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pole dancing, empowerment and embodiment

Samantha Holland, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2010, 166pp.,

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Pole dancing classes are a fast-growing part of the fitness industry, attracting millions of women globally to partake in classes held in gyms, clubs and leisure centres, on university campuses and so on. The hitherto sexually commercialised nature of pole dancing, with its roots in stripping and lap dancing, has been undergoing a transition into less stigmatised, more mainstream leisure terrain. This process has attracted recent attention from feminist academics interested in gendered physicality, sexuality and embodiment.

Samantha Holland's research examines the pole class industry, drawing on extensive ethnographic data collected in the UK, Australia and the US. By carrying out original qualitative research including thirty-seven in-depth interviews, her book makes an outstanding and much-needed contribution to knowledge and understanding of 'polers' and their instructors—their inspirations, scopes of meaning, identity and pleasure, relationships with their own bodies through exercise—and to broader discourses of feminised beauty. Ongoing feminist debates surrounding women's participation in sport and exercise are concerned with women's relationships with 'gender-appropriate' behaviour, and women's reluctance to partake in 'masculinised' sporting spheres. Dancing, in its varying forms, has emerged as an appealing arena, wherein women can express themselves through notions of creativity and gracefulness. Holland presents pole classes as encapsulating these possibilities for women, while also offering the potential for expressing rarer qualities such as glamour, physical strength and a sense of 'empowerment'.

Holland debates this final point, empowerment, as an intellectual 'minefield' with regard to feminist debate. Her data suggest that women experience pole classes as restorative of self-confidence, allowing them to reclaim desirability and sensuality from the clutches of the male gaze. She notes the potential limitations of defining women's bodies within parameters of sexuality, and acknowledges those feminist analyses that deny women's consciousness as they define themselves in relation to hetero-normative sexuality. Yet, asks Holland, is a woman's enjoyment of her own body through all-women fitness classes not something for feminists to celebrate? Holland's analysis of 'empowerment' draws usefully on the participants' own conceptualisations of the term, which range from a sense of physical

empowerment, brought about by the building of strength and muscularity, to a sense of female camaraderie and solidarity, encouraged by supportive teaching and a positive atmosphere in classes. Interestingly, some of the dancers themselves acknowledged outright the complexities surrounding the term 'empowerment' in this context.

One particular appeal of pole fitness classes identified in the book is their departure from 'mainstream' sport and its characteristics of masculine competitiveness that so often alienate and exclude women from a young age. 'Alternative' activities are potentially appealing to those who avoid organised sports as a way of resisting the values and practices of mainstream sports. Women reported their surprise at enjoying other alternative exercise classes as 'exercise in disguise', often as their first positive experience of doing sport. Holland interprets this as one reason for the surge in popularity of pole fitness classes for women. She also identifies the collective refusal by the participants of the widespread stigmatisation of pole classes as a binding element and a driving force to attend these often expensive and demanding classes. A sense of overcoming the stigma, and other negative elements, such as the risk of physical injury, bruising, muscle strain and so on, serves to further inspire women to persevere.

Holland addresses ongoing conflicts in feminist analyses of 'pole' with much force, drawn largely from her rich and extensive data. Her style of data analysis betrays her methodological unease about researchers speaking on behalf of or 'over' the participants, thus potentially rendering their stories less intellectually valid than our own. Holland undertook extensive participant observation, attending pole classes in order to understand and describe them and formulate research questions for the next stage of data collection. She has identified an important difference between types of classes: on the one hand, there are those that borrow props from lap dancing/striptease culture, such as feather boas and high heels, which she labels 'high church' classes. On the other hand, she describes classes that deliberately eschew associations with lap dancing and stripping, where women wear trainers and sportswear—'low church' classes. This distinction allows for a nuanced analysis of the different meanings and experiences of pole classes for individual women, and for an exploration of women's collusions with/resistance to the cultural conditions that affect them. The book includes a great deal of interview material, and Holland does a fine job of allowing it to reveal for itself the often opposing elements underpinning debates about empowerment, agency, autonomy, oppression, etc. in this context. For Holland, the polers' own accounts lead her to conclude that the pole offers the opportunity for more than an objectified body, ultimately arguing that it challenges the restrictions placed upon women's bodies by normative notions of femininity.

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