

Review

Samantha Holland, *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*, Basingstoke, and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010. 212 pages (hardback), ISBN 978-0-230-21038-7.

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Does our need to take sides – with or against post- or second wave feminism, with or against pornography – hold us back? The question was raised as I read through Samantha Holland's *Pole Dancing, Empowerment and Embodiment*. In many ways, her attempts to not engage in the debates, to remain sitting on the fence between the anti- and the pro-pornography sides seemed brave. Discussing an area that many see at the heart of the pornification of the mainstream, she approaches pole dancing as a sport done by women behind closed doors, away from any real male gazes. In this world, women experience the exercise of pole dancing as liberating because it allows them to feel the pleasures of their bodies in motion and unrestricted by the limitations of constructed feminine space (see Battersby 1999, Jeffreys 2006, Young 2006). But, and Holland is keen to point this out, pole dancing is nevertheless appropriating women's bodies and empowering them in limited, and often only personally experienced ways.

So here is a book that attempts to straddle the divide: take seriously the women's experiences and their own articulations of empowering transformation, whilst constantly reminding us of the limitations of this experienced empowerment. Her arguments are backed up by extensive research, including 135 returned questionnaires and 37 interviews with pole dancers in the UK and elsewhere, coupled with prolonged ethnographic observation. Moreover, Holland herself engaged in pole dancing, aware of the different histories that feed into the sport, and in particular the tension between acrobatic pole dancing which teachers and websites emphasise provide the actual roots of the sport and pole dancing in strip clubs which constitutes the popular image of this form of exercise. As Holland notes, remarks from colleagues made very clear "how the sexualised image of pole dancing in strip clubs permeates the image of pole classes, and how its potency did not lessen as pole classes became more prevalent" (p. 11). Discussions of pornography and the pornification of the mainstream thus ensue, whilst the issue of "strippery classes" (p.184)

continues to occupy the book. Indeed, some of the tension between the acrobatic roots of pole dancing and its sexualised popular image is evident in the book itself: whilst Holland works hard at making visible the distinctly un-erotic and non-sexual exercise of acrobatic pole classes, the book cover gives us the image of a woman, her face conveniently obscured by her falling long hair, in a pink corset-style lingerie outfit with matching pink killer-stiletto heels. Whilst the image also emphasises the woman's toned muscles, the outfit and obscuring of the woman's identity return her body into the realm of very traditional sexual objectification.

Whilst Holland remains somewhat ambiguous as she notices that some women shy back from publicising their involvement in pole dancing and that she continues to feel uneasy about the more strippery classes, she concludes by embracing pole dancing classes for their empowering potential that the women she met experienced. In particular she highlights the physical benefits of the exercise, the friendships that develop between women, the increase in confidence and the financial gains for those women involved in teaching the classes. As she points out herself, this emphasises individual rather than collective empowerment and hence is more closely aligned to a post-feminist sensibility with which Holland, following Rambo et al. (2006), seems to align herself. Indeed, her attempt to avoid the charge of assuming the women as "cultural dupes" means that she also embraces individual experience of empowerment as evidence of real powerful (if not necessarily feminist) achievement.

Her argument is based on two key pillars: first, there is the extensive replication of the women's own words. It is notable how much space is given to the women's self-expression as evidenced in the many quotes provided in the book. Second, there is the theoretical basis which relies on a combination of phenomenology and an understanding of the individual as active, enterprising subject. Both originate in the attempt to avoid speaking for and over the subject and conceptualising them as homogenised masses. In other words, Holland works hard at avoiding the pitfalls of much early audience and feminist analysis. This leaves much space for complexity and indeed some unresolved contradictions. As Holland puts it herself: "Pole classes, and their attendant associations and cultural anxieties which radiate outwards like ripples on water, leave me perplexed for a number of reasons. Mostly because I know that by this point I should, perhaps, posit several airtight conclusions and yet I am not going to even attempt to be so glib" (p. 177). Her endeavour to avoid the eradication of complexity and contradiction must be understood as positive; however, she does not quite manage to see this through as she positions her argument in favour of understanding pole classes as empowering. Moreover, at points, this attempt to remain sitting on the fence undermines her critical project.

Under her theoretical and methodological pillars seems to lie the hope to provide as full and potentially as authentic a representation¹ of the women's experiences as possible: in her

own words, the book “aims to provide an up to date, international, multidisciplinary empirical account” (p. 1) “from which new questions proliferate rather than questions being answered” (p. 177). Thus, rather than an analysis, the book seems to offer a description with some critical questions asked. Particularly in the main chapters of the book, such an approach frustrates analysis where good points are being raised but no sustained discussion follows. For example, the point about the women’s pleasurable experience of their own bodies in unrestricted motion raises interesting questions about embodiment and sport and she offers some analysis by drawing on Iris Marion Young’s essay “Throwing Like a Girl” (2006). As Holland argues “the confidence and ability to really engage with physical activity is still commonly ‘trained out’ of women” (p. 56), and she continues to indicate how women coming to the classes were resigned to failure, but then experienced the physical exercise as empowering also because they “lost and gained ‘bodily comportment of femininity’” (p. 58).

This, however, also seems to suggest that the women experienced this particular exercise as empowering in that it allowed them to conform to traditional femininity. Indeed, the cultural perception of pole dancing as sexualised and performed for a male gaze – a perception that women new to pole dancing are undoubtedly aware of if they haven’t internalised it – indicates that the exercise is an uncontroversial one for women to perform because it constantly returns them to the realm of traditional femininity. This would suggest that the empowerment that the women experience is completely individualised: not only does it not challenge any cultural perceptions or offer a space for collective empowerment, but the women experience an empowerment that relates only to themselves, but does not undermine their or indeed their environment’s (understanding of) traditional power structures. In other words, the women experience an embodied empowerment, a physical powerfulness that seems to have no or very little impact on their relations to others. So, does the need to take sides hold us back? In the case of Holland’s book who so bravely attempts to avoid taking sides, I wonder if the answer is not no. Holland is right to try to steer clear of the pitfalls of early audience *and* feminist research: to speak for women as collective mass, to speak for and over the subject, to provide neat answers to complex situations. But this worry should not keep her from providing a detailed analysis of what the women say. Perhaps some more answers and a more deliberate siding with the debates are inevitably needed to move research forward.

References

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- Rambo, Carol, Presley, Sara Renée & Mynatt, Don (2006), ‘Claiming the Bodies of Exotic Dancers: The Problematic Discourse of Commodification’, in Dennis Waskul & Phillip Vannini,

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Notes

¹ Such a hope is, of course, in itself problematic: not only does the editing process inevitably lead to the exclusion of women's voices, but authenticity is also not achievable as all understanding is socially and historically situated. The women, like our research and analysis, thus cannot help but speak in voices that are not entirely our own.