth and then quite aggressively ‘flicking’ it in audience members’ faces. Further, during their interviews, dancers who performed fully nude on stage told me that they did not need to utilise ‘techniques’ such as using ‘rubber cock rings’, or ‘pills’ to maintain an erection for their performance in the show. This arguably indicates not only an onstage demonstration of masculinity, but also in an interview situation, how male dancers saw a direct link between the accomplishment of masculinity and sexual performance, as any perceived impotence could be conceived as a loss or lack of ‘manhood’. The penis is not displayed to the audience or discussed in interviews with dancers as a source of sexual pleasure, but as a sense of masculine *achievement*, reflecting what Bordo (1999:43) has termed the ‘phallic



majesty’, in a kind of celebration or worship of the ‘magical’ accomplishment of a penis, and a built body.

Despite their attempts at performing and creating a heteromasculine embodiment however, some women customers felt that at times dancers had in fact failed to achieve such an embodiment. Through their questioning of the male bodies of the dancers, women customers do challenge heteromasculine power, by highlighting the ‘problems’ they foresaw in dancers’ attempts to construct a heteromasculine body. For example, the image below depicts a dancer who women customers perceived as not representing a body that was the ‘right’ or ‘attractive’ embodiment that they desired to see:



*Figure 4: Male dancer on stage being ridiculed by audience*

I heard numerous women shouting rude remarks at this dancer while he was onstage, such as screaming ‘you’re fat’, ‘yuck’, and one woman commented to me

after the show that ‘he was all flabby, so much cellulite, what a waste of money!’.

This does potentially subvert heteronormativity in which it is usually the female body that is open to scrutiny. For example, as Pettinger (2011:234) argues regarding sex work transactions between male customers and women sex workers, judgements about women’s bodies are often ‘central to customers’ perceptions of the success or failure of a service encounter, both in terms of the erotic labour performed and the way the body looks’. The women’s criticisms of the male dancer at LoveLads subvert normative standards in which it is usually the female body on display that is open to critique.

However, their criticisms do little to challenge heteronormativity in another respect. Rather than their criticisms challenging heteronormative prescriptions for heteromale bodies, their remarks still reify the built male body as the desired, superior form for the male body. If their remarks were to present a challenge to heteronormative masculinity, they would in fact celebrate, rather than criticise, the male dancer’s different aesthetic to the heteromale ideal. For as Gill (2009) argues, it is not simply that women can ‘gaze’ at a range of images/representations of male bodies that are circulating, but rather that ‘a specific kind of representational practice has emerged for depicting the male body: namely an idealized and eroticized aesthetic showing a toned, young body. What is significant about this type of representation is that it codes men’s bodies in ways that give permission for them to be looked at and desired’ (Gill, 2009:143). It is therefore a very particular, heteronormative, masculine aesthetic ideal that can command the heterosexual female gaze.

### **‘Gazing’ at naked male bodies**

Male bodies are presented as quintessentially masculine and heterosexual in LoveLads. Yet one way in which conventional gender roles could be disrupted is if women can exercise a sexualised ‘gaze’ in viewing male dancers. LoveLads represents one of the few commercial leisure spaces in the UK where naked male bodies are presented for women to look at and potentially enjoy. While normative heterosexuality positions men as ‘the pursuers and women the pursued’ (Montemurro, 2001:299), through presenting men’s bodies to be looked *at* rather than as men being the ‘sexual scrutinizers’ themselves (Liepe-Levinson, 2002:9), the male strip show suggests women attend such an event as sexual pursuers, therefore reversing normative heterosexual relations with men dancers objectified by women patrons. This element of ‘looking’ may potentially equate to a sexualised ‘gaze’.

There was some evidence that women customers did exercise a sexualised ‘gaze’ at LoveLads. Women respondents praised the appearance of the dancers in their questionnaire responses. The language that they use here is interesting; their comments about their desires are couched in quite safe and ‘homely’ terms. To cite some examples, Wendy stated that ‘their physical appearance was yummy but they were also nice to chat to’, and Olivia stated that ‘the male dancers are physically attractive but they are also funny & friendly’. One woman commented at the show to me after watching a male dancer squirt cream on his chest that ‘I just wanted to lick it off him, mmm’. Women customers at LoveLads can experience interacting with men that they find physically attractive and approachable to interact with. Moreover, desirable male bodies are presented as accessible to women customers through the

‘photography’ period at the end of the show. Dancers also present themselves as ‘available’ and attentive by deliberately not wearing wedding rings, or by paying particular attention to certain women through eye contact or talking to them at the end of the show. This suggests, as Smith (2002:83) similarly argues, that the male strip show ‘is one place in which women can show themselves as actively desiring’, and women can also experience the feeling that they are desired *by* the male dancers to some extent.

Further, women were perhaps even more vocal of their appreciation of the erotic potential of viewing naked male bodies on the internet, where some women engaged in conversations about LoveLads on LoveLads Facebook page. To cite just a few of the many examples of these conversations, here are some extracts from comments women post on various photographs of male dancers:

‘they are so much better in the flesh mmmm mmmmmm a must see xxx’

(Bella)

‘awesome, sexy, fantastic, gorgeous, horny, orgasmic anssome ;-p~~

booooooooooom xxx’ (Bella)

‘perfect pic to spruce up yer sex life. ;-)’ (Margaret)

‘these guys are better in the flesh seen them 5 times wooo hooooo’ (Lynn)

‘Thanks for a fab night on Saturday, the boys were HOT, HOT, HOT!!!’

(Kerry)

‘god they are all so dam sexy, would luv to give a massage to each one’

(Tracy)

It therefore seems that women are interested in viewing and touching male bodies that they find erotic. All of these comments from women customers focus on the physical appearance of the male dancers that they find attractive, and in some cases, erotically stimulating. Yet, two of the women commenting above, who express themselves vehemently online about the LoveLads performers, told me that they had never actually been to a show but that they hoped to in the future. Their comments indicate that they are still interested in ‘gazing’ or looking at images of the semi-nude male dancers, even if this is a ‘fantasy’ during an online encounter rather than a ‘real life’ encounter at a show. Further, some women respondents felt that they could be ‘bolder’ as customer Rachel put it, in her comments about dancers’ bodies online, than she would ‘if I was speaking to him during the show’. This suggests that some women utilised the show’s online space to exercise a sexualised gaze to some extent, and to comment about the erotic potential of the dancers, which they felt they were not able to do in interactions with dancers in the club. It indicates therefore that where women did not feel comfortable or confident enough to assert that they were sexually ‘gazing’ at male bodies within the venue, they could express their sexual appreciation of the male bodies through another, ‘more safe’ (as Rachel comments) medium.

This was not the case with all women customers, however, as many women were observed acting in what could be deemed a 'sexually aggressive' manner within the club (Peterson and Dressel, 1982). As we saw above, some of the women do not seem content with just looking at the dancers, and many state the ways in which they would like to interact with the dancers, for example through 'massage', 'licking' the dancers, and also through talking with them. I observed women attempting to touch the dancers on numerous occasions, even though this is strictly against the club rules. I observed women pinching dancers' buttocks as they came off stage; women sitting at the front of the stage attempting to touch dancers on stage with their hands and also their feet; and one woman scratched a dancer while she had her photograph taken with them. On one occasion I observed a woman repeatedly attempting to climb on the stage during a performance; the music had to be interrupted five times during the next song for an announcement which stated 'Ladies please remain seated at all times during the show'.

Male dancers also told me about women aggressively touching them. For example, Mike stated that one woman customer 'got up on stage and scratched so much she made me bleed and then as I walked forward, cause it hurt, she scratched all down my back too'. This suggests that women certainly are enabled to act in non-normative roles which contradict normative femininity within the club, even though touching the dancers is against the rules of the show. As these examples highlight, some women go further than 'gazing' at the semi-nude dancers, and instead may use elements of touching that are violent. Aside from some studies of venues where male customers watch women dancers and men are argued to touch the women dancers intimately and violently (e.g. Holsopple, n.d.), the women customers' behaviour at

LoveLads seems to involve a great deal more touching of dancers than is permitted in venues where men watch women dance. This is similar to my discussion in the next chapter of how women customers may 'get away with more' than male customers because they are not considered a 'real' sexual or violent threat.

Furthermore, women respondents expressed disappointment and even claimed they were 'angry' (Chloe), when on one occasion at the show they did not see any dancers fully nude, despite Greg, the host for the evening, attempting to convince the audience that they had seen 'the full monty', as he put it. The women seated in front of me on the balcony on this occasion (as the club was very busy) spoke about this lack of nudity to each other. One woman asked her friend: 'I never saw a penis, not once, did you?'. As she is talking around ten women flocked to the stage after the performance to confront Greg who fled the stage shouting to the women to 'email the website'. The women seated in front of me continue to discuss this situation. One woman appears furious and remarks that:

'I mean it's not fair. Men can pay 20 quid and see a beautiful woman naked any time whenever they want. We pay nearly double that and don't even see a cock. It's just a piss take, and I mean one of them was fat, what's that all about?'. (Customer, October 2010).

Other women on this occasion were also annoyed about not being able to see male dancers fully naked. One respondent, Kelly, commented to me in an email interview after the show that:

‘Was it just me or did none of the men actually take their underwear off? I mean I didn’t really know what to expect but it was quite expensive. If it was *my* hen night and I’d planned it all and expected to see the guys naked then I’d be quite disappointed’ (Kelly, email interview, October 2010).

Furthermore, Lisa, another email participant, commented that ‘I’m shocked really, especially as they tried to make out like we’d seen that one naked when we hadn’t!’. These comments highlight the extent to which women expected to see naked male dancers. As noted previously, the price of a ticket for the LoveLads show is very expensive, and these women felt ‘conned’, because they thought they had paid to see nudity. This suggests that these women expect to exercise economic power in their exchanges with male dancers, just as it is conventional for men to pay to gaze at naked female bodies in strip clubs (Pasko, 2002). The women’s comments are perhaps similar to O’Connell Davidson’s (1995) suggestion regarding sex tourism, that in many instances it is the tourist’s relative economic power that enables the commercial-sexual exchange, as ‘the punter’s power lies in his pockets rather than his Y-fronts’ (O’Connell Davidson, 1995:8). As the women customers expect to see naked male bodies in return for their ticket price, perhaps contemporary conceptions of normative femininity might centre around their relative economic power and what possibilities can be expected to stem from this (sexual or otherwise).

Yet whether being loud, sexually aggressive, being able to potentially pay for sexual encounters, and to erotically view male bodies ultimately challenges male power is debatable. Despite women being able to exhibit behaviour usually associated with societal stereotypes of male behaviour, what is rather perturbing



about this venue is that such behaviour is positively encouraged by the club through the club's host, the dancers, and the set up of the club environment. On the one hand this might seem like a positive step towards female empowerment, as women are presented with an environment in which it is considered acceptable to behave outside the parameters of normative femininity. Yet this is the whole premise upon which the show at LoveLads rests; making it *seem* as if these non-normative subjectivities are available to adopt, when actually, women's behaviour in LoveLads is scripted as much by the club managers and the dancers as it is by themselves. As will be explained in the next section of this chapter, the show requires that women 'feel' that they can transcend normative boundaries of femininity in order for it to be a successful commercial enterprise. Further still, although it is a necessary requirement that the women are enabled to feel as though they are transgressing normative (hetero)femininity, there are still many ways in which the club maintains a strict heteronormative framework in which the women's behaviour is policed by each other and the club staff, suggesting that the boundaries of normative femininity, and the binary division between masculinity and femininity are still upheld in certain key ways.

### **Limits to exercising a 'female gaze' in LoveLads**

There are certainly limits to women's sexualised 'gazing' in LoveLads, and many ways in which their behaviour mimics, rather than challenges, conventional gender behaviour for women. Perhaps part of the novelty of the experience at LoveLads is the relative power of women to purchase performances of male heterosexuality, in the sense that they pay a ticket price to 'gaze' sexually at

heteromascuine naked male bodies, and potentially to objectify them. This certainly presents a challenge to conventional heteronormative discourse as women are not represented as passive sexual beings, and men are no longer primarily positioned as sexual connoisseurs. However, there are two key ways in which this ‘gazing’ does little to challenge heteronormativity. Firstly, as discussed above, despite being positioned as potential sex objects, male dancer’s heteronormative masculinity is privileged rather than challenged. As Tewksbury argues, the male stripper’s sex object role does not leave him vulnerable, but allows him to ‘maintain power, dominance, and the ability to objectify others’ (Tewksbury, 1993:173). Yet there is a further way in which heteronormative gender roles are not challenged in the LoveLads show, and this is in the fact that many of the women customers still occupy positions as sexual *objects* rather than sexual subjects.

From my observations and interviews with women customers and male dancers, it was evident that in many instances it was male dancers who played the active sexual role, ‘gazing’ at women in a sexual sense, with many women customers preferring to be *looked at* by the dancers instead of, or in addition to, looking at them. Montemurro (2001) similarly has argued that the power of the female audience is limited as male strippers typically exercise the active sexual role through approaching female patrons. Although male dancers at LoveLads were not supposed to physically touch women customers during their stage routines, when a dancer is on stage they focus on particular women in the audience, such as gesturing and looking at certain women. Furthermore, some women customers enjoyed being ‘gazed at’ by male dancers, and sought out their attention, just as male patrons seek the attentive interest of female dancers in conventional clubs. Wood (2000:10)

suggests that male patrons pay not only to *see* a female naked body, but also ‘pay *to be seen by* the women’. I similarly observed women attempting to ‘be seen’ by the male dancers. To cite a few examples, on one occasion I observed four women who were sitting in the ‘VIP’ area vying for the male dancers’ attention, by constantly looking up towards the dancers’ dressing room, shouting at them and screaming. Further, audience members were often observed waving to dancers and beckoning dancers to come over to them. One respondent, Olivia, stated that she tried to touch dancer Mike when he was on stage because ‘I just wanted him to notice me’. Women customers therefore demanded ‘attention’ from the dancers to the extent that they are ‘performing spectators’ (Liepe-Levinson, 2002:152), rather than a passive audience of viewers.

However, there is also a sense in which these women are seeking male confirmation of their desirability, or indeed their femininity, through the male gaze. After having her photograph taken with the dancers at the end of the evening, customer Vanessa said that ‘I was all giggly as they were so good looking. One of the guys held my hand in the photo and I was so excited, it felt like he really liked me’. This again suggests a desire to be gazed *at*, or desired/wanted *by* the male dancers. Rather than these sexual interactions subverting normative heterosexual relations, in so far as many women customers attempt to receive the ‘gaze’ from men rather than exercise it themselves ‘it is still the *female* body which remains the primary sex object’ in this social space (Segal, 1987:72).

These observations thus complicate the idea of a ‘female gaze’. If women are more interested in being gazed at by dancers than ‘objectifying’ men, then this

suggests that little about what is 'normative' within heterosexual relations is being challenged, as men are still positioned as active sexual beings, with women seeking male approval. However, the issue is more complicated than this. Although women wanted to be noticed, or desired by the dancers, many of them did enjoy looking at, or appreciating male bodies that they found erotic and aesthetically pleasing, as discussed previously in this chapter. In this sense, it is evident that many customers desired a *mutually reciprocal* sexualised gaze, in that at the same time that many of the women gazed at the dancers, they wished for the dancers to view them also as sexually desirable. In my observations in the venue, I observed many instances where women's attempts at getting the dancers to sexually desire them were unsuccessful, with dancers either ignoring their advances, or pretending to be interested in them when they were not. For example, on one research visit in September 2010 a group of women standing in the 'VIP' area of the venue were waving at dancers and 'making eyes' at them, as I noted in my fieldnotes. As I was sitting upstairs close to the dancers I could hear what they were saying to each other. Dancer Vince laughed to himself and said to Craig 'Cor, desperate cows'. Vince then grinned, and waved back to the women, who then became even more animated, smiling and waving furiously. This suggests that the women may have been enabled to feel as if their desires were mutually reciprocated by dancers, when in fact in this instance dancers were pretending to reciprocate their advances.

Further, some women customers said that they wanted to feel the sense of private intimacy of a one-on-one encounter with themselves and dancers. Customer Wendy said that 'it's just not private enough, if you fancy a man [dancer] and you think he likes you then there's too many people there to compete with and nowhere

you can be alone'. This comment suggests that perhaps what Wendy would prefer is an encounter in a private room with a dancer who she liked, yet unlike many lap dancing clubs in the UK, LoveLads did not provide private dances. Private dances involve the (male) customer paying a fee to the club to frequent a 'back room' and have a dancer's undivided attention, often in the form of a 'private' lap dance (Pasko, 2002:60). As management at LoveLads declined to be interviewed it is difficult to ascertain why they did not offer private dances. It could be because spatially the venue did not have private booths or areas where this could take place, or because management assumed this was something that women customers would not be interested in. Wendy's desire for a more personal, private encounter was also echoed by Rachel, another customer at LoveLads, who commented about Vince, a dancer, that 'when he was looking at me on stage I wanted it to be just us together. I really thought he fancied me but then later he was talking to other girls'. This suggests two things. Firstly, that had she been able to experience a more private encounter, where it was 'just us', as she states, then her experience at the club may have been more enjoyable. Yet secondly, it also confirms what Mike spoke about in his interview about how dancers work to manage customers who want the dancer to be 'just theirs' for the evening, as Mike phrased it. As Mike explains,

'Women get a bit funny if you've spoken to them but then they've seen you kissing or holding hands with someone else at the show, then they won't speak to you. It's like you belong to them now you've paid your money, you're theirs, and everyone else seems to think the same.....and we have pictures at the end and then they might not want you to be in the picture' (Mike, interview, September, 2010).

Mike's comments and the women customers' responses suggest that women not only want to look at dancers, but experience a more emotional and private encounter in which they have the dancer's undivided attention. These comments also confirm Tewksbury's (1993:178) suggestion that male dancers perform 'less emotional labour' than women erotic dancers often do, because male dancer's interactions with customers are 'brief'.

Another element in the gazing/power dynamic between women customers and male dancers is the fact that 'tipping' was not encouraged. On the one hand, the absence of tipping rituals in LoveLads could signal the reinforcement of heteronormative gender roles for men and women. For example, because there is no monetary 'tipping' of dancers, women customers do not have the opportunity to feel the power, as a male patron might, of being able to 'buy' 'their girl' for the night (Erickson and Tewksbury, 2000:287), and male dancers do not have to ask for tips, which could be considered unmanly. Women customers brought to the fore how they perform normative femininity by refraining from tipping. Women customers stated that it would be 'unladylike' to tip, that it would be 'inappropriate', or that they would not feel 'comfortable' doing so as it was not 'normal for women customers to tip'. While in one way this could be read as women wanting to reaffirm femininity by not engaging in tipping, it also suggests that female sexual consumers do not want their behaviour to necessarily mimic male sexual consumption practices through the obvious exchange of monetary payment.

## Conclusion

In their exchanges with dancers, and their interactions with other women customers, there is some evidence that women's experiences are potentially transgressive. That women can be loud, brash, and openly 'sexually aggressive' in a public leisure space does challenge ideas about women's sexuality as passive, and their socialising as being confined to private locations. What LoveLads *does* afford women is a venue in which to try out new subjectivities which would not be acceptable in other spatial arenas. In this sense, LoveLads could be seen as at least potentially novel, as it does represent one space in which women can contradict, albeit to a limited extent, traditional heteronormative gender roles, in that they can be loud, drunk, and can show themselves as 'actively desiring' of male bodies (Smith, 2002:83). However, as Gill (2003) cautions, in an age where it is now seen as acceptable, and even necessary for women to show themselves as sexually desirable and autonomous, their behaviour may merely be conforming to the changing nature of normative femininity in which women are expected to show themselves as confident and independent, even if this does not translate into their experiences in everyday life.

There were also many examples of dancer-customer interactions in the club which still centred on quite conventional gender roles. Heteromascularity is performed by male dancers, often successfully, and further it seems that men play the 'sex object' role in ways that increase their status, rather than leaving them vulnerable and passive. It is also evident that while some women wanted to gaze or look at male bodies, many of the women customers wanted to see very particular

examples of heterosexual masculinity, namely built, toned and tanned male bodies, which suggests that there is little breaking down of conventional stereotypes of 'ideal' masculinity in the shows. Women wanted to view a very narrow expression of a dominant, 'hegemonic' masculinity (Connell, 1995). Women customers also utilised the club space as an opportunity to reaffirm their heterofeminine desirability. In their quest to be gazed *at* by the dancers, as well as looking at the dancers themselves, many women customers sought to have their feminine desirability confirmed or noticed by the dancers.

What is potentially more unique in this venue is that women reported being able to forge new alliances or 'bonds' with other women, that they felt were not possible in some more conventional heterosexual leisure spaces. Yet quite how stable these friendships are is uncertain, as women customers' interactions with other women at the club also served as an opportunity to reinforce heterofemininity. From my observations of the 'photograph' period of the night at the LoveLads show in which women could have photographs taken with the dancers, it was evident that many of the women were competing with one another for the male dancers' attention, and further, attempting to demonstrate their attractiveness to the dancers. One of the many examples of this that I observed was when a woman told another woman in her party that 'he doesn't like you, look he's got his arm around me, move over'. This woman also told another woman to 'move over' and be in a different area of the photograph from where she was standing next to a dancer.

These examples are reminiscent of Storr's (2003:35) discussion of 'female homosociality' at 'Ann Summers parties', in which predominantly heterosexual



women discuss heterosexual practices whilst looking at sex toys and sexualised outfits. Storr (2003:34) argues that these events offer heterosexual women ‘pleasure’ from the opportunity to ‘pass’ tests which demonstrate their ‘membership’ of heterosexual femininity. In this sense, Storr demonstrates that ‘being one of the girls’ is not a passive, unconscious process, but rather is ‘an active construction in which heterosexual women mutually recognise and affirm their femininity as coherent, acceptable and appropriate’, and further, female homosocial spaces afford women ‘the power to judge each others’ femininity – to refuse each other recognition as appropriately gendered women’ (Storr, 2003:52). I would suggest that this is almost exactly what is taking place at LoveLads when women seek to affirm their own desirability, which they do through challenging the feminine desirability of other women. Women customers perform, or ‘do’ heterosexual femininity through comparing themselves to other women whom they wish to construct as ‘lacking’ heterofeminine desirability. Therefore, while some women can and do forge friendships or interactions with other women customers, some of these exchanges centre around a more competitive element than mutual friendship.

Alcohol consumption, together with the encouragement of women to act in a loud and sexually aggressive manner, does enable women customers to experience potentially ‘new and temporary subject positions’ (Eldridge and Roberts, 2008:327). We do therefore need to move on from seeing heterosexuality *only* as a form of oppression and to ‘appreciate differences of experience and meaning’ among women (Smart 1996: 177). However, it cannot be said that the club enables the creation of a ‘heterosexuality without heterosexism’ (Johnson, 2002:46), as many conventional gendered heterosexual roles remain unchallenged. Yet as Storr (2003:53) argues,

perhaps engagement in spaces of female homosociality ‘may not present a challenge to power relations within either the gender regime or the gender order; but it does help women to cope with those power relations’.

This chapter has therefore suggested that heteronormative femininity is subject to change as these women customers were able to act in ways that demonstrated an active female sexual subjectivity, through their attempts to watch and gain the attention of male dancers, and in their loud and drunken behaviour. Yet what this chapter has suggested is that even the potentially new ‘norm’ for contemporary femininity for women to portray themselves as sexually confident and autonomous (Gill, 2003), has been picked up on by the management and dancers at the club as a way of manufacturing the atmosphere in the venue to signal some sort of female ‘empowerment’. All aspects of the LoveLads show are heavily constructed and regulated by management: from the encouragement of alcohol consumption; the seating arrangements and the lack of access for customers to dancers onstage or in private rooms; the construction of dancers’ bodies as masculine; to the way the hosts encourage the customers to feel as if they are ‘all girls together’. This suggests therefore that some women customers are able to express an active female heterosexual subjectivity, at the same time that gendered power relations are still operating. Women can act in loud, sexually aggressive ways at the LoveLads show, but we might want to question firstly, to what extent this signals independent and autonomous power for women if this is the way that the show pushes women to behave, and secondly, whether this is merely a form of heteronormative femininity in a new guise, rather than anything challenging or radical. The next chapter further explores this idea of heteronormativity, to see whether there is scope for

transgression in normative gender and sexual roles from dancers and customers in a lesbian erotic dance venue.

## **Chapter Five**

### **Subverting heteronormativity in a lesbian erotic dance venue?**

Women's engagement with erotic dance as both customers and dancers is complex, and this chapter examines the connections between sexual agency and gendered power relations, questioning how far women can exercise autonomous sexual expression in commercial sexual encounters in a lesbian erotic dance venue. What is particularly distinctive about this erotic dance space, in terms of the sexualities that are performed within it will be highlighted, as well as illuminating some of the interactions within this space that parallel other erotic dance spaces. Utilising feminist theorising of the social construction of sexualities, together with insights from queer theory, provides theoretical grounding for these comparisons to be made. Further, as Jackson and Scott (2010:84) point out, sex or sexual practices cannot simply be defined in terms of what we *do*, but rather 'what makes an act, a desire or a relationship sexual is a matter of social definition: the meanings invested in it'. There is nothing inherently 'sexual' about erotic dance performances, rather, their meanings are variable, contextually specific, and are made in dancers' definitions of their labour, and in the way customers interpret the performances that they see – as either erotic or not.

Erotic dance is a contested activity, particularly in terms of the power that men and women participants can exercise in gendered and sexualised interactions, or not, in certain erotic dance contexts. This chapter addresses these key issues through the concept of heteronormativity. The chapter begins with a discussion of the sexual-social political background behind the club's origin. What was potentially radical or

progressive about the club in its original conception will be discussed, before turning to consider the club in its contemporary manifestation. I draw on the history of this leisure venue, and the visions for sexual performances in the club articulated by current and ex-management and what this means for both dancers' work roles and customers' experiences. I consider whether women's roles are potentially transgressive or whether they replicate or mimic heteronormative roles for women. What is potentially less heteronormative about customer's conception of Lippy as a 'women's space'; how bodies are viewed and constructed; and how space is consumed as heterosexual or more fluid, all provide scope for thinking through how heteronormativity is negotiated and challenged. Importantly, this chapter seeks to think about whether there is something potentially different about gendered power relations and the social relations of the 'gaze' in a lesbian erotic dance context. Overall, this chapter suggests the need for a more complex consideration of women's engagement with erotic dance spaces, which includes an examination of the links between sexual agency and gendered power relations, and how much potential women have in commercial sexual encounters to exercise active sexual expression.

### **Situating heteronormativity and erotic dance**

The concept of heteronormativity refers both to the 'normative status' of heterosexuality as *the* sexuality, 'which renders any alternative sexualities 'other' and marginal'; and also hetero-patriarchy, through which (hetero)sexuality is 'systematically male dominated' (Jackson, 1999:163). The debate between the radical feminist critique of erotic dance, and the 'sex positive' feminist standpoints, outlined in chapter two, suggests an either/or problematic in which stripping is read

as either inherently heteronormative, or essentially liberating. Yet, as my findings indicate, it is more complex than either/or problematic. Further, as heteronormativity 'is contingent upon being constantly reaffirmed', this means that 'it can potentially be unsettled or renegotiated' (Jackson and Scott, 2010:91).

Writers such as Binnie (2007:33), however, have critiqued the utility of the concept of heteronormativity, suggesting that it is too rigid, and that it tends to 'lump all heterosexuals together in the same box', assuming that all heterosexual identities are 'uniformly normative', while 'non-heterosexuals' or 'sexual dissidents' are viewed 'as radical, progressive, or outside of social norms'. This would imply that rather than the concept of heteronormativity helping us to deconstruct and critique normative binary gender and sexuality categories then, it actually ends up reifying them. On the other hand, Hubbard (2008:657) suggests that theorists who critique heteronormativity do not think of it as 'a monolithic or unbending structure', but rather as 'a concept that shifts to encompass different masculine and feminine performances over time'. Arguably, a critique of heteronormativity does not need to reduce all heterosexuals to a monolithic, negative category, but rather we can critique heteronormative discourses and practices whilst recognising the plurality of sexual expressions. Further, in this chapter, 'non-heterosexuals', as Binnie (2007) phrases it, are definitely not taken as necessarily 'radical, progressive or outside of social norms'. Rather, some of the complex ways in which customers (most of whom see themselves as non-heterosexual) and dancers at Lippy, negotiate, and sometimes reinforce, heteronormativity, will be analysed.

## **The changing sexual politics of lesbian leisure spaces**

### *Lippy in the 2000s*

Lippy itself is situated in a large city in the UK, in a region of the city that is often heralded as a gay 'leisurescape' (Browne and Bakshi, 2011). The bar is on a small side street, and it is not immediately obvious that erotic dance takes place from the venue's exterior. As I outlined in chapter three, although the bar is set over three levels it is relatively small, and therefore interactions within the venue already have a certain 'intimate' feel about them due to the close spatial proximity of customers to the dancers and each other. In the bar's contemporary context, customers can watch erotic dance shows on Friday and Saturday evenings, and then dance themselves in the venue when the shows have ended. In the week the bar is utilised as more of a relaxing space for women to meet other women and have a quiet drink.

Founded in the late 1990s by a female club promoter, Mary, Lippy represented one of the first commercial leisure venues in the UK marketed specifically towards women customers. Mary, the club's founder, spoke in her interview with me of a 'big commercial explosion' happening around twenty years ago, which saw the rise of gay bars in large cities in the UK. She says this led to areas within cities being defined as 'gay', but she felt that 'until there's a lesbian bar, it's not'. Lippy has a very particular history. Its strip nights in particular were founded after Mary saw a market for them, through piloting specific strip nights for lesbian women held within existing strip bars which usually catered for male customers, and holding one off lesbian sauna events to see how women reacted and 'experimented' in these venues. With the success of these nights – in terms of the

volume of people attending them and the enjoyment they had there, Mary felt there was a market for erotic entertainment in a bar which catered for women customers.

By the time of my fieldwork at Lippy in 2009-10, however, the bar was owned by a company which seemed disinterested in the club's sexual and gender politics and more in the club as a commercial venture. The implications of this will be teased out in this chapter. The club was purchased by a male business owner in 2009, who did not manage the venue himself, but employed a new female management team to run the venue. By the time I finished fieldwork at Lippy in the summer of 2010 the club was being bought out again by a new company. This suggests a more rapid turnover of staff and management which may contribute to the venue seeming to be concerned rather with profit (particularly as they were rumoured to be in financial difficulties), and because the new management and owners had not come from the socio-historical background out of which Lippy was originally formed, in terms of sexual and gender politics.

### *The sex wars of the 1980s*

Lippy was founded in the context of the 1980s 'sex wars' and previous attempts to create sexualised lesbian spaces. Therefore, in order to examine the way in which heteronorms are negotiated and potentially challenged in Lippy, we need to take a step back and think about the origins of the venue, and the sexual politics that preceded and underpinned its formation. As chapter three of this thesis highlighted, in order to understand the sexual-political climate which forged the formation of Lippy, I spoke with Mary, the founder of the venue and also women who attended a night-time leisure venue in the years directly before Lippy was established, that I call



The Cage. These women, Kathy and Jen, spoke of their experiences of The Cage in the 1980s, and their visits to Lippy in the 1990s. The Cage, they said, involved women who identified as lesbian meeting to engage in sado-masochistic (SM) practices and participate in and watch live sex shows. Both Kathy and Jen spoke of there being a strong ‘politics’ behind the formation of The Cage, which was linked to political activities wider than just the club itself. Indeed, as Kathy says ‘the motivation to do [The Cage] was that we were sick and fed up, there was actually nowhere to go, nowhere different musically, sex was being embargoed and we wanted somewhere where we could be different and we all worked at doing that’. The women involved in The Cage were therefore deeply rooted in a political battle to create spaces for lesbian women that were different, and there was a community ‘feel’, as Kathy puts it, that stemmed from a political commitment to contest the mainstream homophobia against lesbian women. Kathy says that The Cage ‘was really about creating something that was for the people that use it...everybody who went was actually involved in some capacity in being there’. It was therefore not a commercial enterprise, but people fundraised to be able to put on the events because they felt it was important for themselves and their friends.

There was a political ‘anger’, as Kathy notes, as many of the women involved in the club were involved in political demonstrations at the time, and were keen to ‘get women out and visible’ in public life. Kathy herself said her participation in The Cage was about ‘expressing sexual freedom’ and ‘doing things differently’. Kathy felt that The Cage was:

‘...the only place you could be androgynous... You could be whatever you wanted and dress however you liked and do whatever you liked sexually or emotionally and there was nobody judging you like they did everywhere else. It had quite a radical edge to it and I liked that. It was queer in the sense that you could just be how you wanted to be.....in terms of language, questioning, and not taking anything for granted. Still the same old jealousies were played out but there was also room to think slightly differently’ (Kathy, interview, June 2009).

As is no doubt already evident, both The Cage and Lippy emerged out of the ‘lesbian sex wars’ of the 1970s and 1980s. Debate among women in the 1980s in particular was concerned with who ‘counted’ authentically as lesbian, particularly in relation to sexual practices (Farquhar, 2000:220). Kathy, Jen and also the founder of Lippy, Mary, spoke of the debates and political split between women during the sex wars, and of those who ‘policed’ the behaviour of the participants at The Cage because their activities involved SM sexual practices and wearing leather clothes. Akin to Cooper’s (2009:107) respondents who set up a lesbian bathhouse in Canada, participants at The Cage also ‘maintained an ambivalent relationship to lesbian feminism’. Kathy and Jen enjoyed The Cage as a leisure space, yet they spoke of the opposition they faced at the time from those who they deemed ‘vanilla lesbians’ and ‘lesbian feminists’; namely women who opposed the sexual practices they were engaging in and protested, sometimes violently, in and outside the club. Kathy said that the ‘vanilla lesbians’ policed sexual practices, and also the dress codes of women who attended The Cage, objecting to their wearing of ‘lipstick and leather’, because they thought it meant co-optation with ‘patriarchy’. Some of the altercations

between the 'vanilla lesbians' and participants at The Cage were quite brutal, and paralleled struggles outside The Cage, at political marches and demonstrations. As Jen reflects regarding the Lesbian Strength March, a march in which lesbian women marched for women:

'There was a big divide in the community, so as well as the main Gay Pride march we used to have the Lesbian Strength March about a month beforehand and every year things became more and more fraught, until the point where they said anyone wearing leather has got to march at the back, and erm quite a few of us had motorbikes and so wore leather for those purposes more than anything and were quite outraged by that. So I think [The Cage] was born out of that kind of, because what it was really was a minority oppressing a minority, with us *all* being a minority. So although they said that people who wore leather were fascist and that we were representing Nazis and all that kind of thing, they were actually the ones that were being the more fascistic...we used to call them the vanillas, yeah the vanillas really, so [The Cage] was born out of that, and funnily enough...the first night it opened there was a picket outside, all the vanillas had a picket and sort of shouted abuse and stuff as we went in, and a couple of weeks later they actually mounted a raid on the club, erm and came in with paint and crowbars, and tried to smash the place up' (Jen, interview, July 2009).

Mary, the founder of Lippy, also attended The Cage, and experienced the hostility of the 'vanilla lesbians' at the Lesbian Strength March, but not overtly because she was deemed to practice SM sex. As she explains:

‘It was a march for lesbians only....we all rocked up and the march was disabled women at the front, women with children, Jewish women, black women, and we turned up and were like ‘well where do we go’? ‘Cause we were Jewish women, black women, disabled women but that wasn’t our main focus in life we were *lesbians*, we had to use the label back in the day, and they were like ‘you’re London women’. ‘Oh, where’s our spot?’ ‘At the back!’ ‘Oh’. So being a bit naughty, some of the girls ran up the sides to the front and grabbed the banner and held it, and the lesbian stewards stopped it and they got so upset they wanted to stop the march, but the police actually told them off! They said ‘chill out girls they’re allowed to go at the front of the bloody march leave them alone’! Then the Lesbian and Gay Centre tried to charge us £5 to get into the afterparty which was a lot of money in those days so we did a demo outside there’ (Mary, interview, September 2009).

These stories from Jen and Mary indicate the policing of their activities by other lesbian women at the time, which was hostile and exclusionary and also violent. It also indicates the politics and discontent that underpinned the feeling of a need for The Cage as a space where they could be who they wanted to be, as Kathy commented earlier, and the political ‘anger’ of women to stage demonstrations of their own where they felt they were mistreated. Their comments are echoed by writings of women more widely, particularly academics who have charted the heated debates and arguments that arose during the sex wars about acceptable and unacceptable sexual practices and behaviour (Healy, 1996; Wilton, 1995). As Abrahams (1999) recalls:

‘The eighties arrived and the ghetto was awash with feminisms and lesbianisms jostling for supremacy as *the* defining, authentic politic...Suddenly the lesbian bed became public space and it was obvious that more than a few of us had been breaking the rules’ (Abrahams, 1999:118).

It was SM sex that was at the heart of the debates of the sex wars, of which frequenters of The Cage were at the centre. SM was viewed by lesbian feminists as not only a ‘manifestation of men’s power and violence against women’, but also as ‘an inherently fascist (and racist) practice’ (Healey, 1996:100). Echoing Jen’s account of the ‘vanilla lesbians’ deeming those who enjoyed The Cage to be fascists but Jen suggesting that their behaviour was more in line with fascism, Healy (1996:10) argues of the sex wars that ‘[o]ften debates around SM degenerated into simple name calling with both sides often using the same names. Thus you could be labelled a fascist for opposing SM or be guilty of fascist behaviour by practising SM’. Similar to the way in which Jen described the picketing of The Cage by ‘vanilla lesbians’, Rubin (2011:24) documents the picketing of the Barnard Conference on Sexuality in 1982 in America, a major event in the history of the sex wars, in which a small group of protesters ‘wore T-shirts emblazoned with “For a Feminist Sexuality” on the front and “Against S/M” on the back’. These examples from participants at The Cage and academic reflections on the sex wars indicate ‘the discursive construction, regulation and policing of lesbian sex and sexuality within the lesbian community’ (Farquhar, 2000:219). As participant Kathy phrases it ‘the fact is that a lot of women were trying to tell other women how they should live their

life'. This policing of lesbian identities and practices within lesbian communities continued into the 1990s. As Farquhar (2000:219-220) notes, it indicates how 'lesbians are actively involved in the construction, and policing, of alternative sexual meanings'.

Perhaps the most contentious issue in the 'sex wars' was the 'policing' amongst lesbian women around how to understand butch-femme roles. The question it raised is whether practices which lesbian women engage in that seem to mirror normative heterosexuality have the same meaning for lesbian women's practices. It is highly relevant to understanding erotic dance shows at Lippy, since they too could be argued to mirror heterosexuality in the gendered performances that are displayed. This critique of butch-femme existence stems from the 1980s, when butch-femme roles were criticised by lesbian feminists (Maltry and Tucker, 2002:93), who viewed them as 'a reproduction of heterosexual models' (Nestle, 1984:232). Yet, Butler (1990:137) argues that the relation between the 'imitation' (butch-femme), and the 'original' (sex role stereotyping within heterosexuality), is more complex than the argument that butch-femme roles merely uncritically appropriate heterosexual identities, and rather, that these roles may in fact parody the notion of an original, fixed and 'natural' heterosexual sexual or gender identity. Further, Nestle further points out that:

'...the butch has been labelled too simplistically the masculine partner and the fem the feminine counterpart. This labelling forgets two women who have developed their styles for specific erotic, emotional, and social reasons. Butch-fem relationships, as I experienced them, were complex erotic and

social statements, not phony heterosexual replicas. They were filled with a deeply lesbian language of stance, dress, gesture, love, courage, and autonomy' (Nestle, 1984:232).

This statement resonates with Kathy's description of the extensive policing of butch-femme relationships in the 1980s, in which The Cage was taken as a relatively rare space where people could 'wear the clothes that they wanted to wear whether they were seen as butch, femme or otherwise'. Nestle's point also highlights the contestability over the meanings of the performance of masculinity and femininity as performed by women. 'Femme' lesbians were critiqued by lesbian feminists as their appropriation of feminine styles of dress were taken as mimicking heterosexual relationships and reinforcing oppressive notions of femininity. As Maltry and Tucker (2002:93) highlight, 'lesbian-feminists taught that high heels bound women's feet. Lipstick was a sign that women did not consider themselves beautiful and must change themselves...Skirts and tight clothing not only made women sex objects for men, but also were a source of sexual vulnerability to men'. Further, Nestle (1984:234) claims that femmes 'are called traitors by many of our own community, because we seem to be wearing the clothes of the enemy. Make-up, high heels, skirts, revealing clothes, even certain ways of holding the body are read as capitulation to patriarchal control of women's bodies'. On the other hand, however, Nestle viewed her femme identity and dress as a means of expressing that she is 'sexually powerful' (Nestle, 1984:235). In this sense, the femme body is read as 'politically subversive' rather than heteronormative (Maltry and Tucker, 2002:89). In recent years these debates have arisen again in relation to whether butch-femme roles can be interpreted in non-gendered terms (Adkins, 1997; Creith, 1996). The

potential meanings and different ways that customers' and dancers' activities and experiences in Lippy can be read will be discussed in this chapter.

### *The founding of Lippy in the 1990s*

The founding of Lippy in the early 1990s, according to Mary, was part and parcel of these wider debates in lesbian communities. As Mary commented to me, The Cage and these sexual politics related to SM and butch-femme roles that surrounded it at the time, were in fact a useful backdrop for the founding of Lippy. Mary used the analogy of 'straightening the willow branch' to describe the way she saw The Cage and its participants as creating a market for Lippy to enter. Mary says that:

'A bent willow branch, if you wanna straighten it you've gotta bend it the other way for a while. You can fit that to any political situation where to get something equal you've gotta have it extreme for a while. Then over time people recognise the things that *do* need to change as far as sexual politics are concerned.... So [The Cage] did its job in exposing...different ways of doing sex' (Mary, interview, September 2009).

In the context of The Cage being viewed as 'radical' and extreme, Lippy was seen as a more 'acceptable' venture. Even though Lippy was one of the only women's bars in the UK when it opened, and it held a striptease licence, a context had been opened up for sexual entertainment in lesbian scenes. There was still contention around Lippy however. In the gay press in the early 1990s journalists debated whether pole dancing at Lippy exploited women dancers and reproduced



problematic ideas about women's bodies as sexual objects. These debates have also continued in gay magazines throughout the 2000s, with radical feminist writers arguing that the erotic dancing at Lippy represented an example of women 'abusing' other women, with Mary responding to these arguments suggesting that erotic dance can be a form of empowerment for the dancers and women customers<sup>13</sup>.

Mary's own account of her founding of Lippy points to her complex consideration of women's erotic leisure activities. Mary said that there was more of a need for a women's bar in the 1990s than there is today, and that Lippy was about 'building up a community' and creating 'safe spaces' for lesbian women to socialise in. Mary envisioned the bar as being a space where a multiplicity of sexual roles and experiences could be enjoyed. Mary sees herself as having quite a queer outlook, as she wanted to break down identity categories and make the space more 'open'. She says that 'I never said it was a lesbian bar from the off, I said it was a women's bar. I'm into the whole fluidity thing so I wanted to open up the lesbian world if you like to all women...let's just get rid of the labels'. She says that 'we'd get all sorts of people come in, lesbian women on their own in couples in groups. Or even straight couples who wanted to pick up a lesbian, or straight women'. Despite this fluidity however, Mary did still promote the bar as a women's bar, and says she 'did try to stick to a ratio – 85 women to 15 men', and that 'we never exceeded that ratio'. This was mainly, she says, because she did not want it to turn into 'a straight man's strip club'. Mary carefully selected who could dance at the club, and spent time assessing who the audience seemed to enjoy watching, and made sure these performers were hired regularly. She was also concerned with the welfare of the dancers that worked

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<sup>13</sup> Specific dates and article titles and sources have been omitted here to maintain the anonymity of the venue and the participants.

at Lippy, and of their occupational welfare more generally. Because of this concern, she was involved in creating codes of conduct for the erotic dance industry more widely that laid out guidelines for venues to implement on areas such as health and safety and insurance policy advice, for example.

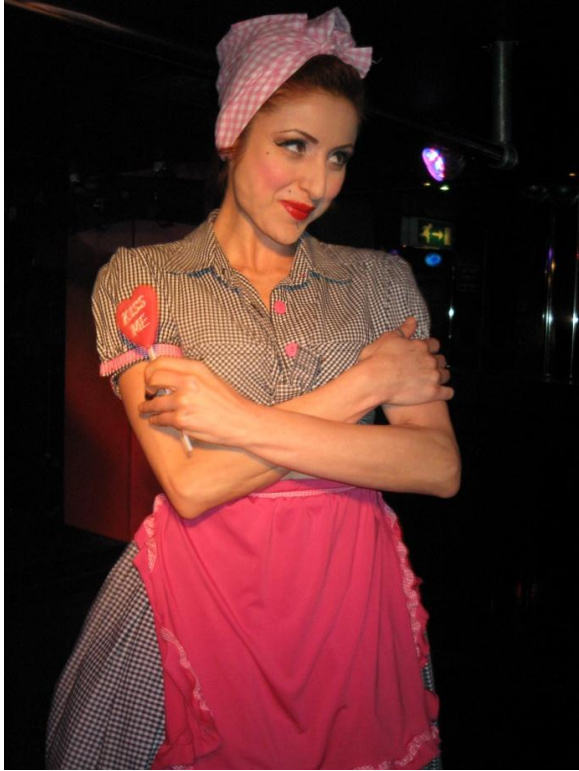
Therefore, it seems that Mary had a vision of Lippy as a space for women to explore their sexual desires through erotic entertainment, as a space relatively absent from men. This in itself is a vision that does counter heteronormative conceptions of space as male-dominated and of male pleasure as privileged in sexual interactions, to some extent. The concern of Mary for dancers' welfare, and of carefully selecting those dancers who work well with women customers, also shows a political commitment to women's working welfare and the exploration of their sexual desires. Quite how far these early visions for sexual politics are played out within the venue in its more contemporary manifestation is addressed in this chapter. It will be questioned how the dancers at Lippy perform gender, and how these performances could be differentially interpreted. I will attempt to draw out some of the ways in which the venue does subvert heteronormativity in certain respects. In the next section I highlight how dancers and customers negotiate and interpret gendered bodies and performances, and how 'normative' these interpretations might be.

### **Gendered bodies: Performances and 'policing'**

Erotic dancing puts the spotlight on bodies. It brings to the fore the way in which bodies are displayed, constructed, and how they interact with other bodies. As this section will highlight, there were some key instances where heteronormative

femininity seemed to be challenged at Lippy by participants' construction of their bodies and their readings of the bodies of others, yet there were also some quite problematic examples of its reinforcement. In this section, I will firstly examine two of WORLDMISTRESS's performances for how they might potentially challenge heteronormativity, before moving on to consider some of the customers' constructions of their own bodies and their conceptions of other customers' bodies.

In gendered terms, some of the bodily presentations by dancers seemed to reaffirm, rather than challenge, conventional gendered roles for women. All of the dancers' costumes in the club involved quite conventional feminine appearances. Dancers such as Naomi always wore a bikini, and Violet spent up to an hour applying fake eye lashes, glitter and hair pieces. Moreover, as the image below depicts, WORLDMISTRESS had one stage act which involved her dressing as an ultra-feminine, 1950s domestic housewife.



*Figure 5: WORLDMISTRESS performs as a 1950s domestic housewife*

WORLDMISTRESS's costume in this image, and the feminised constructions by Naomi and Violet of their bodies, could on the one hand be constructed as reinforcing traditional, quite patriarchal, roles for women. In the words of one audience respondent, Debbie: 'dressing up like a 1950's house wife...is not at all feminist'. Similarly, customer Katherine said that the performance was 'too girly' for her to enjoy. It could be argued that dancers are 'emphasising' their femininity, in Connell's (1987) sense, as their performances may be complicit in patriarchal subordination by accommodating the interests and desires of men. By performing as a feminine object of desire during their performances dancers may do little to challenge ideas about normative femininity in which women are positioned as sexual 'objects' for male pleasure, even though they are performing for female pleasure. It could also be an example of the dancers who identify as heterosexual

being able to demonstrate what Diamond (2005) has termed 'heteroflexibility', as although their performing for women suggests an experimentation with their sexuality, ultimately the reaffirmation of their femininity through their costumes indicates that their 'real', 'straight' sexuality is not threatened. Or, further, it could be an example of women adopting 'post-feminist' ways of expression. As McRobbie (2004) argues, in post-feminist discourse women are constructed as individual decision makers with agency, who can actively choose to re-embrace traditional femininity.

However, there may be a more complex challenge to heteronormative gender relations at play here. Firstly, WORLDMISTRESS herself identifies as a 'queer femme', and thus 'heteroflexibility' does not go far enough for explaining her feminised performance. Further, perhaps the dancers' feminine appearance could be construed as disrupting heteronormative stereotypes of 'the lesbian' as 'butch' or 'manly' in appearance, rather, she brings about a 'recognition to 'femme' lesbians...for whom visibility may only be achieved through a 'butch' partner'' in other circumstances (Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009:201). As noted earlier in this chapter, in the 1980s there was much debate over how the 'femme' lesbian was to be read, with some scholars arguing that this feminine appearance subverts rather than reproduces heteronormative femininity.

Further, the feminine appearance of the dancers could be subversive in that it parodies femininity, as it exposes rather than reinforces the 'performativity', in Butler's (1990) sense, of gender. WORLDMISTRESS's costume choice in the act above is quite different from the costumes of the bikini and lingerie that dancers are

expected to wear in mainstream strip clubs. Frank (2002b) suggests that through *performing* femininity dancers are engaged in a process of visibly ‘doing’ and therefore subverting ‘girl’, and highlighting its constructedness (Frank, 2002b:179). By wearing a costume that is so different from conventional strip club attire, and one that is such a stereotypically feminine costume, WORLDMISTRESS presents more of a parody of heterosexual femininity than a replication of it. In this sense, as Pendleton (1997:79) argues, rather than reinforcing problematic gender constructions, ‘[u]sing femininity as an economic tool is a means of exposing its constructedness and reconfiguring its meanings’. As we saw above, however, comments from audience members Debbie and Katherine suggest that they do not read the performance as parody, indicating that the meanings of erotic dance are dependent upon how they are received as well as dancers’ intentions for how their performances might be interpreted.

Interestingly, more overt attempts to transgress heteronormative gender binaries in Lippy were not read by audience members as successful. For instance, in the performance depicted below, WORLDMISTRESS’s attempt to subvert her feminine appearance was met, she says, with ‘confusion’ from customers.



*Figure 6: WORLDMISTRESS's 'Pussy Lovers' performance where she dresses as a male host (Photography by Geisha)*

Although this indicates that dancers' performances for women customers are not limited to stereotypically feminine acts, WORLDMISTRESS's switching from her feminine routines, which she was often observed performing, to this experimenting with masculinity, caused confusion from customers of how they should read her performance.

WORLDMISTRESS was the only dancer observed in Lippy who attempted to experiment with gender roles. WORLDMISTRESS dressed on occasion as a 'gangster' in a white suit, and as a male host, as evident in the image above. Her inspiration for this act, she says, came from a male character she had seen in a film who acted as a host to try and encourage customers to enter a strip club that was situated in a desert. The male character was humorous, WORLDMISTRESS said,

shouting at people ‘hey pussy lovers’ and trying to get them to enter the club. She says that the performance enabled her to experiment with gender roles, and also to introduce the other dancers performing that night to the audience, in her role as a ‘host’. She explains, however, that her use of a moustache, waistcoat and long trousers, created ‘confusion’ among customers over what gender and sexual identity she was attempting to perform. She says that ‘in the lesbian world someone who comes up on stage like that would be classed as a drag *king*, and because I’m so feminine I don’t think they knew how to take it’. The audience’s confusion, she says, increased at the end of the performance when she removed her clothing and acted ‘all feminine’. Arguably customers would be aware that she is playing with her gender identity in this performance, but perhaps her performance is met with ‘confusion’ because it does not fit the expectation of ‘drag kinging’. As Rupp et al. (2010:276) note, drag kinging ‘includes female-bodied individuals performing masculinity, transgender identified performers performing masculinity or femininity, and female identified individuals performing femininity, the latter known as ‘bio queens’”.

Yet WORLDMISTRESS’s performance does not neatly fit into any of these definitions. It involves more of a parody of a drag performance, rather than a drag performance per se, in that whilst she *plays* with masculinity, by wearing a moustache for example, the overriding gender identity apparent is still a performance of *femininity* rather than one of masculinity. Perhaps customers are not ‘confused’ by her performance because they dislike her playing with gender, but because it is so different from her usual feminine performances, and also because the performance does not completely transcend traditional gendered performances. Nevertheless, it is



interesting that the relatively few performances in Lippy that attempt to trouble gender and sexual roles are not quite able to do so. It is therefore questionable whether WORLDMISTRESS's performance subverts heteronormative femininity if customers do not 'read' this from the performance. This idea echoes Frank's (2002b) reflexive consideration of the subversive potential of her erotic dancing for male customers. Frank (2002b:200) recognises that although she views her dancing as transgressing heterosexual norms, most customers will not view her activities this way, and she therefore questions whether anything is really 'transformed or subverted' when she dances.

I now want to move on from dancers' performances to discuss the ways in which customers exhibited problematic, heteronormative ideas about bodies, in Lippy. To take one example, on one research trip to Lippy I was sitting chatting to Amelia, a participant at the bar while I waited for Katherine to arrive: a customer who had agreed to be interviewed. When Katherine arrived at Lippy and saw me she grabbed my arm, and, (as I noted in my fieldnotes at the time) 'yanked me off my bar stool and pretty much dragged me to the other side of the bar'. Our conversation then proceeded as follows:

Katy: What did you do that for? I was in the middle of a conversation.

Katherine: Why were you talking to that?

Katy: That? What is that?

Katherine: That, that man.

Katy: She's trans, not a 'that'.

Katherine: It's disgusting.

Katy: What is?

Katherine: That man. It makes me feel sick. Look how hairy he is.

Katy: I'm going to go and say bye to Amelia. Why don't you get a drink and I'll be back over in a moment.

This episode was a very uncomfortable moment in the research, which highlighted the quite extreme disgust felt by a respondent at another customer's bodily presentation. It also provided an uncomfortable situation in that I felt I had to lie to both participants in order to prevent a confrontation or awkward moment between the two of them. I returned to Amelia and explained that Katherine was really excited to tell me some news, and she had not realised that I was talking to someone when she first came in to the bar. Reminiscent of the policing of women's bodies by other women allegedly in their own 'community' in the 1980s sex wars as I described earlier in this chapter, this episode highlighted an instance of the heteronormative and transphobic policing of a customer's body in a space that is seen as a 'woman's' space, but not a 'trans woman's' space by customers such as Katherine.

Moreover, while dancers themselves at Lippy did not seem to be discerning of 'which' bodies they would interact with or touch, customers may reject a dancer's performance based upon their rejection of a dancer's aesthetic appearance. For example, one customer Katherine stated of a dancer that 'I didn't want her near me, her ass made me feel sick'. These rejections can cause frustration for dancers who thought they had 'judged' that the customer would want to experience bodily interaction. In such instances a dancer has to visually hide her frustration in order not

to offend the customer and to not disrupt the performance for the rest of the audience. It seems that lesbian women's spaces were contested spaces historically and continue to be in the present day through this 'policing' of women's' bodies.

To take a further example of customers reinforcing normative ideas about other customers' bodies, in an exchange between audience participants that I observed in November 2009, a woman audience member had been taken on stage to engage in an erotic stage routine with **WORLD MISTRESS**. **WORLD MISTRESS** directed the woman to sit on a chair on the stage and separate her legs (the woman was wearing jeans and a t-shirt). Upon her doing so, a crowd of women that I was standing with started to make derogatory remarks about the customer's appearance. Claire, a respondent, stated 'fuck me she's big', while another participant, Barbara, proceeded to repeat to us four times that 'ugh that's revolting'. Both Claire and Barbara, and at least six other audience members I observed, then looked away from the stage or covered their faces with their hands in disgust. This indicates the policing, and 'surveillance' in Foucauldian terms, of bodies that are seen as not aesthetically normative, and thus open to critique and scrutiny by others. It highlights the heteronormative framework within which these women customers understand sexual desirability. As Farquhar (2000:232) argues, the policing of lesbian sex and sexuality *within* a community of women who identify as 'lesbian' demonstrates how it is not only those outside that community that are sometimes 'complicit in the reproduction of hegemonic binary discourse'. The reproduction of heteronormativity here is intimately linked with the customers' construction of the female fat body as Other to the 'normal' body, and it is thus seen as problematic and undesirable. This example is remarkably similar in the problematic constructions it

evokes to Murray's (2004) discussion of a fat woman being sexually ridiculed by a group of men. As Murray (2004:242) argues regarding her example, as in Lippy, 'the ridicule of the fat woman comes from society's own implicit understanding of aesthetic values, and the ways in which her body contravenes them. She is situated as a ridiculous sexual creature'. Moreover, by still keeping her legs spread apart and seemingly not noticing the audience's reactions to her body, the woman at Lippy is also 'made ridiculous by her seeming refusal to bear witness to the offensiveness of her own body' (Murray, 2004:243).

Yet there were customers in Lippy who did not seem to ascribe to traditional heteronormative ideals for women's bodies. For example, two customers explicitly stated that they did not find the dancers in the club sexually attractive precisely because they conformed to heteronormative notions of femininity that suggest women should have a thin aesthetic. Debbie commented that: 'I don't find them sexy, they're all too skinny', similarly, Pippa said that 'she's not doing it for me at all, I like a woman with curves'. This suggests that not every customer in the club buys into heteronormative beauty ideals. However, even these comments do suggest customers have a particular 'type' of beauty that they prefer which still leaves little room for disrupting beauty categories and creating less emphasis on set standards for beauty.

Further, women customers' own presentation of their bodies could be considered to challenge heteronormative standards for feminine beauty. As I noted in chapter three, most customers observed in Lippy wore casual clothing of baggy jeans, t-shirts, and trainers or boots, which were certainly very far removed from the

more conventionally feminine outfits customers at LoveLads wore (short skirts and dresses). Further, as I documented in my fieldnotes during research trips, some customers at Lippy had visible tattoos and piercings that would not necessarily be read as conventional, for example, lip piercings (five women), nose piercings (ten women), and eyebrow piercings (eight women). Dancer *WORLDMISTRESS*'s body is also heavily tattooed, with tattoos visible on her stomach, legs, back and arms. These examples therefore suggest participants in Lippy displaying more alternative bodily aesthetics than conventional feminine ideals for women's bodies. As Davis (1997:33) notes, the modified female body, through its display of visible tattoos and non-normative piercings 'destabilize[s] many of our preconceived notions about beauty, identity and the female body'. Further, it also highlights women's agency to resist conventional heteronormative beauty practices, and as Pitts (1998:80) argues, '[w]omen's transgressive body practices constitute women as subjects', as opposed to passive followers of beauty ideals. This section has therefore highlighted some of the participants' normative ideas about bodies, but also the complex ways in which some women attempt to negotiate and challenge heteronormative bodily aesthetics and the way that these bodies are 'read'.

### **'Women-only space'**

Another element to consider in thinking about how the venue potentially subverts heteronormativity is through the notion of the venue as a 'women-only space'. Lippy provides erotic entertainment, but the space is frequented not only for this reason. Women customers come to the bar to socialise with new and existing friends, for a drink after work, or to dance at the weekend. That Lippy has a

predominantly female clientele was considered important by customers. As I and others who have studied women customers who attend erotic spaces where *men* dance for a women audience have argued (Pilcher, 2011; Smith, 2002; Montemurro et al., 2003), one of the key elements about these spaces that women reported enjoying was the fact that they were conceived of as a ‘women-only’ space, where women could be ‘sexually aggressive’ and ‘bond’ with other women. Approximately 79% of the women customers that I spoke with said that Lippy being a ‘women’s’ and/or a ‘lesbian’ bar or ‘space’ as a key reason why they frequented the venue. Many of these accounts of the venue were of Lippy as a distinctive ‘space’ as they called it, which is reminiscent of the traditional geographical conceptions of ‘place’, in that customers saw Lippy in a territorial sense as has having clear boundaries, as a place where women should be the primary customers, and they had ideas about the venue as very specific and fixed. However, as this section of the chapter will indicate, Lippy is in fact better characterised by Massey’s (1994:155) conception of place, in which places are seen as ‘full of internal conflicts’, and of them as ‘continually reproduced’ rather than fixed and unchangeable. Not only do managers, dancers, and clientele change, and with it change the meanings and experiences attached to the place, but even within any given night the venue is much more than a ‘woman only’ venue, which implies a sense of harmony and fixity of meaning.

In the UK today lesbian-only leisure venues are few and far between, with many gay male venues holding sporadic ‘lesbian’ events rather than specific venues being dedicated to lesbian clientele (Valentine, 1995). Yet as Pritchard et al. (2002:117) argue in their discussion of Vanilla, a lesbian bar in Manchester in the UK, ‘the significance of a defined lesbian space should not be underestimated’. In

the women customers' accounts of Lippy there seemed to be three main reasons why the 'women-only' venue appealed to them, namely because it gave more opportunity to find a romantic partner; it meant they were free from harassment from male customers and they thus felt more 'comfortable'; and because it was an opportunity to meet other women for friendships. This suggests a need to look beyond the erotic entertainment as the only way through which women could potentially challenge heteronormativity in the venue. Similarly to Hammers's (2008:567) research on a women's bathhouse in Canada, where she found that not all of her respondents wanted to 'engage in sexual activities' in a venue that provided erotic activities, not all of the women at Lippy watched the erotic entertainment, or even if they did, it was not always the primary reason they gave for visiting the bar.

Eleven respondents said it was important to have a social space that was largely free from male customers. To cite one example, customer Tina, who identifies as lesbian, states that 'I enjoy meeting the other regulars and dancing without the worry of men trying to chat me up'. Also, I found that nine customers on the club's social-networking page on Facebook engaged in conversations with other customers about there being too many men in the venue. Mary also says that all of the complaints she received at the venue when she ran it were from customers who felt there were too many men at the bar on certain nights. The woman who was the deputy manager of Lippy during my fieldwork, Jude, also said in her interview that she advertised a 'gay male night' on the Lippy Facebook page to be held on Sunday evenings at the bar as it is their 'quietest night', to which she received a 'negative reaction' from customers online who posted their discontent. Jude said customers were posting comments such as 'why are you letting men in here when it's a

women's bar'. Moreover, Becky, a regular customer, who identifies as 'straight', says she enjoys frequenting Lippy to experience women-only company. As in the Manchester gay scene, women may attend Lippy because they consider it to be a safe space, where they can avoid 'unremitting heterosexual masculine harassment' (Skeggs, 1999:216). This idea of women not wanting or needing men in leisure spaces may be a potential challenge to heteronormativity, yet the fact that they need specific spaces in order to avoid masculine harassment does not suggest anything that transgressive about male monopolisation of public leisure spaces more widely.

As in LoveLads, women respondents also were keen to meet new female friends and enjoy 'female friendly' company, yet customers' interactions at Lippy with other women were not fuelled by excessive alcohol consumption. I rarely observed women customers in Lippy being visibly intoxicated, nor did I observe management attempting to actively encourage alcohol consumption as the MC host at LoveLads did. Women customers at Lippy often spoke about how they enjoyed socialising more with women than men. Customers cited being 'more relaxed' or 'comfortable' in female company, with some stating that 'the ambience is different when the crowd is mixed' (Debbie), and that they can 'be more myself with the girls' (Becky). Similarly, some researchers have suggested that men also frequent strip clubs not only to consume naked female bodies, but also to enjoy male homosociality (Liepe-Levinson, 2002).

While at LoveLads much of the women's bonding with each other took place in relation to the strip shows – for example by discussing dancers that were on stage, not many of the women customers at Lippy seemed to relate their women-only



experiences to the erotic dancing. For customers at Lippy it was more about having a space where they could meet other women to socialise with and forge relationships. So it was about women having a shared sense of experience, but not necessarily forged around the erotic dancing. Lippy customer Barbara, however, did suggest that ‘the stripping is good because if they didn’t have it they’d probably have to let more men in’. What she appears to mean by this is that holding stripping in a lesbian club context by definition means that the audience needs to be largely, or wholly, composed of women. In this sense it is not the act of dancing per se that is seen as adding to female bonding or meeting, but its existence is still seen as conducive to keeping the space as a ‘women’s space’. Customer Tina, for instance, said that the erotic dancing for her did provide an atmosphere that was ‘sexually charged’ and enabled women to get ‘more in the mood for mingling’, which made it easier for her to meet potential sexual partners. Tina’s engagement with the dancing because of the atmosphere it creates suggests something quite different from customers’ experiences in conventional heterosexual strip clubs, as her use of the atmosphere provided by the dancing to meet fellow *customers* as potential sexual partners is something quite novel and potentially transgressive. On the whole, customers enjoyed going to what they conceived of as a ‘women’s space’ because it enabled them to meet new women and socialise in women’s company.

Nevertheless, the subversive potential of a ‘women’s space’ should not be overstated. While the women-only environment did create feelings of ‘comfort’, some customers held quite narrow definitions of who ‘should’ be at the venue, with some customers policing the bodies of other customers. For example, on five occasions I noted confrontations between women verbally abusing women who were

seen as 'straight' women, often stereotyped as such because of their feminine aesthetic appearance, encroaching on 'lesbian' space'. In one such instance, Pippa, a respondent, approached a group of women and asked whether they were 'straight', they said that they were, and she screamed at them to 'get outta here. I don't want no straight girls teasing me in here'. I was chatting to Pippa when this dispute arose, and I had socialised with her on a number of occasions outside Lippy. It is therefore somewhat contradictory that Pippa resented these women encroaching on what she termed 'lesbian territory', yet she accepted my presence even though she knew I was in a relationship with a man. This highlights the tensions around how customers might 'read' people's gender and sexual identities from their visual appearances, and police 'who' can be accepted in this space. Moreover, some respondents reported feeling a 'cliquey' environment, in terms of some women being in the 'in crowd', for reasons such as their privileged treatment by staff, and their monopolisation of certain spaces in the bar. Some more feminine-looking respondents also said they felt pressured to look more 'butch', to 'fit in'. This indicates that although a 'women-only' space was viewed as important by many respondents, it does not *necessarily* make the environment more 'inclusive'. As McDowell (1999:4) notes, 'places are made through power relations', in which participants construct boundaries which 'define who belongs to a place and who may be excluded'. Normative gender and identity work are not somehow absent in a 'women's space', or rather a 'place', in which customers reinforce binary divisions between lesbian versus straight, and reify quite normative definitions of femininity through the policing of other customers' bodies.

## **Touching, looking and ‘gazing’: Characterising the erotic encounters between customers and dancers**

One aspect of erotic dance that could potentially challenge normative roles for women as both customers and dancers is the potential for exercising a female ‘gaze’. I seek to unpack the complex interactions in Lippy, including the meanings of touch between dancers and customers, as well as the way that customers and dancers watch/look at each other. Some of the observations and interview data which point to the potential for an erotic female ‘gaze’ at Lippy are discussed here. I then move on to think about the element of touch, and how this could be read in one sense as countering heteronormativity, and at the same time reinforcing it through the ways in which dancers perceive women customers’ touch, and the way that some customers assert a sovereign ‘right’ to touch dancers. This section also highlights the way in which dancers can manage customers’ touch and the way that customers view their dancing, suggesting a more powerful conception of the female dancers’ gaze than might be assumed in accounts which position the dancer as a passive sex object of the male, or indeed female, gaze. Lastly, this section addresses the observational, interview and questionnaire data from women customers who either say that they do not enjoy the dancing, that they object to it, or that they enjoy it but do not want to talk about it in any great detail. On the face of it, these comments from customers could be conceived of as women simply not exercising any sort of ‘gaze’ in the venue. However, this section seeks to indicate a few more complex possibilities for their comments that tie in with some of the ideas about post-feminism (namely critiques of it), and the way in which customers are enabled, or not, to vocalise their sexual desires and experiences.

It was evident that some women customers in Lippy enjoyed watching the dancing, and did seem to enjoy it. To take a few examples, Becky, a regular customer, said that 'WORLD MISTRESS is amazing and very sexy', and Lindsey, a customer who was at Lippy for her first time, stated that 'I enjoyed seeing a woman dancing with her clothes off'. Deputy manager Jude also said in her interview that one of the main complaints they receive at the bar is that 'the dancers don't take their knickers off'. This suggests that some women customers do come to the bar to look at naked female bodies in a sexualised way. I also observed on numerous occasions women looking happy and smiling while they were engaging in stage acts with dancers, and on one occasion a customer seemed 'ecstatic', as I noted in my fieldnotes at the time, when the dancer kissed her on the cheek after a stage act the customer came off stage screaming 'yay, that was the best feeling'. It is hard to 'know' whether all of the customers observed watching the shows enjoyed the dancing, but from my observations I noted that all (except two women on one occasion) downstairs in the bar were facing the stage watching the dancing while it was on (as opposed to facing away from the stage, towards the bar for example). Although some of my respondents claimed the erotic dancing did not contribute to their enjoyment of the night at all, or that they tried to avoid it, these observations and interviews suggest that some customers certainly were interested in the erotic entertainment.

These comments from customers and observations of their experiences of 'gazing' also suggest that we need to complicate the idea, as Stacey (1994:26) suggests, that 'the identity of the female spectator who actively desires' can only be

conceived of as mimicking, or assuming, a masculine subject position. One of the ways in which, I argue, women's experiences of gazing at women dancers in Lippy diverges from the experiences of men at conventional strip clubs is through the element of reciprocal touch between the women dancers and women customers. As I discussed in chapter two, Murphy (2003:310) draws on Žižek's (1992) notion of the 'dialectic of the gaze', suggesting that while the gaze renders male customers powerful because it enables them 'to exert control over the situation, to occupy the position of the master', it also at the same time implies 'impotence' of the customer because they are passive watchers rather than being able to touch the dancer. At Lippy, however, women customers are invited to touch dancers when dancers come out into the audience, in more of a reciprocal interaction. As the image below conveys, *WORLDMISTRESS* goes into the audience and embraces an audience member with a hug during her stage show:



*Figure 7: WORLDMISTRESS hugs a woman customer*

The woman customer in this image is therefore far more than a passive, ‘impotent’ viewer in her watching of WORLDMISTRESS’s performance. Hugs are quite a reciprocal interaction, suggesting perhaps a more complicated interaction in Lippy than the binary dualism of the gaze in which one party is the active ‘gazer’ and the other the passive recipient of the gaze. Women customers can engage in quite intimate bodily interactions with dancers at Lippy. WORLDMISTRESS was often observed incorporating a kiss with a customer into her stage routines, either on the customers’ cheek or on their lips. Similarly, dancer Violet says that she does not mind if women customers ‘touch or stroke me, but with guys I would tell them to fuck off’. This is a similar finding to Brooks’ (2010) discussion of a lesbian strip venue in New York City. Brooks (2010:75) found that performances in the lesbian

strip venue that she observed were more ‘explicit’ than in the clubs she observed where men were the customers. This was also a finding in Wosick-Correa and Joseph’s (2008:213) research in conventional strip clubs where men are the primary customers, in which they found that women customers ‘are granted more leeway by club staff during lap dances’ than male customers are. This element of touch does then suggest at one level an element of the gaze that is different from, and perhaps goes further than, the subject position that male gazers are able to adopt, as women can not only *watch* women dancers but can experience touching, and *being touched* by the dancers also. This points to the quite active expression of erotic touch that women customers are enabled to engage in with other women in Lippy, which in some senses counters heteronormativity as it demonstrates evidence of visibly public (in the sense of the venue being a ‘public’ leisure venue) expressions of women’s desires and practices.

However, what is perhaps less transgressive about women customers being able to interact with dancers through the medium of touch, is the way that these interactions are read by dancers and by management at the venue. As Wosick-Correa and Joseph (2008:213) suggest of the women in their study, women were granted more scope to touch dancers but this is *not* because women’s sexuality and sexual desires are recognised, but rather, because ‘they are not taken seriously as customers who might become carried away in the heat of the moment and violate personal (or even legal) boundaries with dancers’, which male customers are considered capable of. There was a similar sense to some extent in Lippy that women customers were allowed to touch dancers only because they were not perceived to be a sexual or

physically violent threat to the dancers. For example, WORLDMISTRESS claims that:

‘I guess with women, you know in this club, I’ll bring someone up and I’ll touch them, and I’ll get their hand and put it on my boob and I mean that’s ok, but I would never do that with a man...with men it’s all about taking it off and seeing your legs open. Here it’s all fun’ (WORLDMISTRESS, interview, October 2009).

WORLDMISTRESS finds bodily interactions with women customers more acceptable, and not as visibly aggressive as male customers’ actions, but this does not necessarily suggest she views women as sexually passive. However, other dancers at the club, and the deputy manager, openly voiced their ideas about women customers as more passive sexually than male customers. Dancer Naomi claims she tailors her dance to suit women audiences, performing ‘less obviously sexual moves...as women don’t like that’. Dancer Violet also she says that she dances ‘less sexually’ for women, and that male customers are ‘more creepy’ and ‘intimidating’. These quotations suggest that dancers seem to feel more comfortable dancing for women, and they tend to perceive women customers as less of a sexual threat than men. In fact, somewhat ironically for a deputy manager of a venue that provides erotic dance, Jude seemed to view women as sexually passive and disinterested in erotic entertainment. Jude adopted a very set binary distinction between female and male sexualities in her interview. For example, she states regarding customers that:



‘you know women are women aren’t they? They just prefer to chat, to cuddle, to watch a DVD or whatever, I mean yeah we all have sex but we’re not mainly interested in sex, whereas guys, no disrespect to them, it’s just the way they are, they go out pick up a guy have sex and that’s it, and then they pick up a guy the next day’ (Jude, interview, April 2010).

Jude’s views reproduce the problematic assumption that men have natural sexual lusts that are all-consuming and need an outlet, whereas women are viewed as more passive, or less sexual than men.

Another element which counters the subversive potential of women’s ability to touch dancers in Lippy is the way in which some customers replicated quite problematic ideas about the stripping body as necessarily inferior and sexually available. To cite one example of the three of these sorts of views that I encountered, one respondent, Katherine, seemed to feel a sense of entitlement, or ‘right’ to certain services from erotic dancers. Katherine stated that she asked a dancer in Lippy for a kiss, but when the dancer refused and said ‘that’s not in my job description’, Katherine said that she got annoyed and called the woman a ‘bitch’. This suggests that this customer feels some sense of a right of access to the stripper, and that she has an entitlement to gaze at, and even touch the dancer’s body. Katherine’s behaviour is similar to Pettinger’s (2011) discussion of *male* customers’ ideas of their own ‘customer sovereignty’ in how they make sense of their purchasing commercial sex. Pettinger (2011:239) suggests that while male customers expect the sex worker to fulfil these expectations, they are often only implicitly expressed by the customer and the worker is required to ‘second-guess’ what the customer

requires. Katherine's actions are quite overt in indicating what she wants the worker to do, however. Even though this does indicate a woman customer acting quite sexually aggressively in the club as we witnessed in the previous chapter with women 'grabbing' and 'scratching' dancer Mike, it does not challenge heteronormative ideals of the female body as an accessible object.

Equally problematically, dancer Naomi cited one instance where a woman customer attempted to engage her in a conversation about Naomi's breasts when she was outside Lippy leaving to go home. Naomi commented that 'it would have been fine if I was on stage, or even in the bar, cause on stage I am there to sexually entertain, but when I go home I'm a different person'. This echoes Sundahl's (1998) discussion about dancers' distinctions between being objectified in the erotic dance space and outside it. Sundahl (1998:176) argues that erotic dancing 'is the epitomy of woman as sex object', but that 'I liked being a sex object, because the context was appropriate. I resent being treated as a sex object on the street or at the office. But as an erotic performer, that is my purpose...Having the distinction so obviously played out at work, I felt more personal power on the street'. This quotation, and Naomi's comment, suggests that dancers expect to be the objects of a sexualised 'gaze' in the venue, but that outside of this space they seek to challenge the idea of women's bodies as sexual objects.

This also points to a more complicated conception of the dancer's role in erotic gazing. It indicates that something more is going on than women dancers being objectified by a gaze when they are *working inside* Lippy. Naomi suggested in her interview that she feels in control of customers' advances – both physical and

visual – when she is performing on stage, but not necessarily when she is outside of the venue, when these advances are not expected. **WORLDMISTRESS** also spoke of how she manages to ‘command’ as she puts it, the ‘attention’ or ‘focus’ of the customers when they are watching her. Violet similarly states that she can control what customers are looking at when they watch her dance:

‘You learn audience control...it’s about eye contact, about getting them to look at what you want them to look at, like...you’ve gotta kind of learn to train the audience to look at what you want them to see, so say, like, I could have a big pimple here, and I don’t want anyone to see it, I’ll go like this, and draw the rest of your attention to the rest of my breast’ (Violet, interview, February 2010).

This suggests that dancers do not consider themselves as ‘victims’ in the interaction between themselves and customers when a customer looks at them when they are onstage, but rather, that they boldly return, and even ‘manage’, as **WORLDMISTRESS**’s and Violet’s comments suggests, the customers’ gaze. In this sense there is a more complex power relation in play in which the dancer is at one and the same time ‘seen’ by the customer, but the gaze of the customer is managed by the dancer, and the customer is also ‘seen’ by the dancer. This idea is evident in Schneider’s (1997:86) work in relation to theatre; she argues that in theatre performances there is a ‘third eye’, the eye of she who is ‘seen’. In Lippy, this would be the eye of the erotic dancer. Schneider explains that:

‘The ‘seen’ takes on an agency of her own and wields an unnerving potential of subversive reciprocity of vision, an explicit complicity, or mutual recognition between seer and seen, who become seer and seer, subject and subject, object and object in the scene of viewing. Such reciprocity threatens in that it suggests a disavowal of the terror and anxiety that demarcates subject from object in Western cultural habits of knowing’ (Schneider, 1997:86).

This analysis would mean for dancers that the gaze is more complex than the customer being the only party in the interaction who ‘looks’. It also indicates that power in the interactions between dancers and customers is also more reciprocal, and is thus more complex than one party being the subject and one the object. As Murray (2003:310) aptly puts it, ‘dancers are simultaneously in control because they watch and are controlled because they are watched’. Women dancers at Lippy were simultaneously watched by audience members, at the same time that they also ‘see’ the audience and can control, or return, their gaze. The ‘power’ of the gaze therefore works in more multifarious ways, and is exercised rather than held by one party, as the dancer gazes at the customer at the same time that they are watched. Further, some of the theories about the female gaze that I discussed in chapter two relate mainly to cinematic gazing, rather than performances of actors or dancers on stage. Yet watching stage performances, such as erotic dance, is different from watching a film or even pornography in which the ‘spectator has the privilege of ‘invisibility’, looking without being looked at’ by the performer that they are watching (Stacey, 1994:21). On stage at Lippy, however, women dancers can watch the audience’s reaction and question their gaze, or even humiliate a customer in front of the

audience if the customer does not visibly react or ‘gaze’ in the way that the dancer wants them to. To take one example, I observed WORLDMISTRESS simulate spanking a customer who had turned her back to the stage during WORLDMISTRESS’s stage performance. Women dancers are not merely recipients of the customers’ gaze then, but they can gaze at customers themselves, and engage in actively reading and reacting to customers’ gazes.

I want to now move on to consider in more detail the reactions observed of customers, and comments they made in interviews, pertaining to their objections to gazing at the women dancers in Lippy. As I noted earlier, these comments could be taken on the face of it as evidence that women do not, or do not want to, ‘gaze’ at women dancers. However, there is a more complex power dynamic in play which is related to a sexual political awareness that some of the customers grappled with. Some of the customers at Lippy struggled in particular with their personal feminist political views about stripping. For instance, Teresa noted in her email interview that she *did* enjoy the dancing, but that ‘I’m not sure it’s a good thing - I don’t think we should parrot heteronormative exploitation of women. Can’t we come up with something better than objectifying others as entertainment?’. This highlights her quite critical engagement with her own enjoyment of the performances but also her involvement in the wider feminist debate of whether stripping is objectifying or empowering for women dancers. Another customer, Yvonne, stated quite adamantly on the Lippy Facebook page that ‘I find it quite a disturbing place. Why does this club have strippers? It’s not any less demoralising/tacky/offensive when it’s women viewing women you know’. This resonates with Liepe-Levinson’s (2002:37) argument that some women suggest that lesbian strip events should remain a rarity

because it will ‘replicate the objectification and degradation of the female body that occurs within heterosexual venues’. Similarly, Kathy, a participant at The Cage, said that she did not enjoy going to Lippy because of the ‘voyeurism’ of watching pole dancing. Kathy says that The Cage was different from the dancing at Lippy because ‘it wasn’t like these sex shows were happening on a stage and you were just watching it. They were around you or in front of you, and if you wanted to get involved in them you could do’. As I argued above, however, in Lippy women customers can ‘get involved’ in the shows to a certain extent in that they can touch the dancers. What Kathy is describing, though, is a more community feeling within The Cage in which erotic acts were not performed on stage for commercial gain but were performed by customers themselves.

What these comments perhaps also signal, in a different vein from the experiences of women customer at LoveLads, is a sense of a rejection of post-feminist values related to women and sexual expression. In the last chapter we saw how many women customers sought male confirmation of their desirability, or indeed their femininity, through the attracting male gaze, rather than adopting the position of ‘gazer’ themselves, which I argued was intimately linked to post-feminist ideas about new normative femininities. As McRobbie (2004) highlights, there has been an emergence in recent years of ‘new’ ways of ‘doing’ femininity that are characterised by an ‘entanglement’ of feminist, anti-feminist, pre-feminist, and neoliberal ideologies. Further, this new female subject is:

‘despite her freedom, called upon to be silent, to withhold critique, to count as a modern sophisticated girl, or indeed this withholding of critique is a

condition of her freedom. There is quietude and complicity in the manners of generationally specific notions of cool, and more precisely an uncritical relation to dominant commercially produced sexual representations which actively invoke hostility to assumed feminist positions from the past in order to endorse a new regime of sexual meanings based on female consent, equality, participation and pleasure, free of politics' (McRobbie, 2004:260).

While customers at LoveLads seemed to be in many instances unquestioningly adopting these new normative subject positions, the comments above from customers in Lippy indicate their rejection of post-feminist conceptions of female subjectivities. In their more reciprocal interactions with dancers they do not attempt to exercise a purely detached, objectifying gaze. Further, there is a politics behind their watching of the dancing. They certainly are far from 'silent', and do not withhold critiques about the issue of gazing at women dancing and what it might mean for women to watch erotic dance. Further, as Gill (2008:440) argues, post-feminist rhetoric espouses the idea of '*compulsory (sexual) agency*, as a required feature of contemporary postfeminist, neoliberal subjectivity'. In this sense, these women at Lippy pose a direct challenge to the changing character of heteronormative notions of femininity, as the women customers are neither sexually passive, nor do they uncritically adopt more 'active' and aggressive sexual subjectivities that are completely devoid of politics.

Further, some women customers appeared to enjoy the dancing but were unwilling to comment to me about their experiences. For example, on seven occasions I approached women who had engaged in a stage act with a dancer, and

who seemed quite elated about their interaction when they came off stage, but only one of these women would speak to me about her experience on stage. The one customer who did comment, Ella, claimed that while she was ‘embarrassed’ that she was made to ‘crawl’ on the stage by the dancer, she did feel ‘titillated’, as she termed it, by the experience. This reluctance to discuss their experiences with erotic dance may have been because of their similar political feelings to the participants discussed above. However, it also may be because they did not want to talk about their enjoyment of sexual practices that could be considered politically or morally ‘wrong’ by other women. We have seen the historical ‘policing’ of sexual practices within lesbian communities that is continued in Lippy contemporarily through the normative ideas about how bodies should look and behave, and perceptions of erotic dance as objectifying by some customers. These women customers may not therefore have wanted to discuss their interactions on stage with dancers with myself or other customers, for similar reasons as Farquhar (2000:228) argues of her participants, which is for ‘fear of being judged by other lesbians as different, deviant or immoral on the basis of contested sexual practices’. My own social location and the way they ‘read’ my involvement in Lippy may also have affected what women customers felt they could reveal to me about their experiences of gazing. Again as Farquhar (2000:228) points out of her respondents, some customers at Lippy may also have been reluctant to talk about their experiences ‘in case such openings are (mis)understood as a form of sexual advance’. Women customers may not conceive of themselves as ‘gazers’, or talk about their erotic encounters with dancers because they ‘feel vulnerable when they become urban gazers, in ways not usually shared by men’ (Deem, 1996:117), perhaps in this instance because of the fear of the way in which their stories will be interpreted by others.



Of course we cannot ‘know’ the reasons why these women customers at Lippy did not want to talk about their experiences on stage with dancers, precisely because they would not talk about them. It is interesting to consider, however, how this might also be a product of heteronormative gendered frameworks in which women have not conventionally been positioned as desiring sexual agents who openly talk about their sexual experiences and engage in public sexual encounters. As Hammers (2008:558) found in her research with women attending a bathhouse in Canada, there is a ‘communicative difficulty in expressing sexual desire’, even in venues ‘where sex and sexual exploration is explicitly encouraged’. Interestingly, one of Hammers’s respondents suggests that she was uneasy at the bathhouse precisely because she was given the ‘choice’ to articulate her own desires, which she says ‘created a dialogue we have never had’ (Hammers, 2008:558). This suggests that sexual agency, and the choice and ability to articulate an independent sexuality for women, is something relatively novel, which provokes unease because it is not the ‘normal’ way for women to behave or speak about their experiences. Further, as I discussed earlier, at Lippy the women’s reluctance to speak may also be because the language of sexual agency as articulated in post-feminist rhetoric is not considered a suitable alternative way of characterising what lesbian women customers feel that they are ‘doing’ when they engage in erotic encounters in leisure spaces.

## **Conclusion**

Lippy is a distinctive space, and it does potentially subvert the conventions of heteronormativity in certain key ways. Whilst dancers often perform quite traditional

feminine roles in their stage acts, this could be read as a parody of gender roles, or as potentially indicating a recognition of 'femme' lesbians and rejecting stereotypes of the 'butch' lesbian as the only possible appearance for lesbian women. Further, the performance of femininity by dancers could actually expose its constructedness rather than reinforcing ideas about normative femininity. Through dancers characterising the erotic dance space as one where they perform femininity and invite a sexualised 'gaze', and separating this from their everyday lives where they do not expect to receive unwanted objectification and harassment, dancers potentially subvert heterosexist notions of women as sexually available to men, and of men as having natural sexual urges that 'justify' their uninvited sexual advances towards women. Moreover, that Lippy is felt by many respondents to be a 'women-only' space without need or want of male customers, is further evidence that heterosexist masculine harassment and male monopolisation of space is challenged in this venue.

Yet the challenge to subverting heteronormativity is limited in certain other respects. Women's leisure spaces are important in creating and exploring new sexual and gender possibilities, but they are also spaces 'where gender relations exist and are routinely reproduced' (Green, 1998:172). Lesbian erotic identities are legitimated in the venue through their interactions with dancers, which in some cases involve customers being able to 'gaze' at women dancers, and through customers' reciprocal touching interactions with women dancers. Yet, arguably heteronormative femininity is reinforced through the policing of gendered bodies, and the conception of women as sexually passive in some senses. Women within the venue engage in the policing of bodies, often along quite heteronormative lines. The fat body is seen as 'matter

out of place' by some customers, and there is a policing of women who are not deemed to visibly 'look' like 'lesbians', indicating that the fluidity of gender and sexual identities that the founder, Mary, envisioned for Lippy is not quite being articulated contemporarily. However, the 'butch' body and the tattooed body are not seen as out of place, which in itself *is* potentially subversive, as these represent non-normative bodies within the confines of heteronormative femininity.

This extensive policing of bodies indicates that the policing of women within communities of women that was evident at the time Lippy was founded, has continued into the venue's contemporary existence. Customers continue to make quite normative distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable bodies. Cooper's (2009) analysis of a lesbian bathhouse in Canada also identifies the ways in which venues which provide erotic encounters may not be *necessarily* more transgressive of heteronormative boundaries than mainstream venues. Cooper's quotation below neatly encapsulates the tensions also evident in the performance and consumption of erotic entertainment in Lippy:

'The bathhouse, like many sites of social invention, did not simply reverse dominant social relations. It was not a mirror held up to the mainstream, showing its practices in a counternormative light. Rather, what becomes very apparent is the more complex interplay and entanglement between the site and wider social relations' (Cooper, 2009:126).

The social interactions in Lippy do not occur in a vacuum that is somehow divorced from the normative assumptions that people make in other social spaces and

situations. People bring with them ideas about ‘what’ a venue should consist of and ‘who’ should occupy its spatiality. It is these assumptions and people’s behaviour in the venue that go some way in reinforcing, rather than transgressing, heteronormativity.

One aspect of the dancing that is potentially transgressive of heteronormativity to some extent is in customers and dancers exercising an independent female ‘gaze’. As chapter two highlighted, Jeffreys (2003:223) argues in relation to the ‘gaze’ in sex tourism, that women do not ‘do it too’ because their activities are not exactly the same as the way that men gaze at and objectify women’s bodies. However, it seems a little more complex than this at Lippy. It seems problematic to assume that an active female gaze would merely replicate the male heterosexual gaze. Women customers at Lippy do act as sexual agents, who despite their uncomfortableness with their behaviour, *are* looking at semi-naked female bodies, and gaining sexual enjoyment from this act in some instances. It is very hard to articulate an active female sexual subjectivity without falling back on characterising female sexuality as something passive if it does not ‘look’ like male gazing; or as women somehow misguidedly trying to ‘act like men’ if they are deemed to be ‘sexually aggressive’; or without uncritically adopting post-feminist ideas about new female sexual subjectivities.

The women customers’ enjoyment of the dancing, and also some of their reflexive comments on what is problematic about this looking is potentially subversive, as this not only contradicts heteronormative notions of female sexual passivity, but starts to beg the question of what a female ‘gaze’, that is less

heterosexist, and not uncritically 'post-feminist', might look like. Further, this chapter has also highlighted how dancers may 'gaze' at customers also, and they can in some cases read and re-work potential negative gazes directed at them from women customers. I have sought to highlight how there is no single articulation of a 'gaze' in Lippy. Rather, women's engagements with viewing erotic dance performers, and performers viewing their customers, can better be characterised as women making identifications with erotic dance performances that are 'multiple, contradictory, shifting, oscillating, inconsistent and fluid' (Evans and Gamman, 1995:45), even reciprocal, which depend as much upon the context and moment of the interaction as they do upon the performance that is being given. In the next chapter dancers' performances are considered in greater depth in relation to the meanings of their work in gendered terms, and the skills and labour that are required to enable their performances to be seen as effective by customers.

## **Chapter Six**

### **The gendered work of erotic dance**

This chapter brings together data from both venues to analyse the work experiences of women and men dancers. More visual data is included in this chapter as the photo-interview that I carried out with WORLDMISTRESS highlighted in great detail the way she carefully constructs her working role. The chapter seeks to address how dancers in both venues perform gendered roles and how they interact with women customers. It considers how far women dancers at Lippy, and men dancers at LoveLads, perform work that is similar to previous academic accounts of women who dance for primarily male customers. Further, it analyses the relative autonomy that dancers can exercise. Continuing the theme of the previous chapters, it also examines whether dancers' performances provide scope to disrupt heteronormative gender and sexual roles considered 'appropriate' to their gendered labour.

#### **Erotic dance as 'work'**

Characterising sex work as 'work' is problematic for some, with many radical feminists considering prostitution, lap dancing and erotic dance as exploitative rather than as legitimate forms of work. For some radical feminists, characterising the 'sex industry' as 'work' is equivalent to legitimising it. Others, however, have suggested that selling sex, or sexual services, is a job akin to other forms of work. As Pritchard (2010:online) notes, some sex worker rights advocates argue that 'as all sex is commodified under capitalism, what can broadly be termed erotic labour is another service that can be bought or sold like any other'. Yet

whether it is considered legitimate or not, the fact is that erotic dance does exist as a form of 'work' in the UK, and we need to consider what 'work' is involved within it. I would suggest that for erotic dance, as O'Connell Davidson (2003:63) argues of prostitution, whether or not we accept that it '*should be* regarded as a form of labour', the fact remains that vast numbers of people do work within the sex industry, and so our focus should be on 'harm-reduction measures' for those working in vulnerable conditions, rather than whether it is 'right' or 'wrong'. This would entail, O'Connell Davidson (2003:62) suggests, conceiving of sex workers 'as workers with rights', in order to afford them, for example, 'the right to refuse requests for services they do not wish to provide; to freely retract from contracts with clients; to be protected from abusive and slavery-like employment practices, and so on'.

Further, as I noted in chapter two, one key reason why we can argue that it is appropriate to consider erotic dancers as workers is because so much work in contemporary society also involves the display of workers' bodies and emotions. Pettinger (2011:227), for instance, conceives of sex work 'as embodied personal service work, entailing work on and with bodies to provide personalised sexual services'. In this thesis, the work processes dancers engage in are similar to conceptions of typical work practices in the service sector, namely aesthetic labour, emotional labour, and body work, which will be discussed in turn below. I have chosen to discuss dancers' work through these concepts because their own discussion of their work in interviews revealed elements of these labour practices. It is also a useful means for directly comparing the work of men and women dancers.

Warhurst and Nickson (2009:386) have generated the concept of ‘sexualized work’ in recent years, but interestingly, suggest that sex work would not fall under this concept because ‘sexualized work’ is work that ‘is not inherently sexual but can be imbued with sexuality for a number of reasons’. However, as I argued in chapters two and five, there is nothing inherently ‘sexual’ about erotic dance performances – but rather acts become defined as sexual or erotic by the way that they are read by customers, and the meanings that dancers attach to their work. I argued this following Jackson and Scott (2010:84) who pointed out that sex or sexual practices cannot simply be defined in terms of what we *do*, but rather ‘what makes an act, a desire or a relationship sexual is a matter of social definition: the meanings invested in it’. Women and men erotic dancers’ performances of aesthetic and emotional labour and body work do, however, have ‘a distinctly sexualised component, involving flirtation and banter’ (Pettinger, 2011:231). This sexualised component is also specifically gendered, both in the way that it is defined by dancers in some instances, and in the differences in autonomy that the work practices can afford women and men dancers. Therefore, I attempt in this chapter to ascertain how the work of erotic dance is perhaps performed differently, and given different gendered meanings, by men and women dancers, even when they are engaging in seemingly similar work practices.

### **‘I need to look sexy and glamorous’: Women dancers performing aesthetic labour**

One of the work practices that both female and male dancers that I observed engaged in and talked about was the way that they constructed and managed their



appearances for their stage shows. This appearance management can be conceptualised as ‘aesthetic labour’, entailing ‘the mobilisation, development and commodification of the embodied capacities and attributes of employees to produce favourable interaction with the customer’ (Nickson et al., 2001:176). A focus on aesthetic labour brings to the fore the highly ‘embodied character’ of interactive labour (Witz et al., 2003:33). Nickson et al. (2001:176-9) claim that in order to fulfil the demand for aesthetic labour successfully, workers must possess ‘faces (and voices) that fit’, ‘literally embodying the image of the company, with employees themselves increasingly ‘regarded by employers as part of the service product’. Aesthetic labour is performed according to the imperatives of employers, which links the performance directly to the drive for profit.

However, the way that erotic dancers’ aesthetic labour is shaped is distinctive. At least in Lippy, women erotic dancers are not only formally self-employed but are also required to develop their own routines and styles of appeal to the customer: their performances are not scripted by the employer, nor do they style themselves according to corporate imperatives. This is not always the case in conventional strip venues. As Sanders (2011) highlights, some strip venues in the UK require dancers to present a very specific ‘look’, even stipulating specific gowns and other clothes for them to wear. In LoveLads, dancers are given costumes that management require them to wear, and they perform routines that are heavily scripted and choreographed by management. The male dancers potentially have more job security as they are employed on fixed-term contracts, yet their contractual obligation means that they have less scope over what their stage acts involve and their costuming, as I discuss in more detail in this chapter. Women dancers at Lippy,

on the other hand, have more flexibility and control over the direction of their aesthetic labour, and I did not encounter any examples of management at Lippy telling dancers what to wear. However, dancers in Lippy still need to perform aesthetic labour as part of their bodily performance, to ensure that their appearance is one that customers will enjoy and continue to come to the venue to see in order to maximise profits for management. Their labour could also be terminated at short notice if management does not like the way that they dress, as they are not employed on a fixed-term contract.

Some writers on aesthetic labour have suggested that it is not a gendered form of labour, simply by virtue of the fact that both men and women perform it (Nickson et al., 2001). However, as Wolkowitz (2006:88) argues, even if both genders perform aesthetic labour, ‘to say the work is not confined to either men or *women* is not to say it is not gendered’. Both men and women may be employed, but this ignores the fact that particular ideals of masculinity and femininity will be selected for different working roles. Certainly, as figure 8 below depicts, the worker has to produce a gendered body in order to actually ‘do’ this work correctly. More than that, however, as Butler (1990) argues in relation to drag performances, in Lippy also gender performances are self-conscious and often involve parody.



*Figure 8: WORLDMISTRESS's 'Loving Spree' performance*

A good example of this is WORLDMISTRESS's 'Loving Spree' performance as a 1950s domestic housewife. She describes in great detail the way in which she constructs this traditional 'feminine' look through her choice of costume:

'My sister made it, yeah, erm, this apron was an old dress of mine, my sister kind of, I dunno, worked magic on it, erm ... I bought the material and my sister, the top was an old shirt she had and she kind of cut it and put Velcro on it 'cos the sleeves were really big so she put Velcro on it so they'd stick to my little skinny arms, and just tied it up, she put the little pink buttons on it' (WORLDMISTRESS, photo-elicitation interview, February 2011).

A number of significant insights emerge from WORLDMISTRESS's comments. She highlights the level of detail required to create this particular 'feminine' appearance

and how the labour of another person, her sister, is also necessary to support her own aesthetic labour. Her remarks also suggest that her aesthetic labour extends to spaces *outside* the workplace, as the labour required by her costume takes place outside of the immediate workplace. Furthermore, she highlights her attempts to reduce the cost of her aesthetic labour, by getting a family member to make her costume from second-hand garments.

Discussion of the image in our photo-elicitation interview revealed a further temporal dimension to her work. When viewing the image, WORLDMISTRESS commented that she originally wore stockings for this performance, but had subsequently changed her mind. The socks she is wearing here, she points out, were intended not only to contribute to the particular femininity she performs in this act, but were also less time-consuming to put on than stockings: ‘you only had two songs to get dressed into your next outfit, so it was all about timing as well’. What is on show here is the aesthetic skill and planning required to successfully manage her transition between acts.



*Figure 9: Styling the flesh*

Our discussion of the image above further illuminated the bodily techniques that WORLDMISTRESS's gendered aesthetic labour requires. When I asked her why she posed in this way, she proceeded to discuss her aesthetic management techniques by saying, 'It's good to have your arms up because when you put your arms up, it kind of brings your boobs up' [Katy: Oh right, I didn't realise that]. 'Yeah 'cos ... when you put your arms up it actually makes them look kind of fake' (and thus bigger). During our conversation, WORLDMISTRESS demonstrated how she performs this manoeuvre and encouraged me to perform it myself, so that I could appreciate firsthand the bodily strategies dancers use to construct the particular aesthetic appearance they are trying to achieve. In a similar vein, Frank (2002b)

documents the meticulous attention to bodily appearance required by erotic dance work:

‘You can't miss a stray hair on an ankle or thigh. Pubic hair must be carefully tended...Razor burn looks awful... Bruises and veins show up mercilessly, as do scars...Eye makeup also needs to be perfect. Chipped toe nail polish, gray hairs, and fine lines around the eyes - every detail must be tended diligently’ (Frank 2002b:172).

What both Frank’s and WORLDMISTRESS’s descriptions portray is the extensive attention to aesthetic detail that they have to undertake for the effective performance of a sexualised and gendered embodiment. Their accounts illustrate Witz et al.’s (2003:37) argument that aesthetic labour involves the production of distinctive styles which ‘depend as much upon manufactured and performative “styles of the flesh” ... as they do upon the manufacture of “feeling”’. The management of customers’ ‘feelings’ by dancers via ‘emotional labour’ has been much discussed in the erotic dance literature, and will be discussed below. Yet what this ‘styling’ of the ‘flesh’ by WORLDMISTRESS demonstrates is that simply displaying the female body in minimal clothing is not enough for her performance to be effective, but that she also has to frame her breasts in a particular fashion to produce the ‘right’ aesthetic appearance. Similarly, Frank documents how a naked body is not enough to produce an effective portrayal of a woman erotic dancer. As Gill et al. (2005:40) argue, even female bodies that are already heavily worked upon require continual and scrupulous management to maintain their appearance of ‘natural’ femininity. In this sense, the feminine body is never a ‘finished’ project.

Women dancers' aesthetic appearance must also be 'glamorous'.

WORLDmistress said that 'it's important to wear lots of make-up cause you're in the dark, and if you're in day make-up you're just gonna look all plain, you need to look glamorous'. This 'need' to look glamorous was not a requirement stipulated by management, but was more the dancer's own sense of how they wanted to present themselves to the audience. Violet stated that her choice of appearance very much 'depends on what look you're going for' on a particular night. For instance, in one interview she explained that 'today I'm doing more burlesque, so it'll be black eyes, black lashes, I feel like crap, so something that will be able to hide it, but will still make me look sexy and glamorous!'. This not only demonstrates the use of aesthetics to 'hide' a perceived less than satisfactory appearance, which is arguably a conventional feminine beauty practice, but also demonstrates the autonomy of the dancer to choose their own costuming, and experiment with different outfits and accessories according to their own requirements rather than those articulated by management.

The autonomy of dancers at Lippy in their construction of a 'glamorous' appearance is relatively unique. North American research, for example, reports that dancers are preferred if they embody a particular feminine, middle-class aesthetic ideal. Particularly in clubs regarded as middle-class establishments, women are required to convey an image of feminine respectability, being seen as 'glamorous', but not 'trashy' (Frank, 2002a:207). Skeggs (1997:110) has argued more broadly that glamour 'is a way of holding together sexuality and respectability'. Part of creating this glamorous, yet respectable image, is also maintained by management excluding

what it perceives to be bodily signifiers of working-classness, such as ‘policies against tattoos, piercings, weight, shape, excessive makeup or hairspray’ (Frank, 2002b:197). *WORLD MISTRESS* was refused work in many erotic dance clubs in the UK which cater for a male clientele because of her tattoos on her legs, arms and torso, yet her tattooed body image is not out of place in Lippy. This suggests that Lippy enables dancers to style their bodies according to their own standards of ‘beauty’ or ‘glamour’, or their expectations of what the audience might enjoy.

### **Creating a masculine body: Male dancers’ aesthetic labour**

In the performance of erotic labour by male dancers at LoveLads, such roles are also gendered in that they are highly ‘masculinised’. Since the rolling back of the heavy industries under Thatcherism, there appears to have been a shift from male work *with* the body to work *on* the body (Haywood and Mac an Ghail, 2003:40). Monaghan’s (2002) study of ‘bouncers’, for example, showed that male bouncers need to work *with* their bodies and have physical competence, but they also engage in a degree of work *on* their bodies to produce a body which is large and ‘muscular’, in order to fit the ‘masculine’ work role (Monaghan, 2002:340). One of the male dancers that I interviewed, Mike, similarly told me about his appearance management techniques, which he disliked. Here is an extract from our interview in September 2010:

Mike: The grooming does your nut in, like hair and stuff

Katy: Do you have to wax?



Mike: Yeah like a doughnut. One of the bosses told me to shave my legs and it's just growing back and I had ingrowing hairs and stuff. Look like there is a scar where I had an ingrowing hair. Nope, never doing that again.

Katy: Do most of the dancers shave their legs then?

Mike: They clipper them down, but the clipper ran out, and we were preparing for our calendar shoot, and the clipper ran out and I was like urgh so I had to use hair removal cream and shave them, horrible.

Katy: Do you think people scrutinise you that much, in as much detail?

Mike: Well if I had hair and then had to put baby oil on, it looks, like, greasy, like a porn star or something.

Mike's specific aesthetic management of his appearance of a healthy, built body, was intimately connected to his presentation of his body as a *masculine* body. As Gill et al. (2005:58) argue of their male respondents who discussed the 'body projects' of weight management, 'the vehement protestations of individualism, independence and bodily autonomy were not simply expressions of masculinity, but enactments of hegemonic ideals'. Although shaving his legs, which has typically been regarded as a feminine beauty practice (Van Oost, 2005), Mike still manages to carve out the acceptability of his aesthetic appearance management through defining his practice against what he is not. For example, he states that he shaves so as not to look like a 'greasy porn star'. This serves to cast his body as somehow better in status than the bodily appearance of those in other sex-related jobs. Frank (2002a:198) notes how female dancers sometimes similarly make distinctions between themselves and other workers in terms of 'respectability', which can be along appearance lines.

Further on in our interview Mike defines his appearance against what it is not; a feminine body. Mike discusses how he is recovering from an illness which has made him 'look so skinny, before my legs and arms wouldn't be skinny, I apologise'. Interestingly he equates 'skinniness' with femininity, and muscularity and being 'built' with masculinity, and apologises for his perceived 'lack' of muscularity at present. He does this further through his assertion that he is not anorexic, but 'manorexic' at present. This seeks to position anorexia as a women's health-related problem, and sets his currently less 'built' body up as something that is not something which he sees as a self-inflicted illness that 'women' have, but as something which was not his fault, and that he can overcome himself without the need for medical intervention. He cites a number of reasons for his 'manorexia', including toothache, flu, and not being able to eat or go to the gym. Similarly, Gill et al (2005:58) have pointed out, 'doing health' for men is a way of 'doing gender'. Mike's insistence that he can and will work upon his seemingly unfit, 'skinny' body at present suggests that Mike's appearance management involves the portrayal of a body that is autonomous, and which he had individually worked upon and achieved.

I observed on four occasions male dancers rubbing body oil on each other's bodies, which suggests that their aesthetic labour is a collective, reciprocal process, not purely an individual one. This activity only took place in the dressing room, however, hidden from the view of the women customers. This perhaps suggests that it was an aesthetic process that would not be considered heterosexual enough for the audience members to see, and could be viewed as homoerotic. The role of the male dancer has to be 'masculinized' and 'made socially acceptable for men' (Tewksbury,

1993:179), which could explain why this potentially homoerotic activity was conducted in a private area of the club. As Liepe-Levinson (2002:184) argues, the male stripping role has to be framed as one of masculine power and domination because the 'sex object' role is dangerous for men to occupy as it could 'feminize' the male and imply 'the possibility of his being gay', which, if following Connell's (1995) model of the gender hierarchy, would relegate the male erotic dancer to a 'subordinate masculinity'. This seems to be the case in LoveLads. For example, when I questioned male dancers about their processes of preparing their bodies for the stage shows, none of the male dancers mentioned that other dancers assisted in their aesthetic labour via body lotion application.

All five of the male dancers that I interviewed spoke of their 'working out' at the gym as the main way in which they prepare their bodies for the show. For instance, Vince claims that 'I work out every day', and Craig is a personal trainer, which he says 'helps loads for this job as the girls love my muscles'. It could be argued, then, that the male dancers' emphasis upon their individualised bodily aesthetic labour, and the distancing of their potentially homoerotic aesthetic labour to the more private areas of the club, are direct attempts to ensure that (hetero)masculinity is performed. In a similar vein, Liepe-Levinson (2002:123) has discussed how male models are often positioned through 'manly clichés' in magazines that are marketed towards heterosexual women. Interestingly, she also suggests that some women readers still assumed that these male models were 'gay' because they did not recognise the display of men as sexual objects to be 'masculine'. Therefore, for their work role and possibly for personal identity reasons, male dancers may downplay aspects of their aesthetic labour because they recognise

that customers may read their bodies as 'gay' and thus not 'believe' the heterosexual performances in the stage show.

Male dancers' performance of masculinity was further demonstrated through the aesthetic labour of their costuming. All of their costumes were lined with Velcro, which could easily be ripped off in a quick, more violent action than the slower, subtle undressing of the female striptease at Lippy. Male dancers wore 'fantasy' fancy-dress costumes, all of which portrayed a particular hyper-masculine occupation. Every week dancers wore occupational costumes, dressing as firemen, sailors, army soldiers, builders and policemen. Because the 'sex object' role is seen as antithetical to masculinity, these costumes, as Liepe-Levinson (2002) argues, give the men's display of their semi-nude bodies a sense of legitimacy. They give the impression that the dancer is not just there to be objectified, but he gives an illusion that he is doing something else, rather than being there primarily for female voyeurism. Moreover, all of these occupational roles are ones which provide a rescue service or involve danger and risk. The costumes create the impression that the male dancers are 'heroes', there to rescue and protect women customers, which does little to challenge heteronormative ideas of the active male role and passive female role.

The male dancers' aesthetic labour has a different bodily emphasis than women dancers at Lippy, through their use of sensual props to adorn their bodies. Male dancers were observed using ice cubes, soapy water, and fire to create specific visible effects on their bodies. For example, the application of ice cubes to the chest made their nipples more 'pert', as dancer Matt told me, and he said that the dancer rubbing soapy water over his body makes their bodies look smooth as well as

creating a 'fantasy shower scene'. Male dancers also incorporated fire into their routines through using batons which were set alight, which adds an element of danger and risk and further demonstrates their masculine bravery. Two of the women customers at LoveLads stated that the fire enabled them to experience the dancers as more sexually appealing to them. For instance, Maria stated that 'ooh he's much more attractive now', and Jenna said in an email interview that the fire 'made it much more exciting, he looked so much hotter with those fire cane things'. Further, as Liepe-Levinson (2002:116) argues, these visual cues expose the body to real physical stimuli and thus serve to give the impression that the dancer's bodily reactions 'may just be "involuntarily" wrung out of the performer', and therefore his body just 'can't help' but gain pleasure from what he is doing. The aesthetic labour of male dancers therefore both emphasises the (hetero)muscularity of the performers, but also functions to indicate that it is 'ok' for women to look at their bodies to gain physical enjoyment from their performances.

However, at LoveLads, the male dancers' aesthetic labour is heavily circumscribed by management. Their costumes and props are chosen by management to fit in with their choreographed stage routines, which show little variation between weekly shows. As dancer Vince states 'these are routines that we've had for years', and dancers said that many of the routines were choreographed by manager Keith many years ago. In one sense, this leaves male dancers less autonomy over designing or choosing how they act on stage. However, it also affords them less responsibility for aesthetic labour. Male dancers merely turn up to work and perform the same roles that they do every week, rather than having the personal responsibility of conjuring up new costumes and routines as the women

dancers at Lippy do. Further, there is also a sense among the male dancers that there is a 'standard' sexual act or performance that all women want to see and that all women will enjoy. This also means that their aesthetic labour rarely changes as they presume their current routines and costumes 'work' so there is no need to change them. As Vince explains, 'do you really need to change them if they're effective, or as some customers have never see them?'. I enquired as to whether it made their work more mundane if they did exactly the same routine in the same costume every week, but all male dancers claimed it made their work 'easier', with Vince saying 'it means you don't have to think, you can do it on auto-pilot while thinking about what you've gotta do the next day, your washing, go to the shops etc.'. Rather than leaving them relatively powerless in their work role then, the set routine and costuming enables dancers to experience their work role as a lot easier, requiring less thought, and arguably also, less 'emotional labour' than female dancers perform. It also leaves less room for dancers to have to independently take the 'blame' if their costume on stage does not 'work', as it is a collective performance. Moreover, there is less emphasis upon improvising and 'reading' what other dancers are doing as everything is heavily scripted beforehand.

### **Emotional labour performed by women dancers at Lippy**

So far I have considered how erotic dancers labour to construct their bodies as a costume, a gendered costume that is developed through the worker's management of their flesh as well as their clothes. It was also evident that women dancers engage in a great deal of 'emotional labour', more so than male dancers at LoveLads. As I will document here, through looking at visual depictions of

WORLDMISTRESS's performances, and talking with her about her labour within the images, we can gain a rich insight into the emotional management that she undertakes as part of her work role. Emotional labour, in its original conception, refers to the effort and imagination that workers are required to put in in order to 'induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind' in customers (Hochschild 1983:7). Hochschild (1983:7) argues that workers interacting with customers are required to manage their 'feelings' in order to perform a 'publicly observable facial and bodily display' in return for a wage.

Studies have shown that the emotional labour required by workers in the sex industry is particularly intense. Törnqvist and Hardy (2010:144), for instance, have documented how the emotional labour that 'taxi dancers'<sup>14</sup> perform 'is not only about producing feelings in their clients (reliance, intimacy, sensuality)' but is also primarily about the management of the dancer's *own* feelings 'in order to produce a romantic or sexualized experience for the client'. Talking to WORLDMISTRESS about pictures I had taken of her performances enabled me to understand the complexity of her emotional labour, her satisfaction in successful emotional displays, and her resentment when her autonomy was curtailed or her performances were not appreciated. This suggested a high degree of involvement of her 'self' in her work role. WORLDMISTRESS used the images to reflect on the effort her interactions with the audience required, even when her facial expression, far from being 'fake', mirrored her actual feelings.

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<sup>14</sup> 'Taxi dancers', as defined by Törnqvist and Hardy (2010:138), 'sell tango dance experiences to tourists in Buenos Aires, Argentina ... They are for the most part, male and Argentinean, selling dances to female tourists'.



*Figure 10: 'Mistress Show' (Photography by Geisha)*

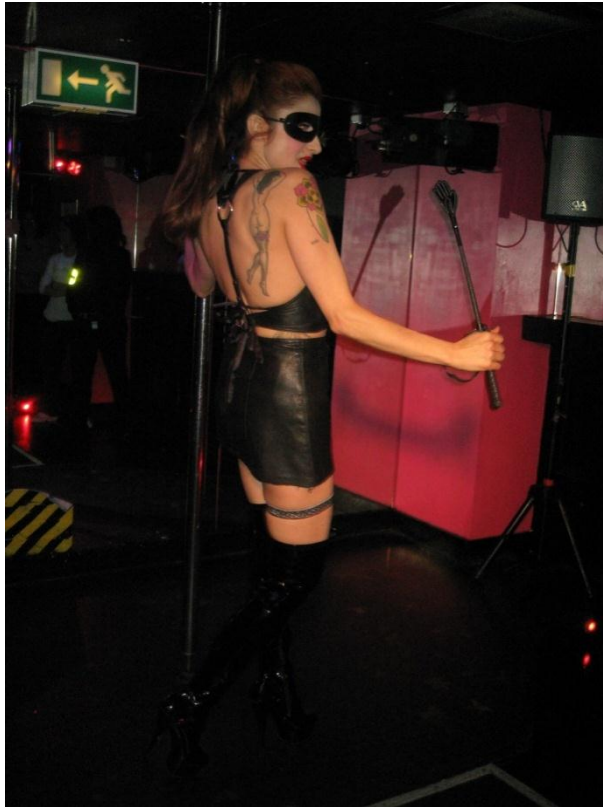
For instance, in figure 10 WORLD MISTRESS is pulling the customer along by a rope tied to the customer's neck. As WORLD MISTRESS explains, this enacts a 'mistress scene', in which the 'bad' or 'naughty' customer is humiliated by being dragged along by the annoyed 'mistress' to 'punish' her. The scene requires considerable emotional labour to display a convincing dominating role. The dancer has to talk, act, and produce facial expressions that make the audience think that the customer is being dominated, or that she has been 'bad' or 'naughty', in order for the performance to be successful. Somewhat ironically, WORLD MISTRESS actually felt the annoyance with the customer that she displays in her facial expression because the customer was not co-operating. Hence, WORLD MISTRESS had to exert herself more than usual to try to bring her into line. For example, she states that:



‘I said ‘you know, just have fun with me’. For god’s sake, she just kept talking and talking to me and I’m like, for god’s sake, I’m like yeah whatever, I was just trying to do the show and I was so annoyed with her, like god’ (WORLDMISTRESS, photo-elicitation interview, February 2011).

Looking at this photograph together enabled WORLDMISTRESS to share with me the mundane workplace frustration that she remembered feeling during this encounter, and also her satisfaction in the emotion that she managed to project to the audience. Her pleasure is in the ironic coincidence between the facial expression required by the act and her own feelings. This could also suggest more permeable, fluid boundaries between the allegedly ‘authentic’, ‘private’ self, and the ‘acted’, workplace ‘self’ than Hochschild (1983) allows for.

Again in our discussion of figure 11, below, a rather complex link between WORLDMISTRESS’s aesthetic labour and her emotional labour, and what this meant for both her work role and her own ‘feelings’, became evident. Contrary to some accounts that suggest that performing emotional and aesthetic labour is disempowering for the worker, in so far as it is embedded in the subordination the employment contract requires, it was clear that WORLDMISTRESS’s performance enabled her to feel powerful.



*Figure 11: 'Dominatrix Show'*

In this image the aesthetic labour required by WORLDMISTRESS's hairstyle, the leather dress that she is wearing, and the way she holds a leather whip, enable her to portray herself as the dominating party in dancer-customer interactions. WORLDMISTRESS explains that 'with dominatrix work I like to have my hair up in a ponytail ... So for me, when my hair is up I feel more in control, whereas when it's down I feel not so in control'. She is 'deep acting' in Hochschild's terms, as her hairstyle helps her establish the emotional mood that is required for this role. Yet this quotation also suggests that WORLDMISTRESS not only presents herself as 'in control' via her hairstyle, facial expression, props and clothing, but also that she feels powerful, or 'in control' even when performing certain routines that require intense aesthetic and emotional labour.

This again contrasts with the idea that performing emotional labour is necessarily alienating for workers, and further sheds doubt on the idea that the workplace ‘self’ that is acted and performed is entirely separable from the worker’s ‘own’ sense of ‘self’. Rambo Ronai and Ellis (1989: 296) suggest that erotic dance is an occupation that ‘pays well, but costs dearly’. Dancers are said to experience what Hochschild (1983:186) terms a ‘transmutation of self’ as a dancer’s constant performance of a specific sexual self can hinder their ability to experience ‘an authentic sexual self’ outside of the club (Deshotels and Forsyth, 2006:234). However, WORLDMISTRESS’s performance suggests that emotional performances do not necessarily involve negative consequences. She mentioned the ‘pleasure’ she gained from dancing for an audience on stage, and as this example highlights, some of her performances do actually make her feel more powerful. WORLDMISTRESS shows how she is enabled to feel powerful, even while exerting the emotional and aesthetic labour that goes into a successful performance of the dominating role the scenario requires. This supports Noon and Blyton’s (2002:198) argument that ‘emotional display does not render women powerless’.

In a Foucauldian sense, WORLDMISTRESS is not entirely disempowered through her performance of emotional and aesthetic labour, but rather a more complex power relation is in play. At the same time that she is required to perform very particular gendered and sexualised roles, she does have agency to resist these, or create different meanings of those performances. Further, performing these particular roles does not mean that a worker cannot feel ‘in control’ of, rather than alienated from, her ‘self’. WORLDMISTRESS’s discussion of images of her acts demonstrates that she has quite a degree of autonomy in her choices of the roles she

creates through her emotional and aesthetic labour, and further, the fact that she personally reports sometimes feeling powerful during her performances suggests that, although a workplace role is carefully constructed, it is not necessarily entirely separate from the worker's own sense of 'self'. Were WORLDMISTRESS to be performing in a heterosexual club where her act required subordination or deference to male customers, however, it might be a different story.

In fact, there are limits to WORLDMISTRESS's autonomy or 'power' even in her stage performances at this lesbian club. Management at the venue require dancers to perform a 'double show', where two women dancers dance together on stage at the end of the show. WORLDMISTRESS complained that this significantly inhibited her ability to present herself as a unique performer, and thus required additional emotional and aesthetic labour; labour that was much less enjoyable or empowering than she usually experienced it. Her labour in this act was less autonomous than in her other performances, as she was constrained both by the requirement to perform a 'double show', and also by her own judgement that the act would fail to convince unless she matched the other performer's bodily presentation.

Figure 12 depicts WORLDMISTRESS performing a 'double show' on stage with another dancer. The foot and leg of this co-performer is visible in the right-hand side of the photograph, but the rest of the image has been cropped to ensure anonymity. In a 'double show' dancers not only have to manage their own emotions and appearance, but have to mediate, or 'read' how the other dancer is performing, and moderate their performance accordingly.



*Figure 12: 'Double Show'*

Upon seeing the image above, **WORLDmistress** stated that it was 'obvious' that the 'double show' was an aspect of her work that she did not like, as in the photograph she and the other dancer are quite far apart. **WORLDmistress's** explicit dislike for the 'double show' is due to the fact that it required her to work with dancers whose performances she perceives as different from hers, particularly in terms of their choice of roles and image. **WORLDmistress** notes that in figure 12 she has changed her costume from what she wears in some of her individual stage dances, 'because I was doing it with another pole dancer ... I wanted us to look the same'. She also points out that she wears what she calls 'stripper shoes'. **WORLDmistress** therefore had changed her aesthetic appearance to 'fit in' more with how she perceives pole dancers usually look and dress. Both dancers wear the same black dress, g-strings, and high heels, because **WORLDmistress** thought their performance together would not work if they were not similarly styled. This,

however, was an aspect of the double show that she did not like as it contrasted with her desire to become known as a ‘queer femme kink performer’, rather than a pole dancer *per se*. She states,

‘I just, I didn’t wanna be there as a pole dancer, and the other girl was a pole dancer, so I thought she’s obviously not gonna work with me so I had to kind of work with her and try and make us *both* look like a pole dancer’  
(WORLDmistress, photo-elicitation interview, February 2011).

This may also be a potential reason why her attempt to perform a ‘masculine’ stage act, as we saw in the previous chapter, was met by ‘confusion’ from customers, as regular customers may have been confused by her changing from this very feminine performance that she performs in a double show. Interestingly, however, although WORLDmistress quite vehemently discusses her dislike for the aesthetic and emotional labour that is required to perform a ‘double show’, as she wants to present her work ‘self’ as ‘unique’ from stereotypes of pole dancers, her opinion is not echoed by other dancers’ interpretations of her work. Another dancer from the same venue, Naomi, commented to me that she thinks WORLDmistress ‘loves the double show’, which suggests that WORLDmistress’s ‘impression management’ is successful. By the end of my fieldwork, WORLDmistress no longer performed ‘double shows’ on stage, she performed solo acts only. This suggests that she had been able to create a relationship with management that enabled her to negotiate over an area of her labour where she felt she had too little autonomy in her working role.

### **Male dancers performing (little) emotional labour**

The literature pertaining to male erotic dancers, and men workers more widely, suggests that they perform emotional labour differently, and to a much lesser extent than women. It has been argued that even when men and women possess the same job title in the performance of emotional labour, it is *men* who tend to benefit from gendered assumptions which accompany such roles. Certainly Hochschild (1983) found that male flight attendants were not expected to adopt the sexualised performance required of female attendants, but instead were seen as proto-managers, rather than proto-mothers or girlfriends. Similarly, Taylor and Tyler (2000:86) claimed that whilst female telesales staff performances were judged upon whether their interaction with customers could be both ‘hard’ and ‘soft’, the latter involving significant amounts of emotional labour, male staff could perform less emotional labour providing they were considered a ‘good seller’. Workplace performances were thus assessed along highly gendered lines, with emotional labour being seen as tantamount to the female work-role, but as an optional extra for men.

In terms of erotic dance, Tewksbury (1993:178) has argued that male dancers do not perform ‘emotional labour’ to the same extent as women, as interactions with female customers are ‘brief’. In LoveLads, this was certainly true during most of the show. During the stage shows, customers could not physically interact with dancers while they were on stage due to the club’s licence regulations stipulating that customers need to remain seated during the show. In this sense, one-on-one encounters between dancers and customers were ‘brief’. However, male dancers still performed emotional labour in the way they managed their own feelings, and the

feelings they attempted to generate in their customers. For example, dancer Todd explained how he utilises ‘eye contact’ while on stage to make customers ‘feel like I want them’. Todd says that he will focus on one woman in the crowd, who he says he selects if they are looking at him ‘a bit more than the other women are’. He then will make lots of eye contact, and direct any hand gestures at her, as he puts it ‘so she feels like I’ve singled her out, to make her feel special’. This suggests that despite the physical boundaries between dancer and customer which makes their interactions relatively ‘brief’, the dancer does still utilise emotional labour techniques to induce their desired feelings in customers.

Further still, towards the end of an evening at LoveLads the dancers participate in group photographs with customers. This part of the evening involves more interaction than is possible during the stage show, and dancers spoke about how they managed to ‘keep up the illusion’, as Craig termed it, that ‘we’re still interested in them when we’re off stage’, by managing their own emotions. Even if a customer’s attention during these photograph interactions is perceived of as unwanted by a dancer, they still have to suggest facially and in the way they converse with customers, that they are enjoying the attention. Dancers spoke of how they were often ‘scratched’ by women customers, with Vince saying that it ‘annoyed me sometimes but I just smile and get on with it’. This was a feature in all the men’s accounts, in that they spoke of some degree of violence in the form of ‘scratching’, ‘grabbing’, or ‘biting’ from women customers, but all said that they managed their emotions by still being polite to the customers as they were told by management that this was simply a ‘hazard of the job’. Yet occasionally male dancers ‘broke’ their performances of emotional labour when they feel a customer has gone ‘too far’ to



warrant the dancer still providing emotional labour. To cite one example, Mike's comment here suggests an instance where he stopped performing emotional labour.

He says that:

'They grab you and scratch you and then try and grab your clothes and your other bits, I mean I can kind of understand it to an extent, sometimes, but you know it does get a bit fatiguing at times. Occasionally if someone grabs me in the chest then I'll grab them in the chest, exactly the same as they did, and I'll say "well do you like it? No, fair enough well don't do it to me!", usually something like that but normally I'll steer clear and just get on with it' (Mike, interview, September 2010).

Mike's account therefore demonstrates how even when emotional labour is a requirement of a work role, employees can sometimes 'act up' and resist its performance. His comment demonstrates a resistance that reasserts his heteromascularity. Other studies, such as Filby's (1992:39) study of a betting shop, highlight how female employees resist performing gendered emotional labour by 'sneering instead of smiling at customers', and 'being sarcastic as opposed to cheerful'. Similarly, Taylor and Tyler (2000:90) document how gay male flight attendants subvert customers' stereotypes of them as the 'cabin crew queer' by actively parodying this identity. Further, Vince, another dancer at the club, compares his job to women dancers in lap dancing clubs, and says that after his show at LoveLads 'I talk to who I want to talk to after the show, whereas those girls have to talk to everybody'. This suggests that he recognises that his work role is potentially

more autonomous in that he can choose who to converse with, or perform emotional labour for.

This begs the question of whether men and women *both* perform emotional labour, and whether men have more autonomy in their performances than women dancers at Lippy and more widely? Further, male dancers' performance of emotional labour does not affect masculine privilege in the same way that performing femininity might reinforce a subordinate status for women. The male dancers in LoveLads were required to perform emotional labour, yet it reinforced their performance of a privileged masculinity, rather than undermining it. Moreover, male emotional labour is often viewed as 'exceptional', as men perform a task not 'naturally' deemed appropriate for their gender (Adkins, 1995:107). Arguably, this is exactly the 'appeal' of men performing emotional labour at a male strip show. Conventionally attractive, semi-nude, and sometimes fully nude, male bodies are presented as available to women, both erotically via aesthetic labour, and emotionally. Although male dancers are still presented as masculine in their appearance and demeanour, their emotional labour, when performed, creates a novelty for female customers, as men play a role that is in contrast to conventional gender relations where women are the emotional labourers who perform work that is an extension of their 'natural' behaviour. In this sense, despite performing a conventionally 'feminine' work process, and through their naked bodies being looked at, rather than men being the 'gazers' themselves, the male dancer is still enabled to re-cast his work role as masculine, and one that is potentially exceptional, as it goes beyond the parameters of conventional male behaviour. As Liepe-Levinson (2002:9) suggests regarding the male stripper's nudity, his naked body, and his

performance of emotional labour, unlike the naked female stripping body, 'may refer less to the vulnerability of the body than to additional demonstrations of power and sexual expertise'.

### **Intimate contact: Working on customers' bodies through 'body work'**

So far we have seen the extensive management of their bodies, both aesthetically and emotionally, that dancers engage in. Yet, following Wolkowitz (2006), I argue that a distinction should be made between the work labourers perform on their *own* bodies, as we have seen in the case of aesthetic and emotional labour that dancers utilise to manage their bodily labour, but also the work dancers perform upon the bodies of *others*, namely their customers, through 'body work' (Wolkowitz, 2006:146). Wolkowitz suggests that little attention has been paid to those 'whose paid work involves the care, pleasure, adornment, discipline and cure of others' bodies', such as beauticians, hairdressers, nurses, sex workers and undertakers (Wolkowitz, 2006: 147). Further, Wolkowitz argues that the performance of 'body work' can be more dangerous for some workers than others, including sex workers, due to its emphasis upon intimate bodily contact. The lower-status, 'dirty work' part of body work may be consigned to subordinates; on gendered, classed and racialised terms. Women dancers who are refused work in the clubs that are larger and considered 'upmarket' establishments may thus have little capacity to defend their own bodily boundaries, as due to their perceived gender, class and 'race' status, they may be denied 'access to types of work that carry more opportunities to exercise discretion' (Wolkowitz, 2006: 141). However, this was not necessarily the case in Lippy. In fact, although the bodily interactions between

customers and dancers were often intimate, this did not necessarily limit the dancers' autonomy over their labour, or compromise their power to exercise discretion over their interactions. On the contrary, where body work took place in Lippy it was often a means through which dancers could actively exercise autonomy over their labour.

Body work in erotic dance venues varies depending on whether 'private dances' can be purchased in a venue. As Egan (2006a:113) notes, many dancers experience the private dance as a problematic part of their labour, in that they experience the high levels of bodily contact with the customer as 'gross', 'difficult' and 'disgusting', particularly where they had encountered uninvited touch from the customers. The fact that there were no 'back rooms' in Lippy where dancers were expected to give private dances was a particular reason dancers cited for preferring dancing in this club to others where a high degree of intimate body work was required of their performances. Dancer Naomi, for instance says private dancing is physically 'too tiring' due to the number of dances she was expected to perform at other clubs in a night, but also because of the time she spends fending off unwanted bodily contact from male customers. Naomi says of Lippy that 'I feel more artistic working here', because she can incorporate what dance moves she wants to into her routine, and because she says there is more emphasis in this venue on the 'performance and dancing rather than the sexual side of things' which she considers to be more present in one-on-one encounters in private dances. In Lippy, dancers perform stage shows, which are performed in the main club area, and so the level of intimacy between dancer and customer, and the amount of body work a dancer engages in, is dependent upon how much bodily touch the *dancer themselves* chooses to engage in. This is a significant difference from clubs where women

dancers are expected to perform private dancing, in relatively hidden-from-view spaces, and aligns their experiences of body work more with male dancers' performances which are conventionally stage shows. Violet, a dancer at Lippy, encapsulates these differences succinctly:

'Lap dancing and stage shows are two different things. Lap dancing is a personal service, and I think that if someone's paying you for something then you should wanna do it, I don't wanna do that, I like to do my stage show' (Violet, interview, October 2009).

So we can see that dancers at Lippy feel more comfortable and able to be autonomous when they are performing stage shows, than in more intimate body work performances undertaken in other clubs which require a great deal more bodily contact with the customer, and the possibility of their uninvited touch.

It seems that the body work undertaken here then is quite different from its conventional conception, as in Lippy the dancers do not necessarily experience dissatisfaction when performing it. Where body work does take place in Lippy, it is not experienced with the same negativity and displeasure as dancers reported feeling in other club settings where they danced for men. **WORLDMISTRESS** in particular incorporated a large amount of body work in her stage shows, yet this enabled her to exercise more autonomy, rather than compromising her bodily boundaries. As **WORLDMISTRESS** states:

‘I like to interact with the audience. This is the part in the song when she goes, you know, hug me kiss me, um, sometimes you might get a night where they don’t wanna touch you at all, you just .... well if they’re standing at the front they’re into it, it’s the ones who don’t wanna be involved or who are shy that are standing at the back, but it’s the ones who really wanna see the shows that wanna get into it, who are at the front’ (WORLDMISTRESS, photo-elicitation interview, February 2011).

This suggests that physical bodily interactions are a key part of WORLDMISTRESS’s performances, even though they are not viewed as a necessity by management, or encouraged by the club space, which clearly separates the audience from the stage by a rope. It also indicates how WORLDMISTRESS decides herself which customers to touch, based upon who *she* wants to interact with, and by exercising her judgement as to how they will respond. It also suggests a somewhat reciprocal relationship in the body work transaction, as WORLDMISTRESS says that some of her ‘fans’ appreciate the labour being performed and they ‘often stand near the front of the stage’ in order to interact with her. As Twigg et al. (2011:173) have pointed out, body work requires ‘co-presence’ between the provider and customer, and therefore the spatial arrangements of body work are ‘central to its provision’. In Lippy, WORLDMISTRESS’s successful performance of body work depends upon a customer being in close proximity to the stage, and being willing to be a recipient of body work. The image below shows WORLDMISTRESS touching audience members’ bodies in quite a direct fashion:



*Figure 13: WORLDMISTRESS touches a woman customer*

What is interesting about this image, and WORLDMISTRESS's own discussion of it, is that it illustrates further the idea that body work is contingent upon co-presence, with the worker and the body being worked upon being physically present together at an exact moment. For instance, WORLDMISTRESS says that:

'I really need to know my music, and know when I should be grabbing someone, cause if they take too long, I have to listen to my music and think uh I should have done this by now, I should have grabbed someone already, so you could really stuff up there, but luckily I know what I'm doing, I know my music in my head and normally in my first show I would kind of suss the crowd out' (WORLDMISTRESS, photo-elicitation interview, February 2011).

As Twigg et al. (2011:176) argue, the necessity of this co-presence makes ‘the times and places of body work relatively inflexible’. This inflexibility is exacerbated in WORLDMISTRESS’s body work because of the very narrow window of time that she has in which her body work can take place. Her stage show only lasts for around three minutes at a time, and so her body work transactions although intimate, are somewhat brief and are heavily dependent upon whether the audience member she chooses co-operates, and whether they do so at the right place in the music she is dancing to. However, some customers at Lippy claimed that although they stood near the front of the stage, this was not because they wanted to ‘touch’ a dancer, or interact with her, but because they wanted a better ‘view’. This suggests that although a ‘co-presence’ is necessary for body work, it does not automatically mean that a body work transaction will be successful, as WORLDMISTRESS’s perception that many of the customers who stand at the front of the stage want to be touched, was not always echoed by audience members themselves.

Moreover, while body work takes place between two people – the worker and the recipient, it is performed onstage for an audience. There is thus the added ‘pressure’, so-to-speak, of a larger number of customers watching whether the body work performance is successful, rather than just the body work relation being between a worker and a recipient. Interestingly also, the body work recipient in the image above has a somewhat uncomfortable looking, even defensive, body posture as they have their arms crossed. This could be for a number of reasons, again linked to the fact that although this is an erotic performance with a great deal of bodily interaction, this is in no way a ‘private’ interaction, and therefore the audience member may be aware of other audience members’ perceptions of them. Also, they



may be aware that lap dancing rules often stipulate that customers may not touch the dancers, and so the crossed arm posture of the customer may be to prevent any confusion as to how they were acting.

However, although dancers in Lippy have the relative autonomy of choosing when and for whom they perform body work, their advances towards customers can sometimes be rejected, and this creates frustration for dancers who thought they had 'judged' that the customer would want to experience bodily interaction. For example, as Twigg et al. (2011:180) note in relation to care work, clients 'have the power to 'act up', to refuse treatment or care, or to make it difficult for the worker to perform'. Similarly, in this erotic dance venue, *WORLD MISTRESS* told me of times when customers did not co-operate with her body work performance, either by refusing to engage in the interaction, or by not acting the way she wants them to for the performance to be successful. She cited a particular example, where a customer was inebriated, and says that the customer 'did not do what I want them to do, they got silly, screaming and stuff'. In such instances a worker has to respond effectively in order not to offend the customer, and also in the case of erotic dance, to not disrupt the performance for the rest of the audience.

Arguably then, although the relative autonomy of dancers to choose when to perform body work, and how they manage their aesthetic and emotional labour, has been demonstrated, this does not obviate the problem of customers either rejecting their performances, or also, of what labour a dancer wants to do not being what a customer wishes to receive. Violet, a dancer at Lippy, says that when dancing for male customers 'sometimes the outfits I wear I notice that guys like me in, aren't

necessarily the ones I like myself in, and sometimes you dress for them and not yourself, and sometimes you dress for yourself and not for them'. Therefore, although women dancers do have relatively flexibility, or control to choose their own outfits and what labour they perform, if this is not what the customer wants then a dancer has to weigh up, often from a financial sense, whether they can afford to refuse dancing for that customer, or whether they should change the way they work to suit that particular customer's request. So as Violet puts it, 'you don't wanna cut your nose off to spite your face – if you knew, for example, that wearing little white knickers is gonna make you fifty quid don't you think you'd do it?'. Thus, while drawing attention to the micro processes of aesthetic and emotional labour, and bodywork, that dancers perform, highlights the intimacy of these encounters, and also the relative control dancers have in this particular venue for performing these types of labour, it also highlights just how precarious this control is. The degree of control or choice of a dancer over their working role is highly dependent upon the particular relationship between worker, customer and also management.

The male dancers at LoveLads did not perform body work to the same degree as women dancers in Lippy, yet this was partly because of the limits on their performances as stipulated by licensing rules in the space in which they danced. As noted earlier, club licensing regulations stipulated that dancers could not engage in bodily contact with customers during stage shows. Their labour could thus potentially be seen as more dignifying, less 'dirty', and as wielding them more power, as they do not have to flatter the customer's body with touch as part of their routines. However, as noted previously, male dancers do still experience unwanted touch from women customers (scratching, biting etc.), even if they do not reciprocate

the customer's touch. Further than this though, there is an element of body work that male dancers engage in after the stage show has finished, when the dancers have photographs taken with women customers, that often involves a great deal of intimate touch on the customer's body. As Mike explains:

'After the show we have pictures and stuff and that's a giggle, I flirt a bit, get them to lift their leg up or I bite their boob, you know, whatever you think you can get away with. Normally you can tell, I mean some people you know, ah, I'll put my arm round her and it's waist height - not bum- height, you know. But some women will come up and bite your chest or something so as they're taking the picture, you know, I'll like bend them over or something, pull their shirt over or something, or kiss their neck, stuff like that, it's all fun' (Mike, interview, September 2010).

This demonstrates the quite intimate and sexualised touch that dancers perform on customer's bodies when they can touch them. It also indicates Mike engaging in a 'judging' or 'reading' process similar to what WORLDMISTRESS described in the way that dancers attempt to ascertain *which* customers would welcome their body work performance. Similarly to WORLDMISTRESS's assumption that audience members close to the stage will enjoy participating in her performance of body work on their bodies, male dancers at LoveLads perceived their being prohibited from interacting physically with customers during their stage shows as inhibiting their full performance. As Matt, a dancer at LoveLads stated:

‘Well anybody who sees somebody onstage they have an automatic thought that ‘that can be me. I could be there, that could be me on the stage’. So when they can come on the stage and dance with us it makes it more of a reality rather than just a fantasy’ (Matt, interview, September 2010).

However, not all customers appreciate body work from the dancers even when it can occur, as five women customer respondents from LoveLads stated that this was a specific element of their night out that they disliked because they perceived the touch of the dancers to be quite violent and intrusive. To cite one example, Wendy says that ‘I didn’t like the very close contact between the dancers and ladies...I thought that was a bit OTT’ (over the top). Similarly, in a previous study of women customers who watched male strip shows (Pilcher, 2011), I found that the majority of women customers said in email interviews that they disliked intimate bodily contact with the male dancers because they found it ‘aggressive’ and not sexually entertaining. Queen, sex worker and activist, argues of her commercial sexual exchanges that ‘[w]e create sexual situations with very clear boundaries, for ourselves and for our clients. In fact, one of the things that people are paying us for is clear boundaries’ (Queen, cited in Chapkis, 1997:77). Queen is referring to emotional boundaries here, but I would argue that what women customers expect from their interactions with male dancers are also quite specific *spatial* boundaries, and that when their boundary expectations are challenged, their enjoyment of the stripping performance is limited.

There are moments in both venues where if a customer did not want body work to take place, they are relatively powerless to leave the interaction until the

dancer has finished their work. For example, figure 14, below, portrays WORLDMISTRESS standing on a customer whose hands are tied to a pole on stage. It would be very difficult for this customer to leave this interaction without the assistance of the dancer. Further, in LoveLads on one occasion I observed a woman customer being carried over a dancer's shoulder. Again, it would have been difficult for her to leave this interaction without the dancer putting her down. These examples illustrate Wolkowitz's (2006:164) point that the 'body worker can have power in the interaction with customers', as it can be hard for a customer to leave during a range of treatments (for example, having wet hair at a hairdressers, or a face-pack on at a beauty salon). Yet even these examples do not indicate the very real *physical restraints* on leaving a body work transaction at an erotic dance club. A customer with wet hair or a face pack have merely their fear of embarrassment at their appearance to prevent them from leaving the body work transaction, but these examples at the erotic dance venues highlight the real physical incapability attached to leaving a body work transaction where a dancer restrains a customer through their bodily touch. This draws attention to the relative power both women and male dancers have relative to customers once a body work transaction is in progress.



*Figure 14: WORLDMISTRESS stands on a customer who is tied to a pole and sitting on a chair on stage*

As has been noted, there are similarities with conventional notions of body work in erotic dance work, as a dancer ‘works’ on the body of customers at certain key points, and there are also parallels in the literature which state that customers can ‘act up’ and ‘refuse’ body work from the worker. Yet some of the bodily work involved in erotic dance is different from conventional forms of body work. Although body work such as care work involves intimate contact, for example the touching of a customer’s private bodily parts, in erotic labour the worker utilises much more of their *own* intimate bodily parts to perform body work on the customer’s body. As Pettinger (2011) explains:

‘the worker’s body is (often) more fully engaged: the body is commodified as desirable, and the sex worker works on the body of the customer with more

of their own bodies than in other service/body work occupations. Something 'private' is consumed, the body's intimate spaces, and this is significant to how sex work is rendered ideologically distinct from other forms of service work' (Pettinger, 2011:227).

In figure 14 (above) we see **WORLDMISTRESS** using her whole body, including her feet, legs, and arms to perform this body work. Similarly, male dancers also noted using not only their arms and hands to work on the bodies of customers, but also their mouths to bite or kiss the bodies of customers. Therefore, this utilisation of more of the worker's *own* intimate bodily parts whilst they work on the bodies of customers, together with their body work performance being conducted in an incredibly public, entertainment-orientated environment, is what makes their sexualised body work quite distinct from conventional body work performed in service sector encounters.

### **Women dancers' management of work 'selves'**

It has been highlighted how dancers manage the perception of their working selves by the use of aesthetic and emotional labour, and through their interactions with customers. However, their own definitions of their workplace roles are also interesting for what they reveal about how much autonomy dancers can exercise. The strategies that women dancers in particular use to separate their 'self' and 'work' roles have been much documented (Brewis and Linstead, 2000). I seek to demonstrate this quite complex identity management that women dancers at Lippy undertake through their use of music in the venue, and further, how

WORLDMISTRESS manages her work 'self' through engaging with visual depictions of her work.

Attempts at keeping their allegedly 'private' and 'work' selves separate by women dancers at Lippy were complicated through the dancers' use of music. Both Violet and WORLDMISTRESS reported that they chose their own music to dance to, and both saw this as a mode of 'self-expression'. Violet said that 'I need music that makes me feel sexy, as well as creating the impression that I'm sexy for the audience'. Violet chose songs to dance to that were typically associated with the 'RnB' music genre because, she said, 'they have a good beat that you can use to really emphasise your features and get into it'. Similarly, WORLDMISTRESS also reported utilising music that she enjoyed dancing to, as well as noting that it was important for the audience to recognise her songs 'so they can sing along'. She enjoys dancing to music from the 1980s 'because its music I grew up with, that I know and love'. In these accounts we see that although dancers might wish to keep their dancing personas separate from their own 'self', through their use of music they still bring a sense of their own 'self', and things they enjoy about the music they listen to, into their work role.

In a slightly different vein, Egan (2006b) has also noted how women dancers may utilise their own song choice to resist management stipulations over what songs can be played. Egan (2006b:214) reports that resisting management's song choices and utilising frowned-upon songs can allow women dancers to feel a sense of empowerment in having secured their music selection, and through singing the lyrics along with the song dancers felt 'powerful', 'strong' and 'like [they] have a say' in



their performances. This therefore suggests that despite music being a means through which the boundaries between a dancer's 'private' and 'work' selves are troubled, this does not necessarily disempower the dancer, as they not only get to select their own songs, but music can act as a means of pleasurable self-expression.

WORLDmistress's work 'self' management techniques are particularly evident in the way she utilises photography as part of her 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959), and her development of a very specific public working persona. WORLDmistress utilised the images I took of her performances to promote her career on her public website. As I discussed in chapter three, what performances a dancer allows a researcher to photograph and which photographs they utilise to promote their career can tell us a lot substantively. They can indicate what WORLDmistress wishes to reveal about her working identity; what we 'see' about it is carefully constructed, or managed, by her. This use of the visual by WORLDmistress emerged after she invited me to take photographs of her performances for her to use on her own website, as well as to help with my research. She pays a lot of attention to her website, which she considers her 'CV'. It is her 'public face', and she spends time most days updating it with different photographs and text.

Why and how WORLDmistress utilises photographs can be usefully analysed in relation to Pink's (2007:94) suggestion that 'absent photographs', and the reasons for their absence, may be of equal interest to those which are shown. I questioned WORLDmistress about why she rejected particular images. WORLDmistress's reply was that, 'I think [it's] my facial expression. I'm very

critical of myself'. The absence of these photographs is thus explained by the ways in which WORLDMISTRESS is continually engaged in 'impression management' (Goffman, 1959). WORLDMISTRESS says that she interprets an image not only from the way she herself would 'read' it, but also from how she feels others might view it. This is evident from WORLDMISTRESS's comment about image 10 (the Mistress Show) when she tells me,

'I mean if I were to look at that from an outsider's point of view ... the look on my face, it's like I'm not satisfied or something, I'm just not impressed or something which is not the impression I wanna give out'  
(WORLDMISTRESS, photo-elicitation interview, February 2011).

WORLDMISTRESS thus points towards an awareness of how our 'visuality' (Rose, 2001:6), of *what* can and cannot be seen in a photograph is socially constructed. WORLDMISTRESS is a performer, engaged in work that requires the construction of a particular gendered, sexualised persona on stage, and images taken of these performances must, from her point of view, portray her in the 'right' way. Thus, the photographs that are 'absent' from her public expression of herself on her website are equally significant in constructing the presentation of 'what' parts of herself that she wants us to see.

WORLDMISTRESS further spoke of images of shows that she had not displayed publicly, such as performances that she had not enjoyed, or that did not go quite as planned. One example was an image of her dressed as the pop singer Madonna. When viewing the photograph she remarked that, 'Ah that didn't go too

well'. She said that the audience did not seem to 'get it' and that 'I think I did it twice, I just don't think it went that well', but she did not want to explain in detail why this performance was not successful. This demonstrates how discussion of 'absent' images can enable a worker to reflect upon when things 'go wrong', and can stimulate some discussion in research interviews about elements of their stage performances that performers would otherwise 'hide' from public view. For WORLDMISTRESS, to show this image on her website would only serve as a public reminder of a performance that 'didn't go too well', and thus through its absence she maintains the construction of her working identity as consistent and successful.

WORLDMISTRESS effectively uses the visual as part of her careful construction of her work as a dancer. Part of why WORLDMISTRESS appears very comfortable with having photographs taken of her performances is because they are exactly that: a *performance* of a particular working identity that does not necessarily have to portray 'who' she is on a personal level. As Thompson et al. (2003:553-4) note of erotic dancers, '[w]hen individuals are engaged in a stigmatized occupation that threatens to "spoil their identity" it becomes necessary for them to "control information" about their occupations and identities'. WORLDMISTRESS devotes considerable aesthetic and emotional labour to attempting to do this, and also to constructing herself as different from the other dancers in the venue. Further, in interviews WORLDMISTRESS talked about her stage routines in the third person, referring to her performing 'self' as a 'she': 'WORLDMISTRESS is a queer, femme, kink performer, she's not a burlesque performer'.

This is not to suggest, however, that the performer's 'self' can be separated entirely from their working performance. Researchers studying erotic dancers more widely have argued that the 'emotional labour' that dancers perform, and their presentation of a specific working identity that does not correlate to their 'true' self, can cause identity confusion and frustration (Deshotels and Forsyth, 2006). Certainly with regards to WORLDMISTRESS's performance as a domestic housewife (Image 7), we can see a quite complex impression management process taking place in her description of the performance: 'Originally she makes, she's got this mixture and she makes, I've got all this mixture and I put it in the cupcakes'. The switching in the description of the activity from 'she' to 'I' illustrates that perhaps the two 'selves', the working self and describing what 'I' do/am, are inseparable or, alternatively, that trying to manage two separate selves is difficult for performers.

WORLDMISTRESS also works as a professional dominatrix, a work role that she says she has kept separate from both her work as a dancer and her private 'self' until very recently, when she ceased employment at Lippy following a change of management and ownership of the club. She now includes a 'link' to her dominatrix work on her dancing website as a means of marketing her diverse work skills to her potential client base. When talking about this decision to make her dominatrix role 'public' to those who have seen her dancing performances, we see again the conflation between the use of 'I' and her working role in her discussion:

'Well, it's taken me a really long time to let everyone know that my other job is as a dominatrix ... I was just I was trying to keep them separate ... I'm a very private person, um, and I just didn't want other people knowing my

private personal stuff, it's really weird, but it's taken me a really long time to go well, ok ... let's put them together' (WORLDMISTRESS, photo-elicitation interview, February 2011).

Yet although she has seemingly now connected the two work roles, as both are publicly visible on the internet, WORLDMISTRESS still engages in quite strict management of images of her dominatrix role. Whilst finding it acceptable for people who view her dancing website to look at her dominatrix site, she does not want her dominatrix clients, all men, to find out about her dancing for women customers. This is largely because, she says 'they think I'm straight', and also because she does not want them 'finding out too much about me'. These examples therefore illustrate the impression management that the management of work 'selves' may require for dancers. Similar strategies adopted by other erotic dancers to separate their 'self' and 'work' roles have been much documented (Brewis and Linstead, 2000). Reid et al. (1994) for example, suggest that erotic dancers usually do not feel that their work role reflects who they 'really' are on a 'personal' level. However, the idea that erotic dancers create workplace 'selves' that are entirely separate from their own 'selves' can also be problematised. WORLDMISTRESS's comments suggest that the extent to which erotic dancers allow their work and private 'selves' to meet can vary at different times, and in different contexts, even for the same dancer. There may therefore be greater fluidity than previously assumed between 'work' and 'private' selves for erotic dancers in different workplace contexts, and this may depend in part on how much control that they can exercise in their working role.

As well as managing their working identities and attempting to keep their 'private' or 'self' identities separate from their working ones, women dancers in Lippy also attempted to construct a working identity that was perceived as 'professional' by customers and in relation to other dancers. As Bradley (2008:507) notes of North America, following the emergence of the 'gentlemen's clubs' which brought about a redefinition of dancers' roles, there has been a more recent 'professionalization of exotic dancing'. She suggests that increasingly we are witnessing erotic dance becoming a 'career' orientated business' (Bradley, 2008:507). Certainly women dancers at Lippy attempted to construct themselves as professional performers, and all three dancers had carved out careers for themselves in erotic dance. However, this definition of professionalism is not without its problems. Further, as will be discussed here, male dancers do not undertake the same attempts to professionalise as women dancers have to go through.

All three dancers at Lippy spoke of themselves as 'professional performers'. Both WORLDMISTRESS and Violet work solely in the sex industry, with WORLDMISTRESS dancing and doing dominatrix work, and Violet performing erotic dance in three venues. Naomi says that her decision to enter erotic dance ten years ago was as a 'quick' solution to make money at a time of economic hardship, but that she now sees her erotic dance work as a 'career'. Naomi dances in three erotic dance venues, teaches pole dancing in a professional pole dance 'school', and she says that later in life she plans to become a pole dance choreographer. However, women dancers' ability to construct themselves as 'professional' is dependent upon a number of factors. As we saw with WORLDMISTRESS's attempt to distance herself from being seen as a 'pole dancer', dancers attempt to present themselves as

different from their dancing colleagues, sometimes in order to cast themselves as *more* professional than their working counterparts.

Both Violet and WORLDMISTRESS perceived those dancers who did have their costumes stipulated by management, or were told how to act or dance, as not being as skilled as was required for being successful professional dancers. For example, both dancers spoke of the skill of being able to improvise on stage or ‘wing it’, as Violet put it, without the audience realising that it is not a set routine. Furthermore, when questioned as to whether management had ever told her what to wear, Violet explained in more detail how she perceives the successful performance of the professional erotic dancer role:

‘I’ve never been told in my whole career what to wear or do. Some girls get told all the time. Some girls are shit. Some girls are shit at costuming, some girls do this job for a long time and they can’t even, they can’t even strip let alone do fucking pole work. It’s true innit? I’ve worked with girls for 10 years and they can’t even jump on the pole and do a normal spin, which after that amount of time, you’d think they’d at least be able to do that and they can’t. The thing is as well that’s different about this job- it’s not fundamental to be able to do that, there’s other things that go into this job, it’s about personality, it’s about character, it’s about being able to talk to people. Some girls can make their money purely by going round and talking’ (Violet, interview, February 2010).

This indicates that seeing oneself as a 'professional' dancer is strictly tied to the ability to be autonomous, and to think and perform independently. Interestingly also, although pole work and self-presentation is seen as important, Violet notes that this is not an essential part of the job if a dancer can perform emotional labour very effectively. If a dancer can 'work' the customer, as she terms it, through talking to them and being attentive, she suggests that a sexualised dance, or appearance, is not even necessary to feign the intimacy that is required by the customer. This confirms Pettinger's (2011:235) argument regarding sex workers that '[h]aving the wrong personality for the job may be equated with a lack of professionalism', and in particular, it is the failure to 'do sufficient emotional labour' to portray a successful erotic dance persona that is seen as inhibiting professionalism. Furthermore, comparing themselves to other dancers, or 'Othering' them, as Barton (2007:586) terms it, is a means through which women dancers can professionalise their work, showing the multiple skills needed for its effective execution, in an occupation which is heavily stigmatised, and also to demonstrate that they are in control of their labour and that they perform it well. Part of this professionalism is also the ability to 'read' when other dancers are not performing their skills as well. For example, Violet notes how she can tell if a dancer is 'faking it', and that she can tell when a dancer 'is on their way out' of the industry'. She says it is because 'they don't smile any more', which suggests her quite conscious knowledge that the labour of erotic dance requires a dancer to manage their emotions through their performances, such as smiling for a customer, and indicates that she can tell when a successful emotional labour performance is not being given.



Although Othering their fellow dancers is a professionalising strategy, as noted earlier, dancers reproduce binary distinctions between themselves and other dancers, which often reproduce the negative stigmas attached to erotic dance. Further, as Bradley (2008:508) argues, even when dancers *are* able to sustain an identity of a ‘professional’ performer, whilst this might give them relative power and autonomy within the industry, it does not translate into ‘social acceptance’ of erotic dance outside it, with many dancers still experiencing ‘stigma associated with their work’. Barton (2007:587) concurs, arguing that even if dancers construct themselves as professionals in comparison to other dancers, ‘one obvious discrepancy here is that most people do not perceive exotic dancing to be a reputable profession regardless of whether the club is totally nude, topless only, located in a good section of town, or a front for prostitution’. In this sense, women dancers’ Othering strategies, and their attempts to professionalise, may afford them more autonomy within erotic dance spaces relative to other dancers, and as Barton (2007:587) argues, can also be a psychological resistance strategy against stigma, yet it does not necessarily challenge negative conceptions of erotic dancers and definitions of their work more widely.

### **Male dancers’ rejection of their work *as work***

In contrast to women dancers’ attempts to construct a professional workplace ‘self’, male dancers engage in less complex identity management processes. They characterise their labour more as a ‘hobby’ or a ‘bit of fun’, rather than a meaningful work role. Arguably male dancers need not engage in as much identity separation and policing as the women dancers at Lippy because they are not as heavily

stigmatised by their work role as women dancers. LoveLads dancers had stage names which were either their 'real' name, or combined their real name with a 'typical' male stripper name afterwards, for example, a dancer named Steven might call himself 'Stevie Stallion'<sup>15</sup>. On social networking sites male dancers seem to use the same 'profiles' to interact with family and friends as with customers from the show. This suggests that male dancers engage in less complex identity management than female dancers, as they can be the 'same' identity at work in the erotic dance club as they can in their private lives. This is linked, I suggest, to their definition of their work *not as* 'work'. None of the male dancers defined their erotic dancing as a 'job', a 'career' or as 'stripping' or 'dancing', rather, they saw it more as a night out with friends which provided them with fun and entertainment. Here I cite just a few of their many descriptions of erotic dancing as 'fun' rather than 'work':

'It's not my bread and butter, I'm not in it for the money I'm in it for the enjoyment and the fun, so the moment that stops I'll stop it.' (Todd)

'It's improved my social life, it's not really, I mean you can't call this a job, it's getting paid to dance on stage a bit, you meet so many people...erm it's just literally fun and games for two hours, I have a drink, take my clothes off and ...I always leave with a smile on my face...this isn't a career for me.'

(Mike)

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<sup>15</sup> Pseudonym.

‘I do this to have a laugh, I’ve been here 16 years and I’ve made a lot of friends, so I do this one night a week, get paid to party, we hang out...I’ve got my own career other than this.’ (Craig)

‘Invariably I’m getting paid to pick up girls...this is my fun at the weekend. I do it to see my mates really. I have a laugh here with the guys...I take the money but I don’t really need the money if that makes sense.’ (Vince)

In all of these accounts the men define their activities as ‘fun’, ‘enjoyment’ and a time to ‘socialise’ with friends rather than as a work role, professional or otherwise. Colosi (2010b:182) has recently characterised women performing lap dancing in the UK as performing ‘anti-work’, suggesting that anti-work is both ‘tied to the ritualistic pursuit of fun’, but is also ‘anti’ because ‘dancers frequently make attempts to resist management and the work rules they are given’. Male dancers in LoveLads certainly prioritize fun and ‘having a laugh’ as the main reason for their dancing, yet their work situation is not such that they need to use ‘fun’ as a strategy for resisting management. Rather, drinking alcohol, male ‘banter’, as some of the dancers described it, and ‘having a laugh’, are *positively encouraged* by management as a means of preparing male dancers for the show. On many occasions I observed managers bringing alcoholic drinks over to the dancers, or making jokes and conversation with them, before they went on stage. In this sense, male dancers enjoy a key part of their preparation for the show, ‘having fun’, without defining it as a ‘work’ strategy, or even as ‘anti-work’. While Colosi’s respondents use fun to *resist* work practices, arguably they still define their work *as work*, as it is work that they are resisting against. This is different from male dancers who do not define their

activities as work, and what they are 'resisting' through characterising their performances as 'fun' may be an association of their performances as being akin to female stripping.

This is interesting as it has been argued that, for men, the workplace is the crucible for the forging of a masculine identity. The workplace is one of the many social factors impacting on the social construction of masculinities; 'what it means to be a man' (Morgan, 1992:76). Yet male dancers do not view their erotic dancing as work, and through this refusal to do so they forge very specific (masculine) identities. I would argue that through their very definition of their labour as not work, but rather as 'fun', they still separate their involvement from the 'women's work' of female striptease. Dancers spoke of their activities as being different from women dancers' work in many ways, namely because theirs was more fun, they did not see themselves as 'in it for the money', and because women dancers were seen as needing to act differently at work when dancing than they 'normally' acted. For example, as Vince states of female dancers; 'if they can separate themselves from it they can do really well out of it'. Vince in particular goes to great lengths to distinguish male stripping from women dancing in lap dancing venues. Further, male dancers felt that they did not have to separate their 'real self' from what they did precisely because they did not define what they were doing as work. Yet in defining their activities in this way, male dancers still make a separation between the work and their 'self', as they separate the 'work' element of the job (and needing to make money) off from what they perceive to be their *real* 'self' that is merely 'having fun'.

The key difference between male dancers' construction of workplace 'selves', and women dancers' at Lippy, is that for men, this defining of their work as *not work* elevated their occupational status in customers' eyes. Women customers at LoveLads saw male dancers as 'professional', as five of my respondents described them, even though male dancers do not have to promote themselves as working professionals in their stripping role. Men were seen as 'just so professional', as Vanessa phrased it, without the dancers having to iterate this identity themselves. This is quite similar to discussions of women and male hairdressers and the way in which women hairdressers are often viewed as less professional than their male counterparts. Gimlin (1996) similarly discusses how women's attempt to present their hairdressing as a 'profession' is compromised by their deference to the customer, as while a female hairdresser may feel a particular style would suit a client best, she ultimately has to give in to customers' requests. Thus, as Gimlin (1996:505) argues, women hairstylists' performance of emotional labour serves 'to undermine their status as professionals'. In contrast, however, Cox (1999:112) shows that this effect upon hairdressers' professionalism may not occur with *male* hairdressers, citing examples of male hairdressers who customers assumed 'knew best' about styles that would suit them.

Therefore, as Pettinger (2011) points out, when women sex workers perform less emotional labour it is viewed by customers as them *not* being professional as they have failed to disguise the 'market transaction', yet women customers' accounts at LoveLads, on the other hand, suggest that a male dancer's lack of emotional labour was instead viewed as him being *more* professional. Of the five women customers who discussed the 'professionalism' of the male dancers, four of these

attributed it to their ability to maintain *physical* boundaries in their interactions with customers, but also *emotional* boundaries. As Olivia, a customer at LoveLads stated, 'I liked the fact that he didn't lie to me, you know, pretend he was gonna go home with me when clearly he wouldn't have done'. Therefore, it is evident that the capacity to perform a professional work identity is gendered in two ways. Firstly, while women dancers have to work hard to manage their workplace and personal 'selves' in order to carefully construct themselves as professional, men are seen as professional even when they do not attempt to define themselves in this way. Secondly, the very ability to *be* professional is linked to gendered performances of emotional labour, with the requirement for women to perform it, but for men to not always, meaning that women are often viewed as less professional even while they perform a similar work role as men.

## **Conclusion**

By looking at dancers' performances of aesthetic labour, emotional labour, and body work, it has been possible to better identify the differences between women and men dancers' approaches to their work. It has been highlighted how these work practices have afforded women dancers in Lippy some autonomy in their workplace, but that it does not elevate their workplace status more widely in ways that men's erotic dancing can. As has been shown, male dancers' lack of emotional labour has the opposite effect as it does for women dancers; constructing them as more professional. What is also problematic is that erotic dance is a work role which is for women in Lippy still stigmatised, and yet for men in LoveLads dance is defined as a 'bit of fun'.

Yet this does not mean we can deny the agency and autonomy of the women dancers in Lippy where it exists. As this chapter has highlighted, **WORLDMISTRESS** manages to gain autonomy and feel in control through her aesthetic and emotional labour, and in her use of photography to manage the ‘impression’ of her work. While some radical feminist discourses construct the woman dancer as a ‘fearful, protected feminine object’, reducing ‘women’s sense of agency’ and victimising them (Lewis, 2000:213), this does not recognise the effort and work that women dancers put in to exercising autonomy in their working roles. Therefore, to consider erotic dance as ‘work’ is not to say that it is necessarily always ‘good’, as this chapter has highlighted some of the problems and tensions surrounding the work. There are costs to the work of erotic dance, for both women and men dancers, but it is also important to note the complex strategies that dancers wield for mitigating these. In the concluding chapter that follows I highlight the implications of these gendered differences in dancers’ work roles, and consider what looking at dancers’ work through the concepts of aesthetic labour, emotional labour, and body work has brought to the analysis, and what it can potentially tell us about gendered work more widely.

## Chapter Seven

### Conclusion: Negotiating gendered power yet performing gendered roles: The complex relations of erotic dance

In this concluding chapter, I seek to chart the contributions that this thesis has made to current academic understandings of erotic dance and participants in erotic dance venues, and also to consider what the findings can indicate for the theorising of gender and sexual power relations more widely. In particular, I want to draw out the subtle ways in which power operates in these erotic dance spaces, indicating how power is exercised and negotiated by participants in different ways in certain contexts. This chapter brings together data from both research venues to analyse women's and men's engagement with erotic dance, and will consider how the key research questions can be theorised. The main overarching question which this thesis has sought to answer is:

How are gender and sexual power relations enacted and experienced by participants in relatively 'novel' sexual leisure venues in the UK night-time economy?

Each chapter has addressed this question, highlighting how gender and sexual power relations are negotiated, and sometimes challenged in certain key respects, by participants in the two erotic dance venues. The key findings of this research question are related to three central themes, around which this chapter will be organised. These are, firstly, the defining of both of the erotic dance venues as a 'women-only' space by the customers, and the ways in which this potentially



challenges, and at the same time reinforces, heteronormative gender and sexual roles for participants. This finding was addressed through the research questions related to customers and dancers' participation in erotic dance venues, and the ways in which they can adopt novel or transgressive gender and sexual roles, namely:

Can such venues provide scope for participants in erotic dance venues to adopt non-normative or transgressive gender and sexual roles? In what ways?

How do women customers define their experiences in these venues? Do they engage with the gender politics of erotic dance? For example, might they view their behaviour as mimicking men's roles as strip club patrons; as something different; as an example of female 'liberation'; as something that could be problematic?

These questions are also answered through my second key finding, related to the female 'gaze'. Findings in both venues point to evidence of a female gaze being exercised by women customers. In LoveLads, however, this is couched in problematic post-feminist sensibilities and is intertwined with women participants' desire to still be positioned as sex objects in their interactions with dancers. In Lippy, women customers had a more critical engagement with the gaze. Some women customers enjoyed watching the semi-nude dancers, and openly spoke of their enjoyment. Yet some customers struggled with how to define their experiences, and further, other customers articulated a critique of erotic dance as reinforcing heteronormative gender and sexual power relations. Observational and interview data with women dancers in Lippy also points to a more complex way in which

women dancers are able to exercise a gaze directed at women customers, which suggests power works in this venue in more multifarious ways than the dancer and/or customer 'holding' the majority of power.

Thirdly, the final set of concerns, about erotic dance as work, has been answered through interviewing dancers about their working experiences, and through a detailed photo-elicitation interview with WORLDMISTRESS where we discussed images of her stage shows. This set of questions asked:

What are the work experiences of women and men dancers at these sites, in terms of the gendered roles that they perform and their interactions with women customers? In what ways is their work similar to or different from what existing academic literature suggests about the experiences of women who dance for (primarily) heterosexual men customers? In particular, do their performances mimic heteronormative gender and sexual roles or potentially disrupt them?

I found that dancers' accounts of their working experiences suggest that these work practices are in many ways similar to concepts of work that are used to discuss service sector labour more generally. Dancers spoke of their appearance and emotion management, and their use of touch in interactions with customers, which I have theorised through the concepts of aesthetic labour, emotional labour and body work. I seek to highlight in this chapter, however, the differences between erotic dancers' use of these work practices and other workers' practices in the wider service sector. I also highlight how the particular venues that dancers work in is crucial to their

capacity to maintain autonomy in their work role, and in doing so I make comparisons between the two venues and research on erotic dance venues documented in academic literature. Throughout the discussion I attempt to show the ways in which Lippy as a space, and the experiences of the participants within it, are more non-normative at certain key moments than in LoveLads. I will begin this discussion by considering the venues as a women's space, before moving on to discuss erotic gazing and the work experiences of dancers in both venues.

### **Erotic dance venues as 'women-only' spaces**

This thesis contains evidence to suggest that women's experiences in non-conventional erotic dance venues, where women are the primary customer base, can enable women customers to define the venues as a 'women-only space'. This was an element in both venues that did strike me as potentially transgressive, as women customers conceived of the venues as spaces *for* women, rather than for men, who arguably dominate public space more generally. In Lippy in particular, women customers reported that they conceived of the venue as a 'women-only' space where they could avoid male harassment, and that it provided opportunities to meet new friends and potential sexual partners. At LoveLads this conception was slightly different; women customers still spoke of it being a 'women's space', but they referred to this mainly in the sense of it being an opportunity to bond with, and make new friends with, other women customers.

Studies of male customers in erotic dance venues have also spoken to these being places where men can enjoy the opportunity to 'bond' in male company. For

example, Frank (2003) suggests that an important element of male customers' enjoyment of a strip club is not only the pleasure of viewing naked women's bodies, but also from experiencing the change of scenery from everyday life that the strip club space provides, where they can engage in 'masculinizing practices' and 'relax' from the pressures of everyday life. For women customers at Lippy, the venue does represent a 'change of scenery' in the sense that they experience it as different from leisure spaces where they may encounter harassment from men, and can 'be themselves' as they put it, without male surveillance. For women customers at LoveLads, it enables a rare opportunity to meet new female friends on a night out. This is potentially transgressive as it contradicts women's normative experiences in conventional leisure spaces. Where women customers' experiences at Lippy of the shared gender of the customer base differ from men's experiences, is that Lippy customers do not experience a sense of 'communal ecstasy' or an 'orgiastic thrill' from collectively watching women dancers as male customers might (Liepe-Levinson, 2002:69). Arguably, however, women customers at LoveLads do experience this feeling to an extent, but not necessarily due to the dancers' performances, but because of the way that the show's host encourages the audience to respond to the show as a unified collective.

This research found, however, that the conception of the venues as a 'women's space' does not necessarily make the venues more inclusive. This supports Massey's (1994:155) argument that 'places do not have single, unique 'identities'; they are full of internal conflicts'. My research has highlighted the extensive policing of the bodies of other customers by women in both venues, often along very heteronormative lines. In chapter five, I noted the historical grounding of the

policing of who ‘counted’ authentically as lesbian in the 1980s sex wars, and charted how this policing of bodies and sexual practices was still evident in Lippy in 2009-10. I highlighted customers’ policing of bodies perceived as ‘fat’, straight (or ‘read’ as straight) bodies, and transgender bodies. This finding supports Valentine and Skelton’s (2003:861) observation that gay and lesbian leisure spaces can be ‘insular and exclusionary’, at the same time as being experienced as inclusive for some participants.

This finding does, however, suggest a slightly different policing to some extent than the policing that took place in the 1980s. During the sex wars the debates centred upon the seemingly ‘outrageous’ practice of SM and who counted authentically as a lesbian woman. The policing at Lippy does still centre around this concern of authenticity, as is evident in the hostility to women perceived as ‘straight’, or as ‘trans’ by those who did not conceive of these women to ‘fit’ the conception of a lesbian woman. The policing around bodies perceived as ‘fat’, on the other hand, is couched in more mainstream heteronormative concerns about fat bodies as objects of disgust, or indeed, as *abjects*. However, it is also important to point out that despite this policing of some women in the venue there were, visibly, a much wider range of bodies on display in Lippy than in LoveLads. I argued in chapter five that at Lippy customers’ own presentation of their bodies could be considered a challenge to heteronormative standards for feminine beauty, as women wore casual clothes, had short haircuts, piercings and tattoos, all of which could be considered non-heteronormative bodily beauty practices to some extent.

At LoveLads, some women customers felt that their ability to strike up friendships and conversations with women who were effectively strangers, was something which the venue provided that was quite different from mainstream heterosexual leisure spaces. However, chapter four demonstrated the fragility of these 'friendships' or 'female bonds', highlighting the similarities between the women customers' behaviour and Storr's (2003) suggestion regarding women at Ann Summers parties. Storr (2003:52) found that 'being one of the girls' is not a passive, unconscious process, but rather is 'an active construction in which heterosexual women mutually recognise and affirm their femininity as coherent, acceptable and appropriate'. Customers at LoveLads were observed actively trying to outdo the feminine desirability of other women through their use of language and bodily movements to attract attention from dancers and 'move' other women out of the dancers' eye line. Women customers therefore perform or 'do' heterosexual femininity through which they construct other women as 'lacking' heterofeminine desirability. They also construct themselves as active sexual agents in a post-feminist strategy of very visibly asserting their heterofeminine desirability.

What these ideas about 'women's spaces' at both venues, together with the policing of bodies within them, might lead us to question, is *which* women can be read as 'fitting' in to certain places, in different moments and contexts. What this also indicates is that whilst heteronormativity can be challenged and negotiated, it is difficult to be outside or completely beyond it. As Butler argues, we are all positioned within a 'heterosexual matrix', which is 'that grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders and desires are naturalized' (Butler,

1990:151). In this sense, the women's challenges to heteronormativity should not be underrated, as their challenges at least show glimmers of destabilising its rigidity.

### **Erotic 'gazing'**

We know from the literature on female sex tourists that there is some evidence of white, middle-class, heterosexual women who are able to exercise a sexualised 'gaze' in public spaces (Sanchez Taylor, 2001; Sanders, 2011). I also speculated in chapter two that lesbian leisure spaces might be more likely to enable customers to express non-normative desires. In this section I want to discuss the three significant findings of the thesis which point to the existence of, as well as the complications around articulating, a sexualised female 'gaze'. These three key findings are, firstly, the way in which women customers at LoveLads do exercise a gaze, but how their experiences are couched in post-feminist rhetoric which limits *which* bodies they can gaze at. Further, the women customers at LoveLads desire to be gazed at as sexual objects at the same time as looking at the male dancers, thus their gaze is dependent upon their look being returned by the dancer. This is complicated by the fact that male dancers do not take on the sex object role in the same way that previous studies have suggested women dancers in erotic dance venues do. Secondly, at Lippy, where women customers spoke about their experiences of the gaze they were quite critical and politically aware about the potential problems of enjoying erotic dance performances. Lastly, a significant finding at Lippy has been the way in which women dancers are able to exercise a female gaze, and to some extent control or command the women customers' gaze, in ways that potentially subvert the idea that

their gendered and sexual power is limited in gazing interactions with customers. I will now discuss in more detail these key findings.

The behaviour of some of the women customers at LoveLads could be seen as equating to an active sexual 'gaze', as the show represents one space in which women can contradict, albeit to a limited extent, traditional heteronormative gender roles, as they can be loud, drunk, and can show themselves as actively desiring of male bodies. Women customers commented in interviews and on the club's Facebook page about finding the bodies of male dancers attractive and wanting to 'lick' and 'massage' the dancers, as we saw in chapter four, which does suggest they were interested in 'looking' erotically at semi-nude male bodies. Indeed, this is the whole premise upon which the show at LoveLads rests; making it *seem* as though these non-normative subjectivities, where women can sexually 'gaze' and be aggressive, are available for women to adopt. However, women's behaviour in LoveLads is scripted as much by the club managers and the dancers as it is by themselves. As chapter four highlighted, the new 'norm' for contemporary heterofemininity is for women to portray themselves as sexually confident and autonomous (Gill, 2003). These ideas have been picked up on by the management and dancers at LoveLads as a way of manufacturing the atmosphere in the venue to signal some sort of female 'empowerment'.

Therefore, rather than women exercising completely independent sexual autonomy, women's loud and extrovert behaviour is positively *encouraged*, and even elicited, by the dancers and the club's host in order to make the atmosphere easier for the male dancers to perform. Further, there seems even less evidence to



suggest that their behaviour is an independent, autonomous gaze that could translate into other social arenas, when we consider that the women's behaviour is part of what is expected on a hen party. To elaborate, hen parties are at the heart of heteroreproduction, giving licence for women to behave in sexually outrageous ways, but only for *one* 'last night of freedom'. In this sense, as women are encouraged to feel as if they are 'gazing' by the club set-up, and by the notions of hen party rituals, their experiences of 'gazing', whilst in some cases affording them feelings of power, are temporally and spatially specific. This is an example, then, of how power is multifarious, and exercised rather than held, as it is possible to have an active female heterosexuality being expressed at the same time that that power is temporarily experienced and couched in a heteronormative framework.

Further still, many women customers at LoveLads desired a *mutually reciprocal* sexualised gaze, as at the same time that many of the women enjoyed viewing the dancers, they wished for the male dancers to view them also as sexually desirable. In many cases, women customers also sought to be the *objects* of male dancers' attention, rather than purely voyeuristically viewing the dancers. This also means that whereas in conventional strip clubs women dancers are viewed as playing the 'sex object' role in erotic dance interactions, the male dancer does not take on a similar role. This confirms Tewksbury's observation that the male strippers' role does not leave him vulnerable, but allows him to 'maintain power, dominance, and the ability to objectify others' (Tewksbury, 1993:173). When male dancers perform their striptease at LoveLads it demonstrates male expertise and control through overt demonstrations of their masculinity. The male dancers wear costumes that relate to traditional male occupations, such as firemen, policemen, sailors, and builders, and

their bodily movements position them as strong and ‘in control’ of the sexual interaction, for example, by aggressively ‘flicking’ their genitalia at women customers. This does little to challenge conventional heterosexual relations in which the male is cast as the active sexual role, and the woman is the sexual object. My observations at LoveLads also raised the question of *which* bodies can, legitimately, be gazed at by heterosexual women. In chapter four we saw some customers’ comments regarding one of the dancers being seen as ‘fat’ and therefore unattractive to watch onstage. Their remarks reify the built, worked upon male body, which as Gill (2009:143) argues, is the only type of body that has been ‘coded’ as acceptable to ‘be looked at and desired’ by women. It is therefore a very particular, heteronormative masculine aesthetic ideal that can command the heterosexual female gaze.

Women customers at both venues could not experience ‘tipping’ a dancer as male customers are able to in many conventional strip clubs. Women customers do not have the opportunity to feel the power, as a male patron might, of being able to not only look at, but also ‘buy’ the attention of ‘their girl’ for the night (Erickson and Tewksbury, 2000:287). I highlighted in chapter four that for women customers at LoveLads, not engaging in tipping was a way of ‘doing’ normative femininity, as many customers felt it would be ‘unladylike’ to tip a male dancer. There are parallels in the absence of tipping rituals in both venues to the behaviour of female sex tourists. In these erotic dance venues, and in female sex tourism, the sex worker/dancer gains economically, but women do not pay overtly for the transaction, nor do they necessarily view themselves as paying for sexual interactions.

At Lippy, the findings identified a somewhat different female erotic gaze. Some women did enjoy the erotic dancing and commented upon their appreciation of the bodies and stage performances of the dancers. Yet their accounts of their enjoyment were often couched in feelings of guilt, and/or a critical and political awareness about the potential problems of enjoying erotic dance performances. I have argued that this awareness suggests a complex disengagement with post-feminist rhetoric about what women's sexual autonomy should look like, as they do not uncritically adopt positions of 'gazers' without considering the implications of their actions. This also suggests that while their gazing is not as visibly 'active' as some of the women customers at LoveLads (in terms of shouting and screaming at dancers, for example), this does not translate into female sexual passivity in any way. Rather, the women customers think critically about the implications of their opportunity to watch women dancers, and as chapter five highlighted, their ability to touch the dancers translates into a more reciprocal gazing interaction.

This leads me on to discuss my third finding regarding the gaze, which relates to the agency of women dancers in Lippy to potentially exercise a gaze at the same time that they are gazed *at* by audience members. In chapter five I draw upon Schneider's (1997) concept of the 'third eye' – 'the eye of she who is seen', to conceptualise women dancers' experiences of simultaneously being watched by audience members, at the same time that they also 'see' the audience and can control their gaze. I identified examples where women dancers engage in reciprocal tactile interactions with customers, and where dancers boldly return, and even 'manage' customers' gazing.

This suggests that the power relations between dancers and customers are complex and multiple, rather than one party in the interaction ‘holding’ all the power. Power in these two erotic dance venues is exercised rather than held by one party. It is still necessary to speak of ‘gendered power’, and we can identify moments where it operates, but this does not mean that we cannot also speak of moments where dancers do feel empowered or are able to subvert customers’ unwanted advances. As this example of the gaze has shown, women dancers do have agency to resist elements of their labour that are potentially disempowering, at the same time that power is still operating. My findings regarding the gaze also suggest that there is no one ‘ubiquitous’ female gaze, but rather, dancers’ unique performances are read differently by customers at different moments in time, and at Lippy, depending on their own engagement with the politics behind the social relations of ‘looking’ at women’s bodies.

### **Gendered work**

In this section I want to address the final key research question of this thesis through highlighting some of the main findings with regards to gendered erotic dance work, and how the work experiences of dancers at LoveLads and Lippy might differ in some ways from women erotic dancers’ experiences in conventional erotic dance venues. I also point to what this might signal for similar work practices more widely, particularly with regard to the work of aesthetic labour, emotional labour and body work in service sector employment. I want to indicate that erotic dance venues and the work within them are not completely different from more mainstream working environments in some respects. Yet I also highlight how the very particular intersection of aesthetic labour, emotional labour and body work performed by erotic

dancers has unique implications, particularly related to the stigma associated with their work role.

One element that is particularly distinct for erotic dancers is that the discussions of aesthetic labour, emotional labour and body work in literature pertaining to the service sector use these concepts to describe the way in which the employer demands these processes as a means of shaping and monitoring the employee's labour. What is different about dancers' use of these techniques at Lippy, is that they are primarily shaped by gender ideology, rather than by management per se. At LoveLads, male dancers' aesthetic labour and body work is stipulated by management, yet their emotional labour is not as heavily regulated, or indeed, required, by their work role. I now review these differences and their potential meanings for gendered power relations, particularly whether dancers' performances mimic heteronormative gender and sexual roles or potentially disrupt them.

### *Aesthetic Labour*

What distinguishes women's erotic dance work at Lippy, and women's erotic labour in conventional strip venues, from male dancers' work is the different ways in which they perform aesthetic labour. We have seen how women dancers' bodies at Lippy are constructed to often create a very stereotypically feminine bodily presentation which gives the illusion of a 'natural' femininity, whilst at the same time being heavily worked upon. Women dancers are also involved in a complex negotiation of gender and class as they seek to create an appearance which is conceived of as glamorous by the audience. This is similar in one respect to research on North American erotic dance venues, which suggests that women dancers 'must

act like women by embodying traditionally female behavior and roles as well as by dressing and behaving femininely' (Trautner, 2005:772). It could also be further evidence to suggest the prevalence of post-feminist precepts being adopted by women dancers. Through their wearing of bikinis and feminine lingerie, as well as their meticulous detail to make up application and bodily hair removal, dancers Naomi and Violet may have internalised the post-feminist and neoliberal requirement for women to self-regulate, particularly as management does not set strict guidelines on dancers' costuming or appearances.

However, where women dancers performed acts which might look similar to traditional conceptions of heteronormative femininity, they could potentially be read in a different way. For example, in chapter five I highlighted how WORLDMISTRESS's performance as a 1950s domestic housewife could on the one hand be read as reproducing the traditional association between women and domesticity. Yet, on the other hand, as this is a performance being given in a lesbian venue, it could be construed as disrupting heteronormative stereotypes of 'the lesbian' as 'butch' or 'manly' in appearance. In this sense the dancers in Lippy might bring about a 'recognition to 'femme' lesbians' (Jackson and Gilbertson, 2009:201). Further, women dancers performing such 'obvious' versions of femininity could also be read as parody, as dancers may expose the 'constructedness' of gender rather than its fixity or 'naturalness' (Frank, 2002b; Pendleton, 1997).

There was some evidence to suggest that women dancers' routines in Lippy were not limited to stereotypically heterofeminine acts. Firstly, dancers at Lippy were not, as in some venues, favoured for their 'whiteness' as 'the feminine beauty

ideal' (Wesely, 2003:658), as there were a range of bodies and appearances at Lippy. Further, although women dancers at Lippy did wear 'stereotypical' feminine lingerie and bikinis, they had a choice over which costumes they wore and there was no evidence that managers were attempting to 'McDonaldize' sex workers' appearances (as found by Hausbeck and Brents, 2009). WORLDMISTRESS's stage shows involved her experimenting with masculinity, and also performing as a dominatrix. She brings women customers on to the stage and ties them to the pole or stands on them as they sit on a chair. These shows are therefore quite different from those described in the literature regarding conventional strip venues.

However, although these performances enable WORLDMISTRESS to experience pleasure and feelings of 'power', there are limits to whether they can be seen as transgressing heteronormative gender roles. For instance, the audience in the venue may not have read the performances as subversive. WORLDMISTRESS recognises this limitation, in a similar vein to Frank's (2002b:200) recognition that although she views her dancing as transgressing heterosexual norms, her male customers may not view her activities this way, and she therefore questions whether anything is really 'transformed or subverted' when she dances. This highlights that there is no one fixed meaning in erotic dance performances, as they depend as much upon the way that they are interpreted by audiences in different contexts as they do upon the actual acts performed.

Male dancers' aesthetic labour, on the other hand, entails men creating a muscular, built body, in order to perform heterosexual masculinity for women customers. The discussion of dancer Mike's aesthetic labour indicated the strategies

he uses to masculinise his aesthetic labour where it otherwise could be perceived as effeminate. For example, in discussing the bodily practice of shaving his legs Mike constructs his practice as masculine by comparing himself against an ‘Other’ – the figure of the ‘greasy porn star’ as he terms it, and against women’s bodies, by claiming he is ‘manorexic’, in order to project his fears of appearing unattractive onto other bodies. This is in some senses similar to Barton’s (2007) discussion of how dancers may seek to ‘Other’ fellow dancers as a means of constructing a higher status for their own dancing. While Mike does not compare himself to the other male dancers at the venue, by drawing on stereotypes of male pornography performers he constructs himself as different from other sexual performers. These examples demonstrate also that doing work on the body, for men, is also a very active way of ‘doing’ masculinity.

Yet writers on service sector employment, such as Nickson et al. (2001), have argued that the fact that men and women both perform aesthetic labour, and more recently, that they both perform ‘sexualized work’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009, see chapter six) means that ‘the power issue becomes more problematic’ in analyses which suggest these forms of labour ‘are premised only on women having to conform to male, heterosexualized demands’ (Warhurst and Nickson, 2009:401). I would argue that just because both women and men perform aesthetic labour, even where both performances have a ‘sexual’ component, this does not negate the power dynamics of the way in which the performance of this labour is gendered. Indeed, what is interesting about the aesthetic labour performed in Lippy and LoveLads is that while both women and men dancers undertake it, women dancers’ aesthetic labour requires a great deal more time and effort on the part of the performer than



male aesthetic labour, particularly with regards to costuming. While dancers at Lippy purchase their own costumes and construct their own stage routines, which differ each week, male dancers' costumes are purchased and stipulated for them by management, making this part of their aesthetic labour much easier. Both of these examples are different from strip clubs more widely, where women dancers may have to purchase or pay to hire costumes supplied by management (Sanders, 2011). Further, the aesthetic labour at LoveLads also points to an assumption made by LoveLads management that is not made at Lippy; that a 'one size fits all' approach can be taken in the construction of erotic entertainment for women customers. The use of the same costumes and routines each week assumes that the audience members do not visit the show regularly. It may also rest on the assumption that there is a standard 'model' for the sexual amusement of women that does not require change or moderation. Yet as we saw in chapter four, some of the women customers' accounts suggest that the often aggressive way (note how Mike 'bit' customers) in which these 'heroes' (as their costuming suggests) perform their routines is not necessarily what *all* women customers wish to watch.

### *Emotional Labour*

With regards to the emotional labour that dancers perform, we have seen instances of both women and male dancers performing this labour. A significant finding however, has been that not only do male dancers perform less emotional labour than women dancers at Lippy, but further, that where they do perform emotional labour it is viewed as more exceptional than women's performances. This has been a finding in service sector discussions of emotional labour, where men's performances are viewed as 'exceptional', as men perform a task not 'naturally'

deemed appropriate for their gender (Adkins, 1995:107). It has interesting implications vis-à-vis the male strip show, where the spatial arrangement of the show limits dancer and audience interaction until after the stage show has finished. Where male dancers do perform emotional labour then, this is seen as novel or exceptional in two senses. Firstly, because men play a role that is in contrast to conventional gender relations where men perform work that is not viewed as an extension of their 'natural' behaviour as it is for women, and secondly, because the specific set-up of the show limits dancer-audience interactions, so that if a woman is spoken to by a dancer after the show it is assumed that he must 'really like' her as he could have spoken to any of the many other audience members. This has further consequences for the way that women dancers' performances are read compared to men's. For as Pettinger (2011) points out, when women sex workers perform less emotional labour it is often viewed by male customers as them *not* being professional as they have failed to disguise the 'market transaction'. Yet in LoveLads, women customers seemed to consider that a male dancers' lack of emotional labour was instead viewed as him being *more* professional.

Women dancers at Lippy, however, had to engage in quite complex emotional labour performances in order to construct their work role as 'professional'. They also had to tailor their emotional labour performances in order to try and separate their work 'selves' from their 'personal' selves. As chapter six highlighted, the extent to which erotic dancers allow their work and private 'selves' to meet can vary at different times, and in different contexts, even for the same dancer. Yet male dancers at LoveLads engaged less in identity management processes. Male dancers could be more open about their non-workplace identities, even choosing stage names

very similar to their 'real' names. This is linked to their defining of their work not as work, but as an extension of the 'fun' they are presumably having in their private, non-working lives. By not defining their dancing role as work, male dancers do not have to engage in as much emotional labour to separate their 'work' and 'private' selves from customers.

What identity work male dancers do engage in, however, is distancing their performances from women sex workers, and as we saw above, from male 'porn stars'. This is different from the findings of Rambo Ronai and Cross (1998) in their examination of the different emotional management strategies that North American men and women dancers engage in to counter the 'stigma' of performing a 'deviant' occupational identity. Rambo Ronai and Cross (1998:116) argue that male erotic dancers are 'not as concerned as the females with seeming to be like prostitutes'. Conversely, male dancers at LoveLads were heavily engaged in rejecting their dancing as a form of sex work, or even as work at all, which I argued in chapter six, was tied in with a masculinising process whereby they are able to indicate their masculinity through claiming not to be financially dependent on their dancing performances, but are only doing it 'for a laugh'.

Highlighting these gendered differences in the performance and meanings of emotional labour is not to suggest, however, that the performance of emotional labour by women dancers at Lippy is necessarily disempowering. On the contrary, *WORLD MISTRESS* demonstrated how she can feel 'powerful' when performing emotional labour for customers successfully. Further, by the end of my fieldwork *WORLD MISTRESS* no longer performed 'double shows' on stage, where she

disliked the emotional and aesthetic labour she had to put in to pretending to be a 'pole dancer'. This suggests that in different contexts and moments, women dancers at Lippy may enjoy the emotional performances that they give, and further, that they can negotiate over areas of their emotional labour that they dislike performing, something which may not be the case in conventional erotic dance venues where management has more direction over the stage acts and interactions that dancers perform.

### *Body Work*

One element of their labour that is perhaps more similar for men and women at the two venues than it is for dancers in more conventional erotic dance venues is dancers' performances of body work. This is for two reasons. Firstly, dancers at both venues did not have to dance for tips, or perform private dances, which studies of conventional erotic dance venues have indicated subject women dancers to quite a degree of unwanted touch from (male) customers (Egan, 2006a; Frank, 2002a, Holsopple, n.d). Secondly, any touching interactions that take place between dancers and customers at both Lippy and LoveLads take place in full view of the audience and the staff at the venue, leaving less room for customers to act violently, and more scope for dancers to exercise autonomy and choice over who the recipients of their body work will be. Akin to the body work performed in care settings though, the fact that audience members are visible by other customers and staff does not negate their power to 'act up', to refuse treatment or care, or to make it difficult for the worker to perform' (Twigg et al., 2011:180). As my observations at both venues has highlighted, women customers at Lippy may refuse a dancer's attempts to touch them, and at LoveLads, customers may bite or scratch the male dancers during their

interactions. Further, the body work of erotic dance creates unique stresses for dancers that may not be experienced by some ‘body workers’ (care workers, for example). Namely, erotic dancers have the added ‘pressure’ of a larger number of customers watching whether the body work performance is successful, rather than the body work relation being between a single worker and a recipient. Moreover, although body work such as care work involves intimate contact, for example, touching the client’s private bodily parts, in erotic dance the worker utilises much more of their *own* intimate bodily parts to perform body work on the customer’s body (Pettinger, 2011), such as with WORLDMISTRESS kissing customers.

Where there are some potential differences between the body work performances of women dancers at Lippy and male dancers at LoveLads, however, is in the discussions with women customers about their tactile interactions. As noted in chapter five, women customers at Lippy declined to comment about many of their body work interactions with dancers. Women customers at LoveLads however, were quite vocal about their dislike of the touching interactions. Customers’ accounts of the LoveLads show indicated that they expected quite specific personal boundaries from the male dancers, which might involve some elements of touching, but touching that is less aggressive and more reciprocal.

### **Final thoughts and reflections**

This thesis has its limits, some of which were arguably unavoidable. I have reflected upon the ways in which my own social location and my theoretical and methodological interest in feminist and queer theories will have shaped the data and

the conclusions I have drawn about the ways in which gendered power operates in these leisure venues. My own identity also impacts upon the replicability of the study, as another researcher could not replicate the study exactly. Yet these implications are inevitable in fieldwork-based qualitative research. Participating in the leisure venues myself afforded me a deeper understanding of the embodied and performative elements involved in 'being' a customer in these spaces, and meant that customers and dancers were more likely to talk to me as they knew I had some knowledge of the spaces.

However, the limited number of customers that I managed to speak with was a potential pitfall of the study. In an environment where people are busy engaging in leisure activities, some people are reluctant to 'disrupt' their night to think about 'research', and this, coupled with the fact that the leisure that they were engaging in involved watching erotic entertainment, did seem to make customers reluctant to agree to interviews in some instances. Perhaps offering a monetary gesture to thank them for their time may have persuaded more people to be interviewed, yet financially I was not in a position to do this. This study did, however, go further than the only other analysis of erotic dance customers in the UK; as Smith (2002) only managed to interview eleven women customers in interviews that lasted around five minutes each.

Through the use of email questionnaires, and sampling participants through the two venues' Facebook pages, I did manage to maximise participants somewhat. Email questionnaires, internet analysis, and the use of visual data, are relatively novel methodological practices in research on erotic dance, and therefore this thesis

has not been limited to more traditional research methods, but has embraced new techniques as a means of both enabling people to participate and to understand the complexities of erotic dance as both online and offline spaces. As I argued in chapter three, the images taken of WORLDMISTRESS's performances, and the photo-elicitation interview that we carried out enabled a greater insight into the pleasures and pitfalls of her work. However, due to the stigma associated with the labour of erotic dance, it is not a method appropriate for engaging with erotic dancers who do not want their work to be made visible in a public or academic context. Hence researchers need to be mindful of when visual methods may be inappropriate.

This thesis overall has taken a feminist/queer theoretical approach to focus, somewhat uniquely, on the experiences of women customers in erotic dance venues, and the work experiences of both female and male erotic dancers who perform in these non-conventional erotic dance spaces. Through a plethora of methodological techniques, it has demonstrated the ways in which participants experience these spaces as, often at the same time, both pleasurable and problematic. Through looking at both the performance and watching of erotic dance, it has highlighted the ways in which participants negotiate and manage gender and sexual power relations. This thesis presents a timely contribution to both the growing academic literature on erotic dance in the UK (Sanders and Hardy 2011; Colosi, 2010; Smith, 2002), and the current expansion of erotic dance venues within the UK. The thesis importantly highlights the very subtle and complex operation of power in these venues, and indicates that the experiences of participants within these spaces is often more complex than one-dimensional conceptions of gendered power might assume.

Indeed, one of the key theoretical contributions that this thesis has made is with regards to the operation of power. The thesis has charted the multiple ways in which dancers and customers negotiate heteronormative gender and sexual power relations. I have carefully considered the subtle ways that power operates in the micro interactions of customers and dancers in both of these venues, indicating that power cannot be conceived of in a zero-sum model, in which one person ‘holds’ power and leaves the other party with little to no power. Rather, I have argued that power is exercised, rather than held, and that both gender and sexual power relations are fluid and contestable, rather than somehow ‘natural’ or unchangeable. Specifically, I have argued that we can conceptualise heteronormativity as contestable, and have indicated the ways in which some of the activities and experiences of participants in these venues might potentially transgress heteronormative ways of being and thinking.

For instance, while I argue that the male dancers’ roles at LoveLads reaffirm traditional constructions of white, muscular, masculinity as the hegemonic ideal, I have also indicated how the performances of the women dancers at Lippy may be seen as subversive of normative femininity in some respects depending on how they are ‘read’ by customers. Some of the dancers at Lippy were not even able to obtain work in conventional erotic dance clubs due to their tattooed appearance not fitting with managers’ perceptions of normative femininity. Further, women customers’ critical considerations of the meanings of erotic dance at Lippy, and their own viewing of it, represent a challenge to both post-feminist, uncritical ideas about female sexual agency, and also to heteronormative ideas about women’s sexual passivity. That women and men dancers in these venues can ‘touch’ customers on



their own terms, rather than experiencing unwanted touch through private dances, and as dancers at Lippy have the artistic licence to construct their own aesthetic and emotional performances to a high extent, suggests that space, and *where* dancers work, plays a vital role in dancers' experiences of autonomy in their work role.

I have shown how gender and sexual power relations are not fixed in interactions between dancers and customers, and further, that through new forms of heteronormative femininity being embraced by women customers at LoveLads, that 'normative' ways of being are contested and changeable over time. Conceiving of power relations as complex and changeable does not negate a discussion of what is problematic about erotic dance venues. In a different vein from the 'problems' that previous research on erotic dance has discussed, namely the objectification of the woman dancer by male customers, I have outlined problems with erotic dance relative to the construction of gender by women customers. In both venues, I have drawn attention to the problematic policing by women customers of other customers, often along very heteronormative lines about who 'counts' authentically as women, and as women in an erotic leisure space. Further, women customers at LoveLads adopt post-feminist subjectivities of active sexual expression whilst at the same time attempting to reaffirm their heterofeminine desirability and their desirability as sexual objects, by vying for the male dancers' attention. The show at LoveLads is actively couched around ideas of female empowerment and ironic sexism in a way, as Gill (2010:345) argues, that makes 'gender ideologies more pernicious and difficult to contest'. Studying erotic dance thus does not only provide room to examine the potential fluidity and contestability of gender and sexual power relations in the interactions between performers and customers, but it also provides scope for

considering the implications of women's and men's engagement with heteronormative discourses more widely.

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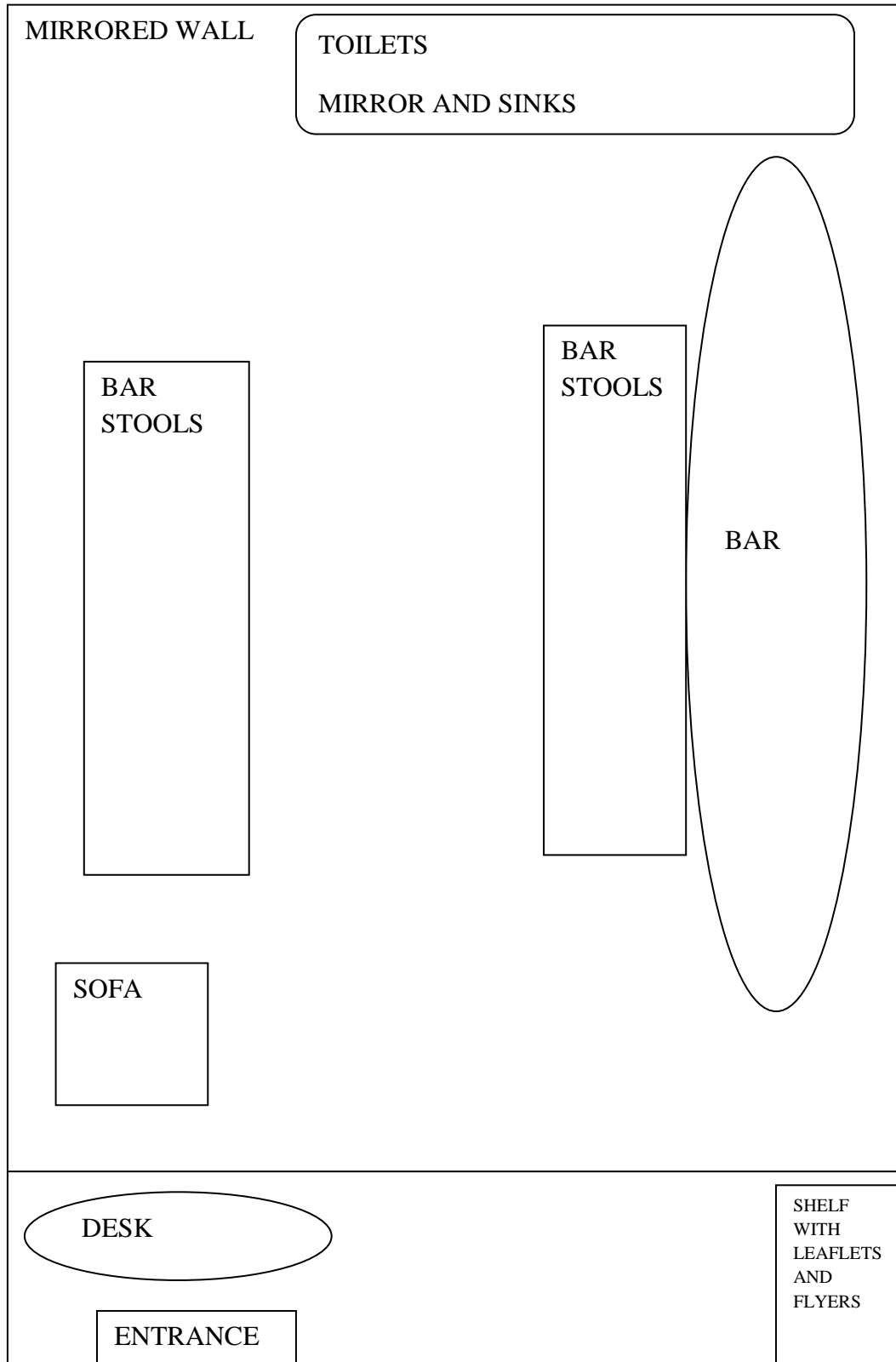
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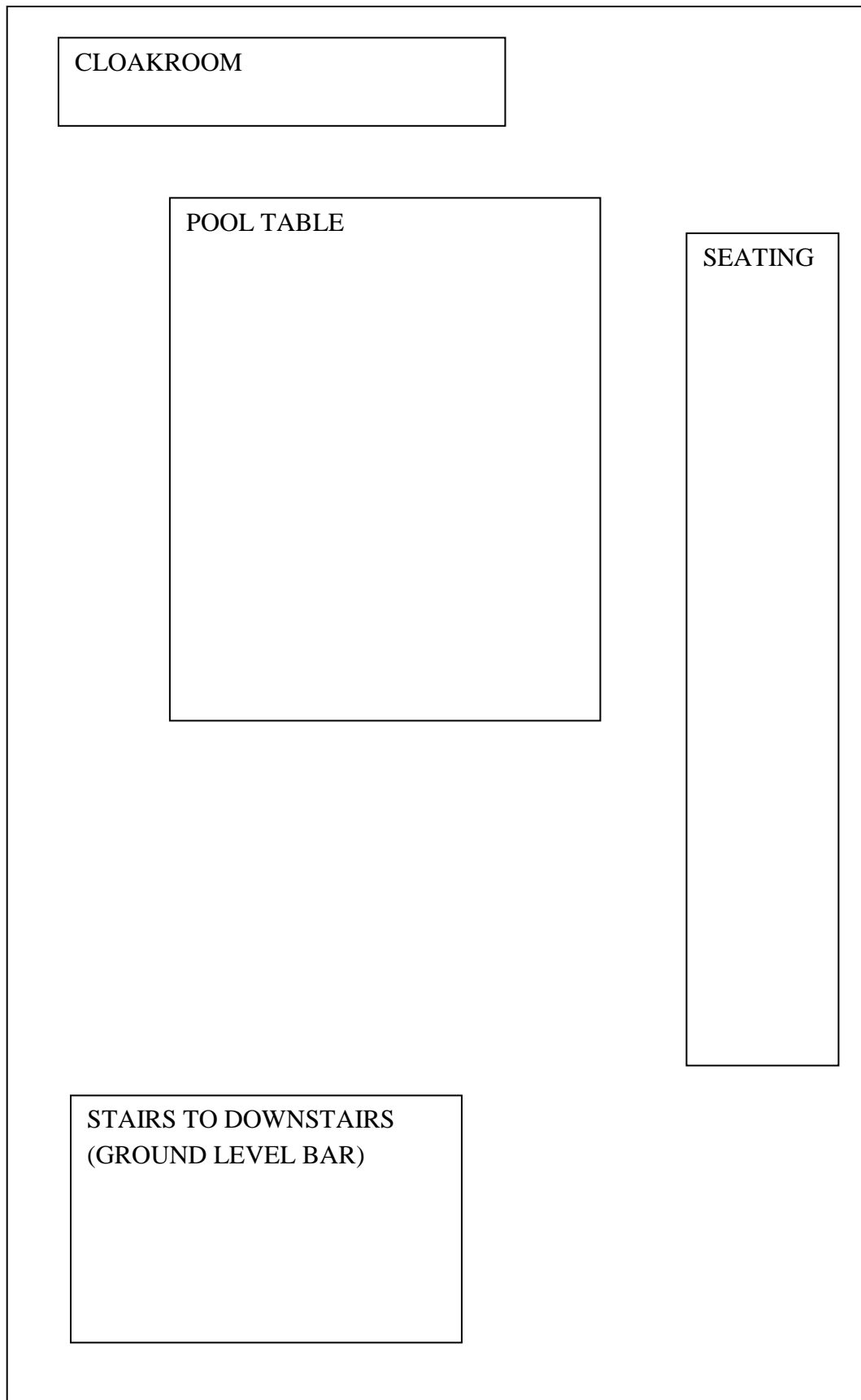
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**Appendix A: Lippy research site plans**

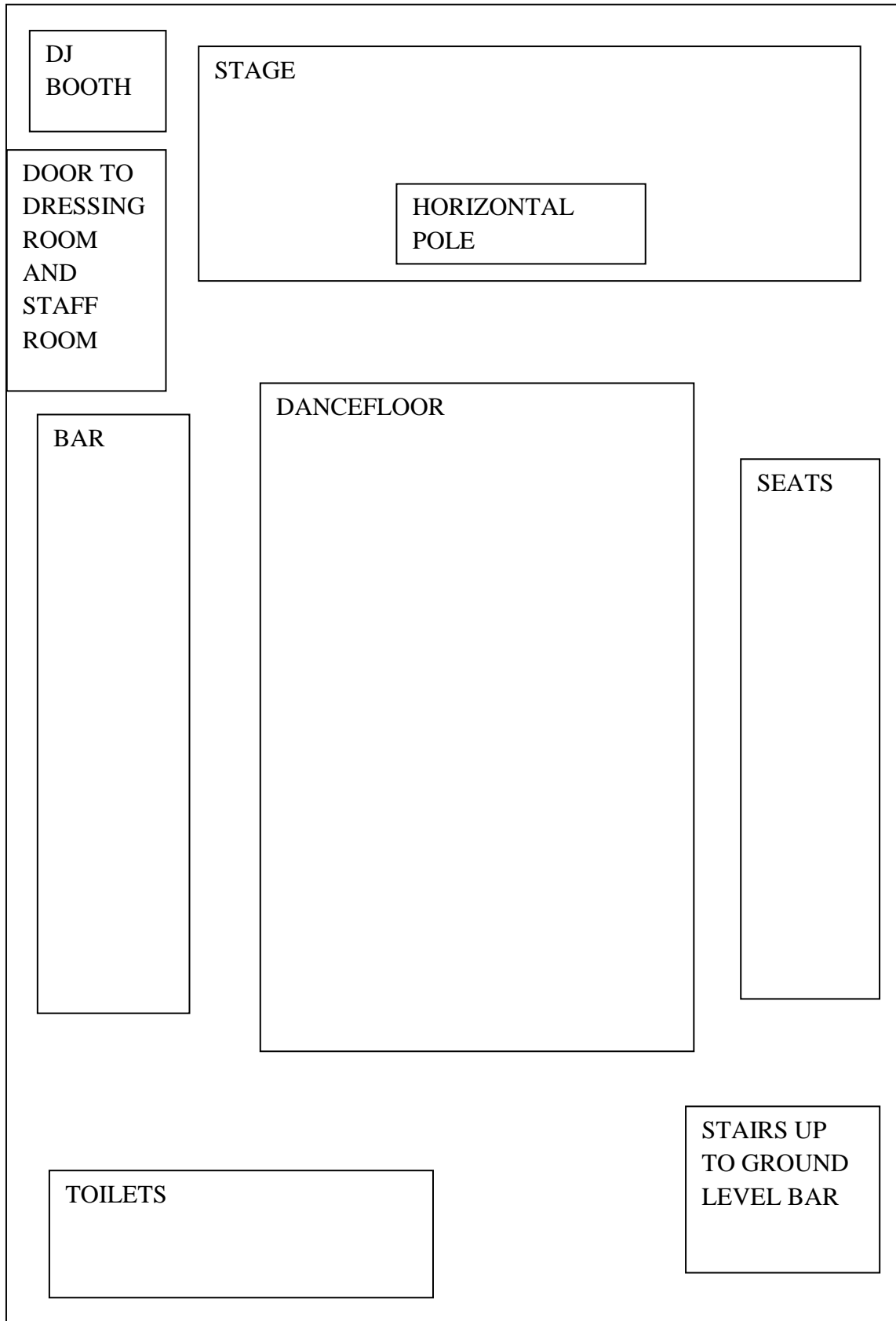
**Lippy ground (entrance) level**



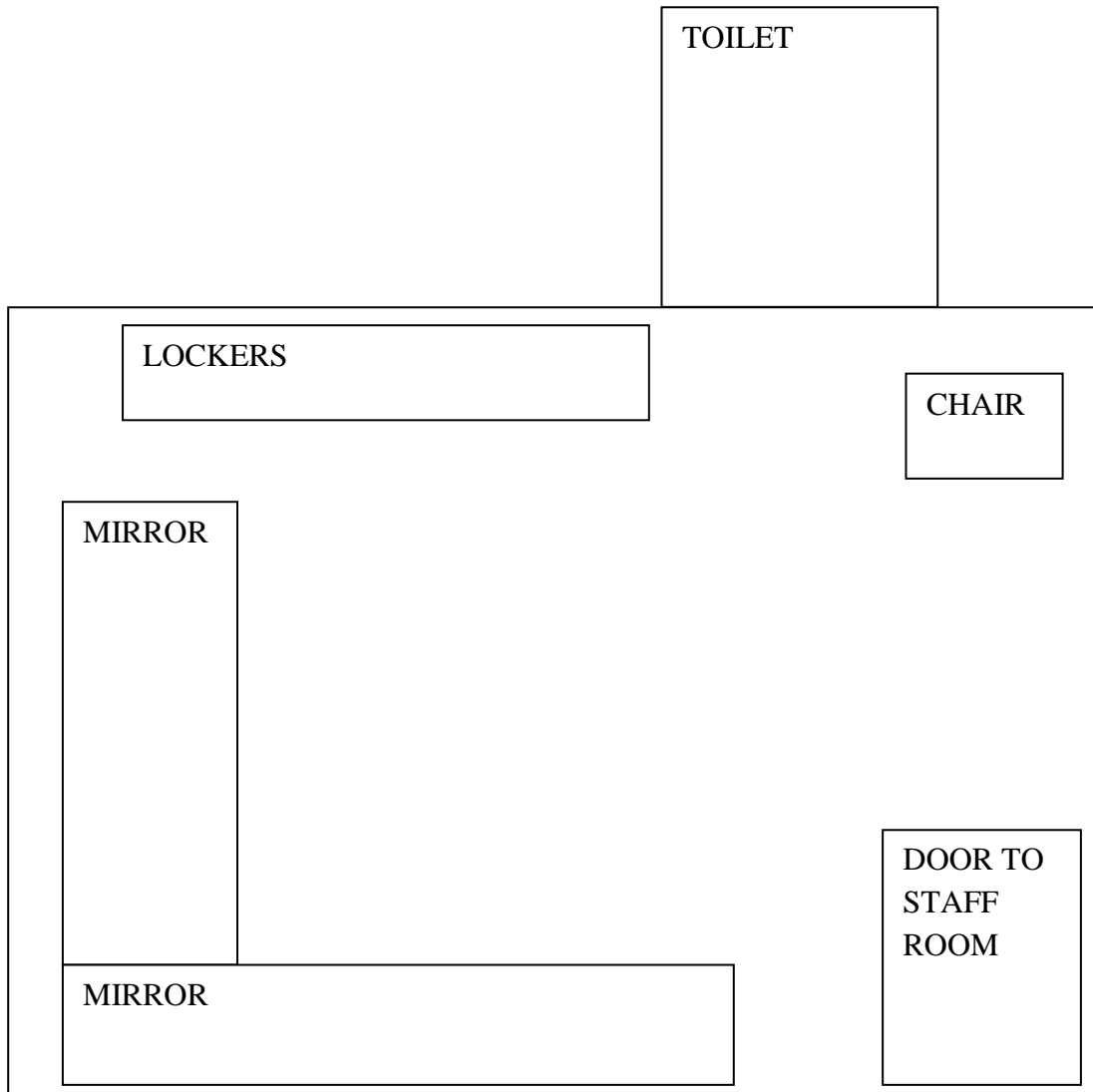
**Lippy level 1 (top)**



**Lippy basement bar (where erotic dancing takes place)**

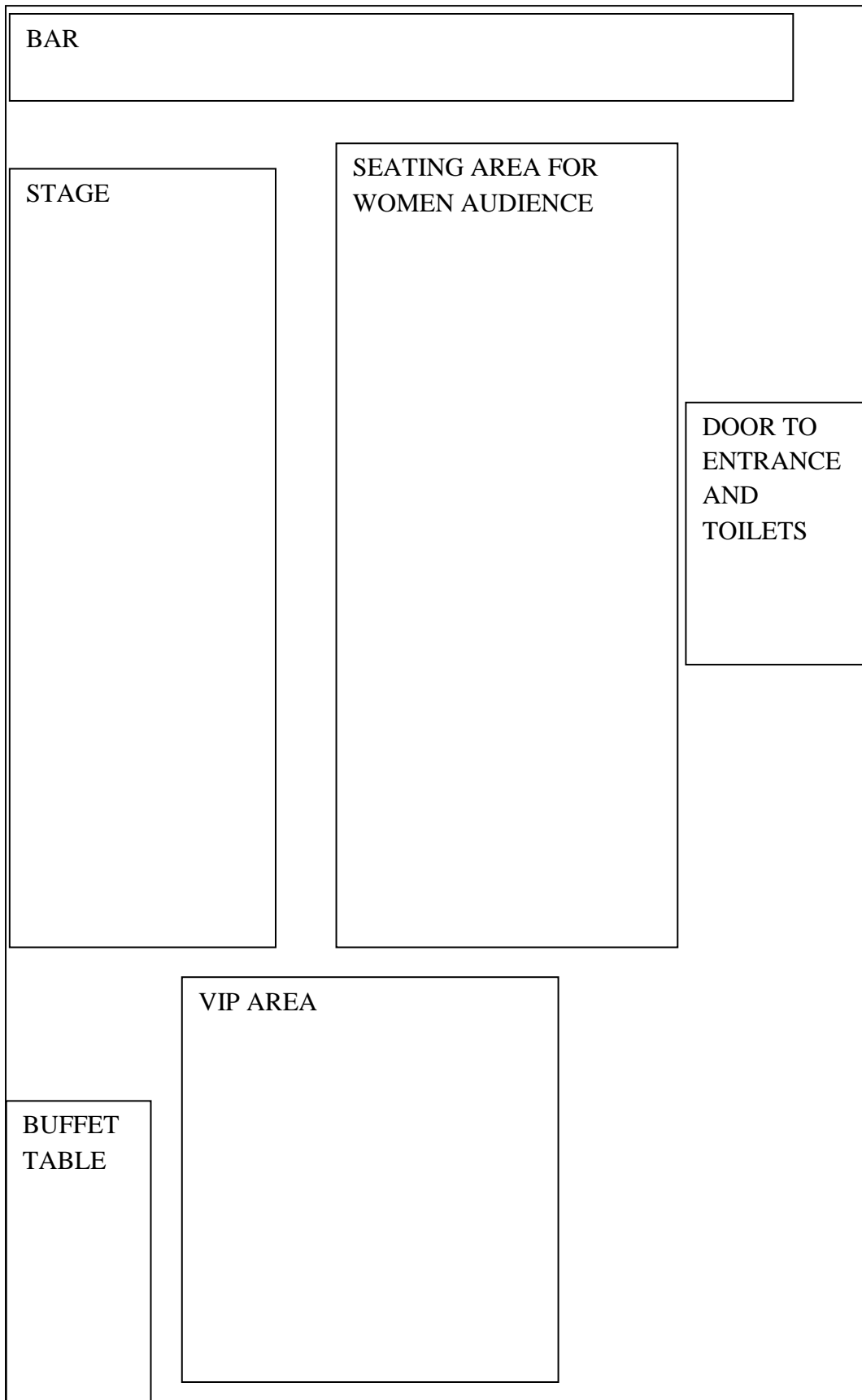


**Lippy dressing room**

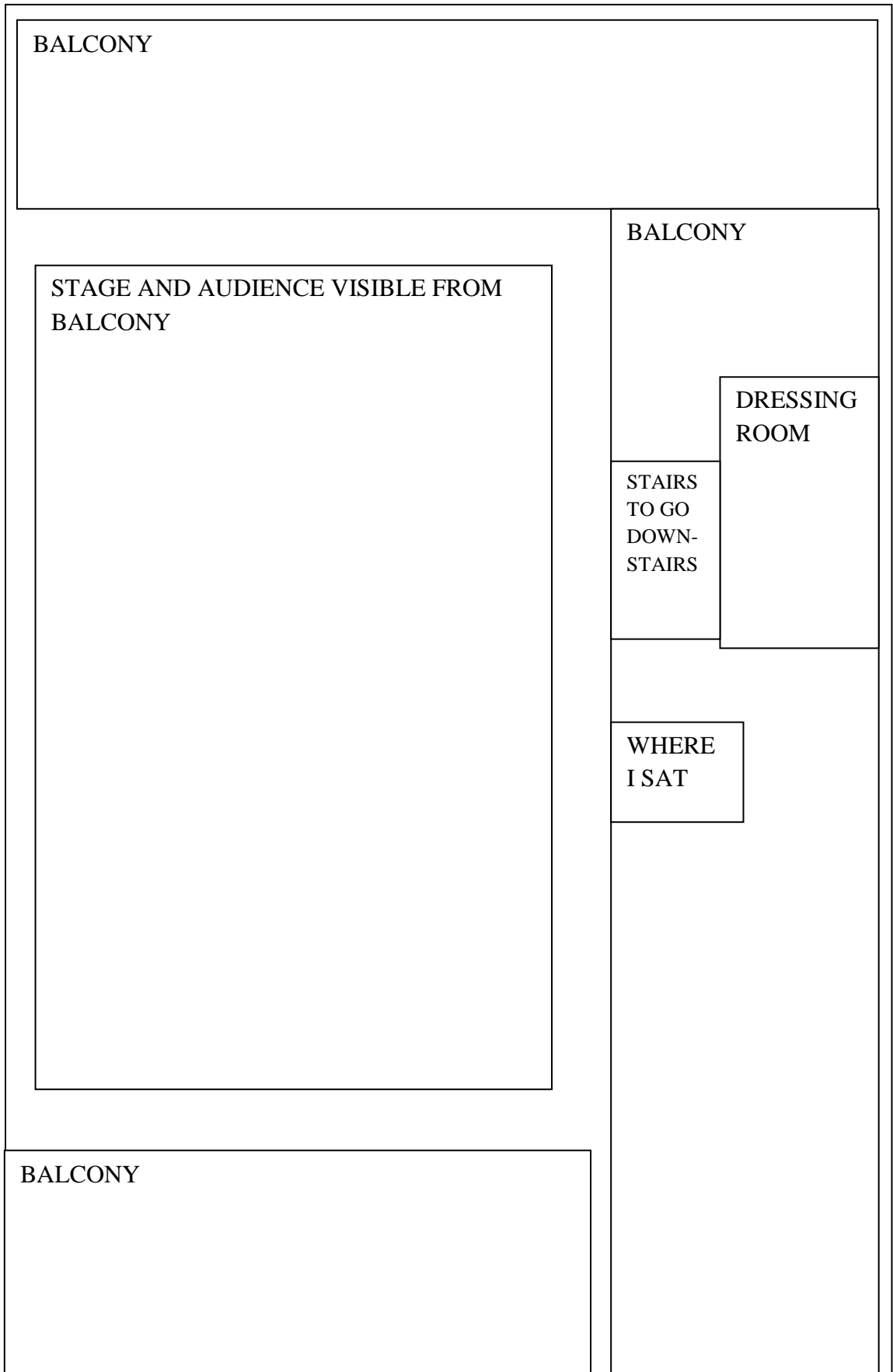


**Appendix B: LoveLads research site plans**

**LoveLads ground floor (stage and seating area)**

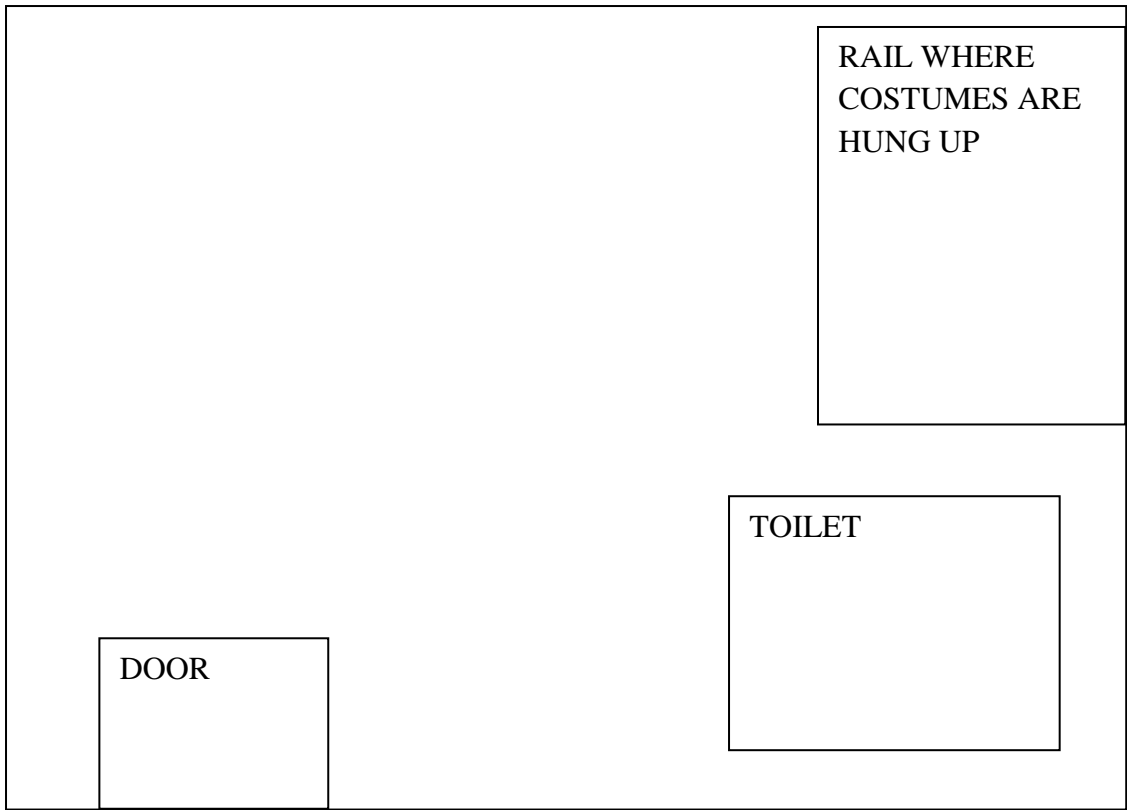


**LoveLads balcony and upstairs area**





**LoveLads dressing room**



## **Appendix C: Participant information**

Table 1: Participants at Lippy

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Number of people interviewed face-to-face</b>	<b>Number of email interviews</b>	<b>Age Range<sup>16</sup></b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Occupation (where known)</b>	<b>Estimate of number of people observed in total across all research visits</b>
Women Customers	6	13	18-20 (4); 20-30 (13); 30-40 (2)	Bisexual (2); Heterosexual (1); Lesbian (14); Undisclosed (2)	Student (8); Teacher (3); PA (1); Research (1); Business Owner (1); Management (3); Undisclosed (2)	1430
Women Dancers	3	0	30-40 (2) Undisclosed (1)	Heterosexual (2); Queer (1)	Erotic Dancer (1); Erotic dancer and Student (1); Erotic Dancer and Dominatrix (1)	5 (2 dancers declined to be interviewed)
Women Management	2 full interviews, 1 fleeting conversations	0	20-30 (1); 40-50 (2)	Lesbian (1); Queer (1); Bisexual (1)	Management and Graphic Design (1); Management (1); Event Promoter (1)	3

<sup>16</sup> Where stated, all age, sexuality and occupational data are all as defined to me by participants themselves.

Table 2: Participants at LoveLads

<b>Respondents</b>	<b>Number of people interviewed face-to-face</b>	<b>Number of email interviews</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Occupation (where known)</b>	<b>Estimate of number of people observed in total across all research visits</b>
Women Customers	0	14	18-20 (2); 20-30 (8); 40-50 (4)	Heterosexual (13); 'Married' (1)		475
Male Dancers	5	0	20-30 (2); 30-40 (2); 40-50 (1).		Erotic Dancer and Model (1); Erotic Dancer, Stage Dancer and Topless Waiter (1); Erotic Dancer and Events Manager (1); Erotic Dancer and Fitness Instructor (1); Erotic Dancer and Company Director (1).	10 (5 declined interviews)
Male Management <sup>17</sup>	0	0	40-50 (1) Undisclosed (1)	Heterosexual (2)	Management (2)	2
Drag Queens (both identified as male)	1 (brief, 5 minute interview with one performer)	0	Undisclosed (2)	Undisclosed (2)	Drag Queen (2) any other occupation unknown	2

<sup>17</sup> Male management data was told to the researcher during conversations but formal interviews were declined by these respondents.

Table 3: Participants from The Cage

<b>Venue and respondents</b>	<b>Number of people interviewed face-to-face</b>	<b>Number of email interviews</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Sexuality</b>	<b>Occupation (where known)</b>	<b>Estimate of number of people observed in total across all research visits</b>
Women Customers	2	0	40-50 (2)	Lesbian (2)	Higher Education (1) Unknown (1)	N/A (club operated in the 1980s and is now closed)
Intersex Customers	1	0	40-50 (1)	Queer (1)	Artist and Photographer (1)	N/A (club operated in the 1980s and is now closed)

## **Appendix D: Lippy Management Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a bit about your work here– what you do, when and why and how you first got your job here?
2. How often do you work here?
3. Do you just work at Lippy or anywhere else?
4. If you work anywhere else how is it similar/different to Lippy? Which do you prefer? Why?
5. Have you worked in a Lesbian bar before? If yes, how is Lippy similar or different?
6. What do you like about your work?
7. What do you dislike?
8. How do you get on with the other bar staff , the dancers and the customers? Do you see any of them outside work? Do customers ever give you tips or buy you drinks?
9. Are the customers ever hard to manage or keep in line? (during the dancing or at other times?)
10. What are customers looking for when they come for a night at Lippy?
11. What does it mean for women to have a predominantly lesbian space to socialise in?
12. Is there more or less of a need that there was in the past for this kind of space?  
Has the need changed?
13. Has Lippy changed over the years?

14. Do you think it would be easy for a straight person to do your job? Would they relate to the customers differently? Does sexuality or gender of the staff matter do you think?
15. Do any heterosexual women, or any men attend or work at Lippy? Why do you think they do?
16. What does it mean for lesbian women to have a bar that has pole dancing? Or for women to be able to watch women pole dancing? Does the club get any criticism for this? Why?
17. Do some customers just come for the pole dancing nights?
18. What do they like about the dancing do you think?
19. Do you think the dancing affects the number of customers you have in the bar? Would people still come without the dancing? What does the dancing 'add'?
20. Do some customers object to the pole dancing? Have any customers refused to watch it or anything? If yes, why do you think?
21. How are the dancers who perform at Lippy chosen? Who chooses who dances there?– Do they have to have a certain 'look'; performance; skills; sexuality?
22. Are the dancers from an agency or self-employed? Do you have any preference for where they are affiliated with?
23. Do you ever watch the dancing? Do you enjoy it?
24. What do you think is different or similar for the dancers working at Lippy as opposed to a club where they dance for men?
25. Will the new Policing and Crime Bill and the licensing of strip clubs as 'sexual entertainment' venues affect Lippy? In what way(s)?
26. Where do you see yourself in, say, 5 years time? Working here? Somewhere else? Why?

27. What would be your ideal working environment?

28. Do you have any new plans for Lippy?

## **Appendix E: Lippy Women Dancers Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a bit about your work – what you do, when and why you first got into it?
2. Do you just perform at Lippy or anywhere else?
3. If you perform anywhere else how is it similar/different to Lippy? Which do you prefer? Why?
4. Have you performed for male and female audiences? Do you have a preference? Why? Are there any differences?
5. What does a typical night at Lippy involve?
6. What would you wear?
7. What do you like about your work?
8. What do you dislike?
9. What does it mean for lesbian women to have a bar that has pole dancing? Or for women to be able to watch women pole dancing?
10. Do some customers just come for the pole dancing nights?
11. Do you have any ‘fans’? Or do you build up relationships with audience members? See familiar faces?
12. Are there any audience members that annoy you? If yes, in what way?
13. Are there any audience members you particularly appreciate? Why?
14. What do they like about the dancing do you think?
15. How do you get on with the other dancers?
16. Do you perform in similar or different ways to the other dancers?
17. What would be your ideal working environment?
18. Where do you see yourself in, say, 5 years time? Working here? Somewhere else? Why?



**Appendix F: Lippy Women Customers Interview and Email Interview Questions**

1. Did you enjoy your most recent night at Lippy? If yes, when did you go and what did you like about it?
2. Have you been before? Would you perhaps go again?
3. Who do you usually come to the club with? (e.g. alone, in a group, with a friend or partner?)
4. Do you go with the intention of meeting new people?
5. Is it important, do you think, for women to have a bar/club that has mainly women customers? Why/why not?
6. What other bars/clubs do you go to? Why do you go there?
7. In what ways is Lippy similar or different to these places? Do you have a preference for any of these clubs/bars? Why?
8. If you have watched the dancers in the basement bar, what did you enjoy about the dancing?
9. If you didn't watch the dancing – why didn't you?
10. What do you like or dislike about the way the dancers relate to the audience?
11. Were all the dancers similar? Which did you prefer? Why?
12. Do you think the dancers enjoy working there? Why?
13. Did you give the dancer, or have you ever given a dancer, a 'dollar bill'? Why or why not?
14. Have you ever been to a club where women strip for men?
15. If you have, how would you compare this experience to your experiences of watching dancers in Lippy?

16. If you haven't, what would you imagine would be different/similar in a club where women strip for men?
17. How would you compare the female audience at a pole dance show with a male audience at a club?
18. What does it mean for lesbian women to have a bar that has pole dancing or for women to be able to watch women pole dancing?
19. Do you think that women nowadays are more likely to go to an event with erotic dancing (either with male or female dancers) than they would maybe 10 or 20 years ago? Why?
20. If you have a partner, is watching erotic dancers together an activity you would choose as a couple, or would you have considered this activity with a past partner – why or why not?

## **Appendix G: LoveLads Male Dancers Interview Questions**

1. Tell me a bit about your work – what you do, when and why you first got into it?
2. How long have you been dancing?
3. How did you learn to do the dancing?
4. Do you just work here or anywhere else?
5. Do you just perform for LoveLads or any other dance events?
6. If you perform anywhere else how is it similar/different to LoveLads? Which do you prefer? Why?
7. Have you performed for male and female audiences? Do you have a preference? Why? Are there any differences between the audiences?
8. What does a typical night at LoveLads involve?
9. What would you wear?
10. What do you like about your work?
11. What do you dislike?
12. What does it mean for women to be able to watch stripping?
13. Do you have any regular customers? Do you have any ‘fans’?
14. What do women like about the dancing do you think?
15. Are there types of audience members who annoy you? Or any that you particularly appreciate?
16. Do you ever build up ‘relationships’ with audience members who are familiar faces ? Do you have any regular customers? Do they buy you drinks or anything?
17. How do you get on with the other dancers?
18. Do you perform in similar or different ways to the other dancers?

19. Does management decide which routines you are going to do on any particular night or do you?
20. Where do you see yourself in, say, 5 years time? Working here? Somewhere else? Why?
21. What would be your ideal working environment?

## **Appendix H: LoveLads Women Customers Email Interview Questions**

1. Did you enjoy your most recent night at the LoveLads show? When did you go and what did you like or not like about it?
2. Have you been before? Would you perhaps go again?
3. Who did you come to the show with? (e.g. alone, in a group, with a friend or partner?)
4. Do you go with the intention of meeting new people? Or potential partners?
5. Is it important, do you think, for women to have a bar/club that has mainly women customers? Why/why not?
6. What other bars/clubs do you go to? Why do you go there? In what ways is the LoveLads show similar or different to these places? Do you have a preference for any of these clubs/bars? Why?
7. What did you enjoy about the LoveLads show?
8. What did you like about the male dancers? Was it their physical appearance or something else?
9. What did you like or dislike about the way the dancers relate to the audience?
10. Were all the dancers similar? Which did you prefer? Why?
11. Do you think the dancers enjoy working there? What do you think they might enjoy or not enjoy about their work?
12. Have you ever tipped a dancer or bought him a drink? Why or why not?
13. Do you keep in contact with any of the dancers or women audience members that you met at a show? Why or why not? And if yes, how do you keep in contact with them (e.g. Facebook, phone number etc.)?
14. Have you been to any other shows where men strip for women?

15. If yes, were there any similarities or differences between this show and the LoveLads show? Which did you prefer? Why?
16. Have you ever been to a club where women strip for men?
17. If you have, how would you compare this experience to your experiences of watching dancers at the LoveLads show?
18. If you haven't, what would you imagine would be different/similar in a club where women strip for men?
19. How would you compare the female audience at a strip show with a male audience at a strip show?
20. What does it mean for women to be able to watch men stripping?
21. Do you think that women nowadays are more likely to go to an event with erotic dancing (either with male or female dancers) than they would maybe 10 or 20 years ago? Why?
22. If you have a partner, is watching erotic dancers together an activity you would choose as a couple, or would you have considered this activity with a past partner – why or why not?
23. What do you think your current or past partner would think about you watching the LoveLads show?
24. Are there any other comments you wish to make about your experiences of the LoveLads show?