

ENCOUNTERING THE SELF ON
THE POLE:
RECREATIONAL POLE SCENE
IN TURKEY



BERFİN SU KAZAKLI

BOĞAZİÇİ UNIVERSITY

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Berfin Su Kazaklı

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The thesis of Berfin Su Kazaklı

has been approved by:

Prof. Biray Kolluoğlu
(Thesis Advisor)

Assist. Prof. Souad Osseiran

Prof. Sibel Yardımcı Yalçınan
(External Member)

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DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, Berfin Su Kazaklı, certify that

- I am the sole author of this thesis and that I have fully acknowledged and documented in my thesis all sources of ideas and words, including digital resources, which have been produced or published by another person or institution;
- this thesis contains no material that has been submitted or accepted for a degree or diploma in any other educational institution;
- this is a true copy of the thesis approved by my advisor and thesis committee at Boğaziçi University, including final revisions required by them.

Signature.....

Date.....

ABSTRACT

Encountering the Self on the Pole: Recreational Pole Scene in Turkey

This thesis offers an embodied, spatial, and affective exploration of the process of becoming a recreational pole dancer in Istanbul, Turkey. Moving beyond the dominant academic discourse that frames pole dance within a simplistic empowerment/oppression binary, this research draws on autoethnographic and ethnographic methods to investigate the embodied, affective, and communal dimensions of the practice. Grounded in the author's position as both a pole dancer and a researcher, the study is structured in three core chapters. First, it examines the disciplined body of the pole dancer, arguing that the rigorous training and navigation of pain are not merely repressive but are transformative technologies of the self that enable creative and queer expression, blending masculine-coded strength with feminine aesthetics. Second, it investigates the pole studio as a produced space, detailing how its material conditions and spatial arrangements foster a sense of safety and community. Finally, it explores the affective bonds formed through shared vulnerability, practices like spotting, and collective rituals, arguing that these circulations of trust and sensuality orient dancers toward each other and generate a queer feminist counterspace. The thesis concludes that becoming a pole dancer is an ongoing, negotiated process where discipline, space, and affect intertwine. It demonstrates that the pole studio functions as a site of queer feminist world-making, where dancers actively reshape their bodies, relationships, and the meanings of femininity, strength, and community, holding the apparent contradictions of the practice in a productive and dynamic tension.

ÖZET

Direk Üzerinde Benlikle Karşılaşmak: Türkiye’de Hobi Amaçlı Pole Dans Alanı

Bu tez, İstanbul, Türkiye’de hobi amaçlı pole dansçısı olma sürecini bedensel, mekânsal ve duygulanımsal bir bakışla inceler. Pole dansı, akademik söylemde sıklıkla basit bir güçlenme/baskı ikiliği üzerinden ele alınsa da, bu çalışma otoetnografik ve etnografik yöntemlere dayanarak pratiğin bedensel, duygulanımsal ve topluluk boyutlarını araştırır. Yazarın hem pole dansçısı hem de araştırmacı konumundan hareket eden çalışma üç ana bölümde yapılandırılmıştır. İlk bölümde pole dansçısının disipline edilmiş bedeni ele alınır; yoğun antrenman ve acıyla baş etmenin yalnızca baskıcı değil, aynı zamanda yaratıcı ve kuir ifadeyi mümkün kılan, maskülen kodlu güç ile feminen estetiği harmanlayan dönüştürücü bir özneleşme teknolojisi olduğu ileri sürülür. İkinci bölümde pole stüdyosu üretilmiş bir mekân olarak incelenir; stüdyonun maddi koşulları ve mekânsal düzenlemelerinin güvenlik ve topluluk duygusu oluşturduğunu ortaya koyar. Son bölümde ise kırılmalılığın paylaşılması, “spotting” gibi uygulamalar ve kolektif ritüeller aracılığıyla kurulan duygulanımsal bağlar incelenir; bu güven ve şehvet dolaşımlarının dansçıları birbirine yönelttiği ve queer feminist bir karşı-mekân ürettiği savunulur. Tez, pole dansçısı olmanın disiplin, mekân ve duygulanımın iç içe geçtiği, sürekli müzakere edilen bir süreç olduğu sonucuna varır. Pole stüdyosunun, dansçıların bedenlerini, ilişkilerini ve kadınlık, güç ve topluluk anlamlarını yeniden şekillendirdiği, pratiğin barındırdığı çelişkileri verimli ve dinamik bir gerilim içinde tuttuğu queer feminist bir dünya kurma alanı olarak işlediğini gösterir.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

As a pole dancer myself, my curiosity about pole dancing was not limited to the dancing aspect; there were aspects about pole dancing that I could not readily make sense of. As a feminist and a pole dancer, I was faced with a dilemma: I was well aware that I was objectified by men, and marginalized by the majority of people who found out I do pole dance, and I sometimes had the urge to hide this part of my life or reveal only certain aspects to it to specific people, like my friends. On the other hand, it was something that I have been doing for myself since 2022, and I derived immense joy and empowerment from it. Pole was a domain where I felt I could explore, play with, and express my own desires. I felt like I was embracing and reclaiming my own bodily autonomy and finding a community of women and queer people as I do so. It was hard for me to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory aspects of pole dance in my mind. Disclosing the fact that I do pole dance became a question in and of itself. This was reflected in my personal and professional life in corporate jobs and academia. Why was I struggling with saying that I am a pole dancer? What criteria was I using to decide so, and when I did decide to disclose it, why did it necessitate strategizing how exactly to do so? What was it about pole that required me to have so many strategies to talk about it? I was uncomfortable with the fact that anytime I told someone I was a pole dancer, I also found myself on the defensive, justifying my interest in pole dance. What I argued for and where I stood kept shifting with each interaction I had with people other than pole dancers. For those who judged me for doing something akin to sex work, I explained that pole dance does not equal sex work; moreover, it takes a lot of work and physical fitness

to pole dance. For example, I sanitized the image of pole dance when talking to my parents, referring to it simply as dance. For those who reduced pole to fitness, I explained the organic ties it has to sex work, highlighted the erotic aspects of it, and defended the sex workers who pioneered it. It was only other pole dancers with whom I could discuss various aspects of pole dance all at once without feeling like I had to defend my choice to pole dance. I was also aware that other people did not really understand the bodily experiences I had. The discomfort I felt about how being a pole dancer played out in everyday interactions led to a deeper question about the nature of pole dance, and soon I knew that I wanted to embark on this research journey to better understand my own experiences of pole dance. In time, I found myself dissatisfied with the opposing views of empowering vs oppressive that seem to permeate the pole dance discourse and wanted to have a ground-up approach to exploring these aspects simultaneously. I felt like my embodied experience had to account for something.

The most common question I get asked when I say I am a pole dancer is, “Does the pole spin?” This question has been etched into my mind for the longest time. Through this question, I realized that the material aspect of pole dance is unknown to the majority since the very first thing I learned in a pole class was to feel how the pole spins. I remember holding the pole in my palm, looking at myself in the mirror. When I tried to walk in circles, it looked and felt weird. I was then instructed to walk forward with my hand on the pole as the anchor connecting me to it. I was walking forward, but the pole was pulling me inward. This connection resulted in me walking in circles around the pole. At that moment, I felt like something was irrevocably changed. The pole itself transformed my movement. I quickly learned that my movement was not separate from the pole, I needed to account for that and

let the pole guide me. Understanding how the centripetal force works with pole dance took me a while, but this physics principle, along with many others that I came to know very intimately in training, are mostly absent in much of the discourse on pole dance. As I was researching this subject, it became more and more apparent to me that everybody I came across as a pole dancer had something to say about pole dance, but only a fraction of people knew the very first thing about its actual physical properties, and by extension, how one feels when pole dancing.

What does becoming a pole dancer entail? What is the role of discipline in becoming a pole dancer? What is the role of pain and pain management in becoming a pole dancer? What is the role of the pole studios and how do spatial entanglements shape the pole community? What is the role of emotions in belonging to the pole dance community?

In this thesis, I explore themes of becoming, embodiment, discipline, and feminine communities that emerge at the recreational pole dance scene in Istanbul, Turkey. By delving into the embodied and spatio-social aspects of becoming a pole dancer this thesis aims to explore queer and feminist possibilities of pole dance through spatial entanglements, production of docile body, and affective economies.

1.1 Situating my own experience

One of the contestants of Ukraine's Got Talent 2013 was Anastasia Sokolova, who wowed both the judges and the crowd with her pole performance to Marilyn Manson's Tainted Love. As she walks up to the main stage, the camera pans to her body, dressed in black patent leather underwear and 6-inch thigh-high boots. The image of her walking in slow motion cuts to show that the audience is somehow appalled by how scandalous she looks. When she starts her performance, however, it

is clear that everyone is impressed by her physical agility: She performs kicks, drops, dynamic spins, and she carries her body weight with only one arm or a small patch of skin, all while making it look effortless and sexy. At the end of the performance, she successfully moved up to the next stage of the competition. This 7-minute video of Sokolova's performance was my first exposure to pole dancing. I remember going back to this video over and over again throughout the years, always finding it impressive, and at the same time, impossible. It didn't seem like something regular people could or would do. I found her fascinating, much like circus aerialists I have seen; only, her clothes were skimpier and there was an air of forbiddenness to her performance. This was my very first encounter with pole dance. My fascination with it led me to become a pole dancer myself.

In April 2022, I stumbled upon Spin and Flow on Instagram. The advertisement I saw on the studio's page stated that everybody can do pole, no matter the age, gender, or body type. I was instantly reminded of Sokolova's image on the screen and how otherworldly she seemed. And here this studio was, with the promise of that same otherworldly athleticism and sexiness to everyone who wants it. I decided to give pole dancing a shot right away and booked a class.

I spent a good 10 minutes in front of a sage door that looked like it belonged to a warehouse or storefront under an apartment building in the middle of a residential street in an inconspicuous neighborhood, trying to find out exactly where I was supposed to go before my very first pole class. The frosted glass of the windows obstructed the view from the outside. There was no sign to clue you in as to what this ordinary place might be. When the pole dancer who worked at the studio opened the door and let me in, it was as if I was transported in space: Women in underwear were everywhere, it seemed like they were "flying", spinning on the

poles. It was a well-lit, busy space at first glance; there was sports equipment on the cabinets, as well as impossibly high Pleaser heels. An LGBT+ flag was hanging on the wall where gymnastic mats were propped on, and behind that was a couch where people were having light conversation, waiting for the next class. The floor-to-ceiling mirror that lined one side of the room showed different bodies moving in tandem, the physical extortion visible on their red and sweaty faces.

Most importantly, the room had 7 chrome poles that are fixed to the floor and the ceiling. Even though the pole studio had a distinct lack of markedness from the outside that gives it an air of seclusion, those poles were the physical marker of a mirage amongst the desert, creating a place that felt fixed in time and space. The moment I stepped inside, I was surrounded by bodies who felt at home in that safe haven, a community of pole dancers, and in time, I would become a part of this community inhabiting this space.

I have been a pole dancer for more than 3 years. During this time, I regularly took classes that Spin and Flow offers, such as pole conditioning, stretching, old school pole dance, exotic choreography, and technical classes that focus on building a pole repertoire in progression. I also participated in many workshops, both in Spin and Flow and other studios, and had the opportunity to perform in Spin and Flow parties and performance nights. I wasn't alone in all these experiences; I found myself surrounded by a community made up of pole dancers accompanying me every step of the way.

I wanted to learn everything there was to pole, so in November 2023, I enrolled in the instructor training program Spin and Flow offered that spanned 5 weeks, and covered theoretical and practical aspects of teaching pole such as anatomy, demoing the tricks, spotting the students so that they can try the trick

safely, skill progression and programming the necessary conditioning, and having a command on the class. I also had the opportunity to observe the instructors here while they were teaching their class for a month, and intern for them, stepping in as instructor for a part of each class I observed. I soon realized that everything I learned from this program was passed down to me by people who originally designed this structure. This experience helped me better see the professional and institutionalized side of recreational pole dance.

1.2 Navigating the field and doing (auto-)ethnography

This thesis is an attempt to answer the question of becoming a pole dancer and its embodied, spatial and affective entanglements; and to make sense of my own experience among many. The proximity pole dance has to sex work means that the topics of women's sensuality and bodies are central to this thesis, and I was aware from the beginning that these topics require a deep level of responsibility and respect. Given the highly stigmatized and marginalized position sex workers have, since they are the ones who pioneered and popularized pole dance in general, I tried to be mindful of having a feminist methodology even when the sex workers are not the primary subjects of this thesis. Moreover, this thesis is about a community of women and LGBT+ people. From the inception of this research, I was aware that highlighting women's voices about their bodies and practices was crucial. Rather than being a spectator, it was important for me to be an active participant in the research matter at hand, something that was possible through my status as an active member of the community. As a result, I used both auto-ethnographic and ethnographic methods to gather data for this thesis. At the beginning stages of this research, I was not expecting the sensory world of pole dance to possess this text as

much as it eventually did. But since the experiences related to the corporeal body are a big aspect of this thesis, I followed Pink's conceptualization of sensory ethnography, trying to capture the "multisensory everyday life practice" that's shared by pole dancers.

From the very beginning of this research, being part of Istanbul's pole dance community was both one of the biggest assets and challenges I had as a researcher. As a pole dancer of 3 years, I already had a good rapport and even close personal friendships with a lot of the people in the community. These close ties meant I was able to easily access pole spaces, and I was trusted by pole dancers themselves. Throughout the research process, I struggled the most with trying to make sense of the ways my situatedness in the field prevented me from having a more well-rounded perspective on pole dance. To combat that, I used ethnographic methods that include participant observation, focus groups, and semi-structured in-depth interviews. I took extensive field notes during community events, trying to capture the things I've seen, felt, and heard. These field notes follow sensory ethnography's commitment to "thick description" (Pink, 2015), documenting not just actions but the textures, rhythms, and atmospheres of pole practice. Observing classes and community events and taking extensive notes in the meantime, with the clear intention of researching it, helped me see details that I had not paid attention to before. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 10 pole dancers, pole dance instructors, and pole studio owners across 3 months. Even though I had a set of questions, these interviews often felt like conversations with friends, and I found myself sharing my own experiences as well. This helped me have a more open dialogue with my participants, given the trust I had already established with the majority of them by sharing the same pole spaces. These interviews allowed me to situate my own experience among others and

shed light on aspects of pole dance that I wouldn't otherwise have access to, such as business relations. By looking at the experiences of other people through the perspective of a researcher over and over again during the transcription and analysis part of the in-depth interviews, I was able to develop a more critical outlook on pole dance.

Given my closeness to the research matter, self-reflexiveness plays a huge role in framing my embodied experience with a critical lens. I tried not to create a distance between myself and the pole; on the contrary, as Holman (2016) suggests, I submerged myself deeper into my experience, trying to situate it in relations of power. I treat my embodied experience as critical data. By writing not just about my body, but through it, I practice what Ellis (2007) calls "radical self-exposure", an autoethnographic approach that results in research that connects the personal to the cultural (Ellis, Adams & Bochner, 2011).

As a pole dancer myself, even though the questions I had about my own practice were the starting point of this research, I wouldn't be able to shape this research without the contribution of other pole dancers. I was a part of a feminist book club consisting of 7 pole dancers with the occasional participation of other pole dancers from the community, from September 2023 to March 2024. One of the book club members, Filiz, was a pole dance instructor, while others were students. Our meetings took place at a cafe in Kadıköy, near the studio where we all frequented. Each session lasted around 2 hours. The goal of the book club was to have a reason to socialize outside the studio as pole dancers and make sense of our experience as pole dancers through reading and discussing feminist literature. In these book club sessions, I had the chance to express my own experience and discomfort and hear about other people's experiences.

Through these discussions, a lot more questions emerged in my mind. It was during these book club sessions that I decided to research this subject as my MA thesis project, and our discussions helped shape this thesis in various ways, from helping me come up with the questions of this research in the first place to acting as a focus group where these questions are discussed in depth. Their contribution to this project is immeasurable. Thanks to our long discussions, I was able to better see the possibilities of a queer feminist counterspace. This book club helped me situate myself not as a static dancer/researcher, but as a combination of both that always shifts and evolves. In these sessions, I was both an active participant in the pole dance community and an observer. Each session was moderated by someone else from the group. Thanks to their facilitation, I was able to hear the issues that are brought forward by other pole dancers and how they thought about their own experience. It was thanks to the conversationality of these focus groups that I was able to gather multiple outlooks on the same issue at once (Cyr, 2015). This helped me better situate my own experience among the experiences of other pole dancers.

As a pole dancer, the women I interviewed talked from a place of familiarity. My pre-existence in the field means that I was fortunate to have an already-existing rapport, but also that everyone I spoke to have an idea of who I was, which studios I go to, and with whom I had close relationships. I had to situate my own experience among others, constantly be in dialogue with the feminist theories that helped me make sense of the field. Since I occupied a certain position in the field that I was researching, my position gave me a unique point of view that allowed me to ask the questions I ask in this thesis and formulate them in a way that is much more intimate to the pole dancer experience.

Literature on pole dance rarely takes advantage of auto-ethnographic data. Scholars who research pole dance state that their academic interest in pole dance led them to take classes. For example, Griffiths (2015) explicitly says that she is not a pole dancer, but the pole classes that are offered at her gym caught her interest. Even when she talks about how having a similar background to her interviewees helped her build a rapport with them, she highlights that her lack of being a pole dancer was a limiting factor. She overcomes this by taking pole classes and using that experience to further the interviews. Still, she, herself, doesn't claim the title "pole dancer". That is still reserved for the object of the study, not the researcher herself, despite hours of pole experience. I, on the other hand, claim that title. My interest in pole dance didn't start as an academic interest. On the contrary, my academic interest began through my personal experience as a pole dancer.

As a pole dancer myself, I feel deeply embedded in the subject I'm researching. I am not an outsider looking in. There is no duality between the researcher and the research subject since my own body stands at the intersection of both, blurring the lines between the self and the other, the personal and the social (Spry, 2001). My own embodied experience and knowledge informed and guided this thesis from the start. Through utilizing the autoethnographic method, I tell the story of my body through my material experience, and I situate my own "socio-politically inscribed body as a central site of meaning-making" (Spry, 2001). As Spry writes, I try to unearth what occurs in the liminal spaces, "between experience and language, between the known and the unknown, between the somatic and semantic" by understanding how my body is exposed and politicized through being a pole dancer (Spry 2001, p.726). As Spry writes, the theory and the body are already integrated. As a result, I hope to achieve "an embodied mode of inquiry that is

sensuous, emotional, and intimate and a form of representation that is imaginative, evocative, and heartfelt” (Bochner & Ellis, 2003, p.444). From this inquiry, I hope to achieve what Kathy Davis has articulated as “embodied theory”, one that bridges the gap between “the symbolic and the material, between representations of the body and embodiment as experience or social practice in concrete social, cultural and historical contexts” (Davis, 1997, p.15). As a result, this thesis is an attempt at reflecting my collaboration as researcher with the pole community and the culture.

1.3 Navigating the field as a pole dancer

At the beginning of the research process, as I was telling people my interest in writing about this subject, I had to come face-to-face with my own vulnerability in disclosing being a pole dancer. At first, even though it was easier to talk about it with people who already knew that I was a pole dancer, I found myself ill-prepared for the close scrutiny I would come face-to-face with from people in academia. Given my proximity to the subject matter, I had a lot of questions and intuition about pole dance that I was not yet able to formulate and verbalize. As I discussed it and read literature on it, it became easier to do so, but in the meantime, I had to explain myself over and over again to everyone I talked to about this research. This experience was different from my previous experience when disclosing my research interest in Femicide. Seen as a more serious topic and something that was a more impersonal academic interest, researching femicide did not require me to talk about my relations to it, even though I was an active member of the feminist group that I was doing research on. But when I decided to do research on pole dance, my relationship to pole became the first topic that emerged. Soon I realized that for me, deciding to research this topic meant that I had to publicly embrace being a pole dancer. While it

was difficult at first, with each person I talked to, it became easier. As I reflect on these encounters, I realize that this thesis made it possible for me to address the discomfort I felt around this topic and go on a personal journey, as well as an academic one.

That is not to say that I was always faced with positive feedback. At times, I found it extra hard to speak to male academics, given the close connotations of pole dance and sex work. In these discussions, I found myself taking a more abstract approach to avoid the reality that I do pole dance. I was not alone in this discomfort: Griffiths (2015) talks about how her male colleagues and acquaintances teased her by wanting to go to lap dance clubs with her when she told them she was writing a book on pole dance. Griffiths suggests that she was able to distance herself from her academic interest because she is not a pole dancer herself but navigating this as a pole dancer proved to have unique challenges. For example, I found myself in uncomfortable situations where the topic shifted from my academic interest in pole dance to how sexy pole dance can be. Similarly, I felt the sense that people felt more welcome to talk about sex-related topics with me due to the subject of my research, not questioning whether I was open to it or not. Navigating these conversations proved to be challenging, especially with male colleagues. On the other hand, I was more open to discussing my research with other women and queer people, even when I had to clarify misconceptions and misassumptions that they might have. I was often met with curiosity and a desire to try it themselves. In any case, as I talked about pole dance in the context of this research, I grew more comfortable disclosing myself as a pole dancer and developed a more consistent strategy to talk about this topic that was more decisive than how I used to position myself before starting this research.

Talking about this thesis within the community was a different experience. For the majority of my participants, trusting outsiders with their pole experience was a vulnerable thing. During the fieldwork of this thesis, many people expressed their trust in “someone from the community” to write about their experience, and their curiosity about the thesis itself. While this was instrumental for how the participants opened up during the interviews, it also meant that the responsibility I feel towards their portrayal grew larger with each such sentiment.

But not everyone in the community was supportive. While the majority expressed interest and support, I received a couple of hesitant remarks, especially from pole dance instructors who have been in the field for more than a decade and didn’t think my own experience in the field would be enough to capture everything. When they asked exactly what I was researching, my answer of the material and discursive experience of pole dancers in Istanbul was met with comments that suggested I was missing one aspect of pole dance or another, even when I explained that I was taking that into consideration. Although discouraging at some points, these comments were instrumental for me to have better self-reflexivity and be aware of my limited perspective. By conducting interviews with people who have longer-than-a-decade experience, I could better see how the pole dance scene has changed and evolved since 2013. Their insistence on highlighting certain aspects of pole dance as “missing” from this thesis helped me better approach this subject in a way that would make sure that their worries are addressed and included. Their comments reminded me of my own position at the beginning, which led me to this research: They wanted to make sure that how I understood pole was as well-rounded as possible. Whenever I said pole fitness, they suggested sex work, and vice versa. This further solidified

my initial unease with always being on the defensive when it comes to pole dance, which was also the case for other people as well.

1.4 Participants

For this project, I conducted interviews with pole dancers mainly from one pole dance studio in Kadıköy, Istanbul, namely Spin and Flow, as well as pole dance owners and instructors across 3 studios. The participants of this study are pole dancers, studio owners, instructors, and studio employees. All of the participants are women, and majority of them identified as LGBT+. All participants of this study are between the ages of 20 and 45. They have jobs that allow them extra income to take pole classes such as dentist, journalist, computer engineer, psychologist, content writer, etc. All of them were either college graduates or students. Some of them were pursuing higher education and in the process of getting their master's and PhD degrees.

I had 8 key informants. Among those, Sevgi, Esin, Filiz and Buse are pole dance instructors, and current or previous studio owners. Arzu, Defne, Yeşim and Alev are pole dancers. I had a personal relationship with everyone except for Esin. Rather than one off interviews, I had multiple conversations and interviews with each one of the informants. As a result, while some of the quotes come from interviews that are recorded and transcribed, others are reconstructed from the notes I've taken. I have had brief conversations with other pole dancers as well. For the structured interviews, I had prepared questions coming into them, but since they had a more conversational tone, the participants also had an active role in shaping the direction of the interviews. Each session lasted between 30 minutes to 2 hours. Some of them were online meetings, but the majority occurred face-to-face at coffee shops or bars.

The conversations I had outside of the interviews spanned the year that I was actively working on this thesis, and the majority of them occurred inside the studio spaces.

1.5 Theoretical framework

The promiscuous pole dancer with her 8-inch stripper heels and tiny lingerie is a prominent figure in collective consciousness, but in the context of Turkey, it is mostly a foreign image, imported from the West, where it is common for sex workers to use this instrument in the clubs where they work. In the early 2000s, with the initiation of sex workers themselves, such as Fawnia Mondey, who opened the first recreational pole studio in Las Vegas, pole dance moved beyond the closed doors and dim lights of the nightclubs and became more mainstream. Soon, more and more pole studios that cater to non-sex workers emerged (Holland, 2010). However, this association and stigma of the “stripper” is prevalent even when the dancer is not a sex worker and is doing it recreationally, so much so that it pushes certain people in the pole community into categorizing what they do as “pole fitness”, rejecting the association altogether through sanitization of pole as a sport activity (Whitehead-Kurz, 2009).

The image of the “pole dancer” is burdened with contradictions. On one hand, it is seen as sexy: people, mostly women, get semi-naked under the dim lights, perform moves like body rolls that showcase eroticism, wear high heels that are not made for walking, but for dancing. It reminds the audience of the image of the “stripper” in a club. On the other hand, pole dancing demands rigorous physical discipline. Pole dancers undergo an intensive exercise regime to the point where they can carry their weight by a thin patch of skin, a difficult feat that has even led to initiatives to make it an Olympic Sport. As a result, the pole dancer figure

simultaneously evokes the male fantasy and challenges docile femininity and traditional expectations that come with it. Both Holland and Griffiths talk about the physical strength necessary and the sports aspect of pole dancing to situate pole dance as having a paradoxical place in this debate when juxtaposed with its sexual nature. While Holland talks about how not “girly” pole classes are due to the exertion and unfeminine training regimes, Griffiths states that the pole classes are regarded as empowering through their separation from sex work and rebranding of a fitness activity. Donaghue et al. (2011) show that while many pole dancers describe their practice as empowering, they also acknowledge internalizing societal beauty standards, such as feeling pressure to wear revealing attire or maintaining a "pole-ready" body.

Holland (2010) cites the emergence and popularization of recreational pole classes within a wider cultural shift towards the sexualization of culture. Levy (2005) describes this new culture as “raunch culture”, a society that is increasingly sexualized, and where sexual images and pornography are everywhere. Griffiths (2015) suggests that this cultural shift is linked to the rise of post-feminism where she sees post-feminism as the understanding that feminism has done its deed and is now obsolete, and as a result, women’s self-objectification is seen as empowerment, especially in the Western World. McNair (2002) suggests that many women might have grown up thinking that the issues radical feminism fights against are seemingly resolved and might see pornography as relevant to their own sex lives, rather than in opposition to them as women. Levy (2005) describes this as women joining in on their self-objectification. McRobbie (2009) calls this phenomenon the “post-feminist masquerade”, a paradoxical stance of quasi-feminism that does not pose a threat to masculine hegemony. In this perspective, the sexual liberation rhetoric and enjoying

feminine aesthetics become tools of oppression in and of themselves. In extension of that, feminist scholars such as Levy and McRobbie view pole dancing as the epitome of such a false sense of empowerment. Griffiths (2015) discusses how she came into the pole classes with this certain bias. Having been shaped by the raunchy culture rhetoric laid out by Levy, she had a pre-established notion that pole classes objectify women. However, soon, she says she realized it is much more nuanced than that. In her work, she examines how women experience pole classes and how femininity and feminism are negotiated in these classes. Following these various interventions, it becomes necessary to consider if it is possible to have a different understanding of empowerment, one that's aware of the structural issues that present an obstacle to women to exercise their choices, while also searching for areas where they manage to create pockets of freedom, a resistance to the status quo by exerting their agency in varying ways?

Not all literature has the same approach or understanding of post-feminism and feminine aesthetics. Baumgardner and Richards (2004) argue that the enjoyment of feminine aesthetics is not inherently non-political, and it allows for feminists to cultivate new feminist identities and "girlie" feminist subjectivities. Similarly, while critical of this shift of feminism towards culture, Walter (1998) suggests that enjoying feminine practices like makeup and high heels can coexist with feminist commitments to autonomy and equality. Conducting an ethnographic study of recreational pole dance in the UK, Holland's (2010) shows that pole dancers framed their practice as a form of resistance against restrictive gendered norms, emphasizing the development of physical strength, confidence, and community. Similarly, Whitehead and Kurz's (2009) study with Australian pole dancers reveals that many dancers viewed the practice as transformative, allowing them to "feel powerful in a

way that society doesn't usually allow women to feel" (Whitehead and Kurz, 2009:24). These examples illustrate how the lived experiences of pole dancers can create pockets of freedom/agency. Berlant (2008) also highlights that public feminine performance often expresses collective identification, emotional attachment, and intimacy.

The main argument against post-feminist thinking is that it falsely assumes that gender equality has been achieved. The book *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms*, Brooks (1997) suggests that postfeminism does not mean that all the battles of feminism have been won; rather, it refers to the intersection of feminism with other movements that are anti-foundationalist, such as poststructuralism, postmodernism, and postcolonialism. Similar to Walter, Brooks also identifies a shift within feminism away from debates on equality and towards a greater interest in culture. Unlike Walter, however, she sees this shift not as a rupture, but more as "a sign of the ongoing productive transformation and change of feminism" (Gill, 2000, p.143). As a result, Walter argues that this opens up space for growing interest in different feminine experiences. In the post-feminist debate, the feminine body that dances on the pole exists as a symbolic figure, and its agency is linked to the patriarchal ties that influence the culture it emerges from. While the symbolic aspect of the feminist subject is discussed, the embodied aspect of the feminine subjectivities becomes a topic of debate as well. Even when scholars envision a level of agency for the feminine body, it is mainly through a negotiation with the masculine hegemony. Braidotti (2002) criticizes this approach as phallogocentrism, or "the privileging of the masculine (the phallus) in understanding meaning or social relations" (Purdue dictionary). Is it possible to understand this

feminine body from a different perspective, one that considers its material reality and disrupts the power given to the phallus, represented here in the pole?

By focusing on the corporeal body, feminist scholars have understood these different feminine experiences from an embodied perspective. For example, in her materialist theory of becoming, Braidotti (2002) explores these differing femininities by focusing on corporeal experience and refuses a “coherently essential and a purely superficial idea of the sexed and/or gendered body” (Sellberg, 2008, p.137). For Braidotti, the “female corporeal reality” is not the opposite of the masculine but is a process of becoming. By deconstructing the Masculine/feminine binary, Braidotti opens up the possibility for the Feminine/other to contain multitudes and transform (Pelletier, 2004). The woman, then, emerges as "multi-centered, internally differentiated female feminist subjectivity" (Pelletier, 2004, p. 203). For Braidotti, then, the feminine and sexualized body is not inherently passive. On the contrary, she argues for a body that is dynamic, desiring, and capable of political agency. This conceptualization is far from condemning femininity to a place of objectification. Rather, by displacing its status as the other to the masculine, it gives agency to the feminine body to desire. By embracing pole dancing as an embodied emancipatory practice, the relationship the pole dancer has with the pole as an instrument creates a space for how the “erotic, queer, fun, marginal” body desires (Kum, 2025).

Braidotti (2002) suggests that Irigaray also envisions a rupture from phallagocentrism. This rupture allows Irigaray to understand femininity outside the bounds of hegemonic masculinity. She suggests that the patriarchal unconscious is at unease with the feminine attributes, qualities, and entitlements. Irigaray suggests that rejecting femininity causes “irreparable loss and unrepresentable grief” to the subject (Braidotti, 2004). Femininity, in this conceptualization, functions less as self-

objectification and more as a disruption of the patriarchal unconscious. She emphasizes the need for a new heterosexual socio-symbolic contract that rejects the existing femme-fobia and embraces femininity. Adding to that, Braidotti argues that this redefining of the feminine subject repairs “the asymmetry between the sexes”. This opens up space for femininity and feminine sexuality to be a mode of becoming. Braidotti envisions a feminine project she terms “virtual femininity”, a type of femininity that is not codified by the patriarchal imaginary, but a femininity that is empowering. The corporeal body and all its sensory experiences, as well as feminine communities, play a role in redefining femininity.

By shifting the focus from pole dancing as a passive practice that’s merely assessed by the outside perspective to pole dancing as an embodied practice, new possibilities of queering of pole dance emerge. The gender performativity of pole dance, as Butler (1990) conceptualizes, exaggerates and recombines gendered aesthetics, revealing that both femininity and masculinity are constructed rather than innate. Pole dancing can function as a queering of normative femininity, where femininity becomes a performance, achievable through masculine-assigned traits such as physical strength. Pole helps blur the distinction between the categories of masculine and feminine. In *A Fem(me)inist Manifesto*, Duggan and McHugh (1996) describe the femme as “the performativity, the insincerity, the mockery, the derision of foreplay, the bet, the dare, the bringing to attention of the suitor, the one who would provide (her) pleasure” (p.154). They understand this queer performance of femininity as occupying normality abnormally, in a way that the feminine pole dancer occupies the sexy feminine body through abnormal masculinity. Just like femininity, pole dance then challenges masculinity as well. In *Female Masculinity*, Halberstam (1998) demolishes the assumption that masculinity is exclusive to the

domain of male bodies, showcasing how female and queer performers reclaim masculine-coded traits (e.g., strength, angularity) to destabilize gender norms. These queer perspectives reveal pole dance's potential to subvert the masculine and the feminine and disrupt gendered norms.

1.6 Thesis structure

This thesis focuses on the embodied and spatial aspects of pole dance in becoming a pole dancer. As I discuss briefly in this chapter, feminist literature focuses on the oppressive/empowering dilemma of pole dance without taking into account its materiality. As a result, this chapter aims to approach this subject from a different point of view, one that is aided by and rendered possible through my own experience as a pole dancer. In this chapter, I have established my proximity to the subject matter and offered a concise overview of the methodology. This chapter also includes a literature overview detailing how the feminist literature lays pole dance on the table. By taking advantage of embodiment and materiality, this thesis aims to showcase the queer feminist possibilities of pole dancing.

This thesis is organized into three main chapters, each exploring distinct yet interconnected dimensions of becoming a pole dancer. In Chapter 2, titled *The Body of the Pole Dancer*, I delve into the embodied and disciplinary aspects of pole dance. Drawing on Foucault's concept of the docile body, this chapter examines how pole dancers undergo rigorous physical training to transform their bodies, strength, and feminine aesthetic ideals. Using Sara Ahmed's theory on affect, pain emerges as an integral part of becoming a pole dancer. As a result, I draw from autoethnographic accounts and interviews to understand the becoming of a pole dancer through strategies of pain navigation and discipline that shape the everyday embodied

experiences of pole dancers. The chapter also argues that through an intrinsic interplay between masculine-assigned physical strength and feminine aesthetics, the docile body is not merely a site of control but a condition for creative and expressive freedom, enabling pole dancers to challenge gendered norms through their practice and explore queer/femme possibilities.

Chapter 3, titled Spaces of Pole Community, shifts focus to the community aspect of pole dance through a spatial exploration, centering pole studios as queer feminist counterspace. Using Lefebvre's theory of space, this chapter investigates the material and social production of the pole studio. It highlights the studio as a site of trust, and safety where pole dancers navigate societal stigma while forging a sense of belonging. The chapter concludes by reflecting on how the production of the physical space is accompanied by a narrative production of the community, shaping how the dancers feel a sense of belonging.

Chapter 4, titled Affective Space of Pole Dance, draws from Ahmed's conceptualization of affective economies and orientation to explore how practices of training together, spotting and mutual vulnerability create intimacy among pole dancers, resulting in a collective reimagining of femininity and empowerment. I aim to showcase the role of affects such as sensuality and trust in becoming a part of the pole community. In this chapter I explore how bodies orient towards one another and towards the studio space, and how the circulation of affects and orientation of bodies play a role in the production of queer feminist counterspace.

Together, these chapters offer a grounded, material and embodied exploration of pole dance, bridging the personal, cultural, and theoretical to illuminate its transformative potential

CHAPTER 2

THE BODY OF THE POLE DANCER

I hold the pole under my armpit, trying to push it into the ground, like driving in a stake. This motion catalyzes a series of movements that I execute with different parts of my body in tandem. I hike myself up, raise my legs to my chest, and try to keep my knees straight. I straighten my arms as I hold the pole in both hands, effectively lowering my upper body. I then open my legs wide in a straddle, raise my pelvis a bit more, and anchor my outside leg while bending that knee to have a solid grip. I then open my chest, let go of my hands, my inside armpit squeezing the pole, and hang in a trick that's called a *gemini*, or an outside leg hang. This whole saga lasts only a few seconds.

When I try to break down the learning process, I cannot pinpoint the exact steps in the exact order. There were times when I was doing other leg hangs to teach my leg what it was supposed to feel like, how to grip the pole, and how much I should squeeze, to understand how it feels to have a secure grip. There were times when I was holding the pole in the first position and repeatedly conditioning my arms, back, abs, and legs to carry the weight. There were times when I sweated through strengthening exercises in the form of warm-up, pushing myself, trying to get in one more rep. There was a time when I was first given visual and verbal instructions, followed by a failed attempt, and a successful one with the instructor spotting me. Then there were countless times when I attempted the trick, was successful, then failed again, and again, thinking about the instructions, the sensations, receiving feedback and instruction, getting stronger, working through the bruises on my legs, calluses on my hands, and working against gravity. I do not

remember which came first. It took a few months to consistently do the trick, a few more to be brave enough to let go of my hands, and years to “clean” the trick, do it with straight legs, do it from above the ground, do it while spinning fast.

In time, all the thinking, learning, and understanding became automatic. I am not mindless when I do this trick, I take a mental tally of all the grip points, all the precautions against the danger of falling, all the aesthetic concerns I have. I think about the music, the spin, the angles. But the actual trick itself, at some point it became automatic, part of the somatic database my body has, a pathway that I know by heart. Over time, my body is transformed, and my relationship with my body, pole, and pole dance along with it. Through disciplining my body and working through the pain, I became a pole dancer.

How does one become a pole dancer? While the literature on pole dance focuses on what it means to be a pole dancer, and whether it is oppressive or empowering, this question of becoming remains mainly unexplored. As I explored in the Introduction, the material and embodied aspects of pole dancing are usually subsidiary to the discursive discussions. While that is the case for literature, the embodied aspect of pole dance occupies a big space among the topics that pole dancers talk about. What are the embodied experiences of pole dancers? What happens to the bodies of pole dancers during training? What is the role of the pole class, repetition, strength, and discipline in becoming a pole dancer? How do pole dancers navigate pain, and why is this navigation crucial in their becoming pole dancers?

In this chapter, I explore the materiality of pole dance and the role of embodied experiences in becoming a pole dancer. The process of becoming a pole dancer is looked at through the disciplining of bodies and the affective framework

through which pole dancers understand training, strength, and pain. Following Sara Ahmed's framework, this chapter begins with an exploration of how pole dancers experience pain and injuries, how pain as an affect shapes the boundary between the self and the world, and the role of the navigation and management of pain plays in the pole dancers' becoming through reorientation of bodies. After that, the text turns to the pole class and how the class functions in producing docile bodies. It continues with an exploration of the role of discipline as understood by Foucault, and what the pole dancers' experiences of strength and progress reveal about becoming a pole dancer. Finally, this chapter questions the relationship between discipline and femininity by blurring the lines between feminine and masculine-assigned traits of pole dance, revealing its queer possibilities.

2.1 Pain and injuries

The studio employee said, "You need to fill this form and sign this waiver," as she welcomed me into the studio right before my very first class. I was supposed to inform the studio and the instructor of any illness, injury, or condition that might impact my capacity for physical activity and claim responsibility for any physical harm that may occur during class. I glanced at the women who were hanging upside down in the ongoing class next to us, the crash mats on the ground that were supposed to lessen the impact if they were to fall. In an instant, I was made aware of the possibility of falling and my own body. I was unsuspecting of the kind of physical activity I was getting into. The danger suddenly became apparent. This activity involved my body in a way that I wasn't used to.

This waiver, which came as a surprise to me, serves multiple purposes for the studio. First, it is a document that protects the studio and the instructor from any

liabilities in case something goes wrong. It is also a handy document to see what physical issues the instructor should be mindful of. They review it before the first class with a student to plan for the lesson and take precautions when necessary. Maybe unintendedly, the waiver functions as a warning for the first-time pole dancer as well. It reveals the physicality of pole dance and the dangers inherent in it.

Of course, signing a waiver before a physical activity is not unique to pole dance. For a lot of gyms and studios this is common practice and pole dance studios are not an exception. However, I was not anticipating this level of physicality from the get-go: Naively, I was misled by the word “dance” in the phrase pole dancing. My prior experience in dance consisted of some salsa and tango classes, which did not require that intense of training at the recreational level that I was doing it. I was ignorantly expecting a similar level of physical commitment. However, seeing people upside down with bruises all over their bodies was eye opening: This was not like any other dance class I took before, it was something that would involve my body in a way that I was not used to. The waiver showed me that pole dance had risks that I had to be mindful of, and my body was going to go through a level of training that I had not expected. The class I was going to take was much more technical than I had anticipated. And it was going to be much more painful than I thought.

Holding onto the pole using skin contact is painful. This became apparent at the very first class I took. After walking around the pole and doing pirouettes, the instructor, Sevgi, demonstrated the pole sit. Sevgi is 39 years old and is the owner of Spin and Flow, a pole studio in Kadıköy, a hip neighborhood in İstanbul, and she has been a pole dancer since 2013. She was an engineer and worked as a general manager when she quit her job during the Gezi protests. She then discovered pole

dancing through a party she went to and decided to try pole dancing. In 6 months, she became an assistant at the studio and soon became an instructor herself. She didn't have any prior background in sports. She is now both a pole instructor and a personal trainer. The trick she demonstrates in the first class is a trick in which the dancer sits on the pole, as the name suggests, a trick that's introduced quite early on in the curriculum. This beginner move requires the dancer to squeeze the pole between their legs, tilt their hips, and defy gravity thanks to this grip. But the delicate skin gets bruised in the process. It was easier for some people and harder for others, but one thing was true: everyone was complaining about how much it hurt. Pole is painful for everyone to varying degrees from the beginning, but it gets easier as the skin adjusts.

Pole sit is not an isolated case where the skin and pole contact is necessary: Almost all the tricks work similarly. The students are told to wear clothing that would leave their legs, arms, and torso bare because skin contact is crucial for a dancer to stay on the pole. Having friction can be the difference between falling headfirst onto the ground and successfully performing the tricks and combos. For pole dancers, pain becomes an integral part of their practice, but how it is interpreted is contingent.

One common sight at the studio is purple marks all over people's legs, arms, and bellies. The way you stay up the pole, as mentioned above, is through friction, so the skin contact with the metal is crucial. Any part of the body, any patch of skin can become an anchor, a grip point that keeps you from falling. But the price is the reddening of the skin, the bruises, the pain.

The relationship pole dancers have with pain can be understood by how Sevgi warns her students in the stretching class:

If you feel a burning sensation in your hamstring, that's normal. But you feel it in your joints, you should stop because you might get injured. We, pole dancers, have high pain tolerance, so we might easily overstretch.

Her words reveal that pole dancers can indulge in practices that are painful, to the extent that it may cause harm. While some level of discomfort is present, even welcomed, overdoing it can cause medical problems, such as injuries. Common in all kinds of bodily practices, injuries often occur in pole dance space as well. In my own experience, the injuries I sustained had multiple reasons, such as wrong technique, overuse, attempting a trick before being ready, or accidents. In all those cases, my injuries put a limit to my practice. I had to rest, get medical treatment, and in some cases, months or years of physical therapy. My physical therapist, Suna, who is also a pole dance instructor, explained how common some injuries are among pole dancers: "Most pole dancers have a pinched nerve in their shoulder and almost everyone tears their hamstring". While these injuries require treatment, pole dancers find ways to work around the pain and continue dancing.

Sara Ahmed (2004) suggests that understanding pain as an affect rather than an effect opens possibilities for the formation of the body as a material and lived entity. Melzack and Wall (1965) understand pain as having ties to how well we remember past experiences of pain and grasp its consequences. In this understanding, "pain is not simply an effect of bodily damage" (Ahmed, 2004, p.18) and is a sensation that helps us understand the boundaries of our bodies. Referring to Freud's understanding of pain as a "thing intermediate between internal and external perceptions even when its source is in the external world" (Ahmed, 2004, p.19), Ahmed sees pain as instrumental in our seeing our skin as the thing that separates us from the outside, while also mediating the relationship between inside and the

outside. She points at the paradoxical notion of skin separating us from the outside world, while connecting us to it at the same time.

With my very first contact with the pole, the thing I realized was how painful it was. Everything hurts. Your skin gets friction burns. You get calluses on your hands. Bruises everywhere. Your wrists and shoulders might hurt from carrying your body weight. Muscles ache. You might fall, or worse, get injured. The transformation my physical body goes through the contact with the pole is one that is painful. However, it soon became apparent to me that while it never stops fully hurting, in time, I got used to it. The calluses helped lessen the pain on my palms, my skin got used to the contact and stopped producing bruises, and as I got stronger, my muscles did not ache as much. While this might be the case, my feelings of pain are not linear: The seasons change, making my skin more susceptible to friction. I attempt a trick that squeezes my internal organs in a way that hurts. Or another trick causes more friction than what I am used to, so I feel wary of attempting it. Or after a vacation, I come to realize the loss of tolerance my skin has to the contact with the pole. Just like the outside elements, the internal cycles of transformation my body has also plays a role of how much pain I feel. The calluses on my hands break, leading to the emergence of fresh skin that needs to be rehardened. The hormones of my body change, which leads to a heightened sensation of pain. Or my injuries flare up, making it much more painful.

Ahmed suggests that by sensing pain, one becomes aware of her body, recognizes the sensation as pain, and acts in a way to manage it. So much of becoming a pole dancer is about managing the pain: They train their bodies, modifying the components of it such as the muscles, to enable this toleration of pain. For some people, pain can be the reason why they quit. At 24 years old, Deniz

wanted to do pole dancing because she was looking for a fun way to exercise. She was in the same class as me when we first started, but soon she decided not to continue. “It was so painful that I didn’t renew my subscription after the 8-class package I purchased had ended,” she says. “There are less painful ways of exercising, I am happy to go to the gym.” She says that pole sit was the bane of her existence for more than a month because of how painful it was. For her, the pain was not worth it. As a result, she took action to stop it, an action which Ahmed calls the re-constitution of bodily space

With pole dancing, when this awareness of the pain leads to the prevention of pain, one is no longer a pole dancer, as in the case of Deniz. In other cases, however, the pole dancers work against the re-constitution of bodily space. They try to hold the positions as long as possible to get used to the pain. This practice is called skin conditioning. If the general response to pain is to reconstitute the bodily space by means of moving the body away from pain, how do we understand practices that go against it, such as skin conditioning?

As framed by Ahmed’s concepts, the encounter with the pole creates an impression upon the skin, and the pole dancer’s sensation of pain and its intensification allow her to realize her own bodily boundaries. Her skin, the thing that separates her from the material world, also becomes the thing that unmakes this boundary by connecting her body to the pole. Ahmed calls it materialization, which “takes place through the ‘mediation’ or reading of affect, which may function in this way as readings of the bodies of others.” In the case of skin conditioning, the affect that pole dancers make out of the pain they feel is not negative. On the contrary, they reframe this pain as instrumental in their becoming a pole dancer. Through the instructor’s affirmations of how instrumental it is in the disciplining of their bodies,

the pole dancers learn to tolerate, and even enjoy, the pain. In time, as the skin adjusts, the contact with the pole starts to feel more comfortable, hurting less. However, the uniqueness of each trick means that even when the skin gets conditioned, it can hurt again. As a result, being a pole dancer is not a straightforward journey or a one-off thing, but a process of becoming that is non-linear, material, and affective.

The pain can also be a marker of the effort or the progress of a dancer. For example, in a more advanced class I took, the instructor told the students to attempt the trick on both sides. The trick, shoulder mount, required the delicate skin on the neck and shoulder to be in contact with the pole. At the end of the class, the instructor walked around the room, looking at our skin, determining who worked on both sides and who hadn't. Those of us who had redness in the shoulder area expressed a sense of pride and pleasure. This sense of pleasure is integral to becoming a pole dancer.

The visual manifestation of this pain, or the bruises that are formed on the skin are called the “pole kisses” by the community. The bruises function as the markers of hard work, effort, and, as a result, becoming a pole dancer. The word pole dancers use to describe these bruises, “kiss”, reframes the pain they feel as positive. By referring to it by being kissed by the pole, the pain becomes a source of pleasure, and the bruises themselves are turned into a shared symbol. As can be seen from this example, the meaning of pain is not fixed, rather, it is negotiated within the community. It can be a badge of honor, a sign of progress, or a reason to quit. In any case, pain remains a constant factor through which pole dancers work to become pole dancers. Going back to Ahmed’s understanding of materialization, the bodily

sensations of pain and the how pole dancers read this pain mediates the materialization of the pole dancer and her body.

In her blog, *Cehenneme Direk*, Özge Uraz Kum, a pole dancer and pole dance instructor, talks about her experience with pain and injuries:

At one point, I got hooked on a pole instructor in Slovakia. I went there twice, staying for a week each time, and took about three hours of classes every day. (This was back in the stone age when the Euro exchange rate actually allowed for such luxuries.) During one of those sessions, I cracked my big toe by slamming it into the ceiling! I was whining about whether it hurt too much, wondering if I should stop, when the instructor, in the coolest tone ever, said, ‘Work through the pain.’ She had a perfectly sleek haircut and flawless eyeliner. I did as she said. Nothing bad happened. This story doesn’t have a moral. It hurt like hell during class. I couldn’t wear heels for a long time afterward. Oh, and I cursed a lot while hiking through the forests in Vienna on my way back. (Kum, 2025) (my translation)

The disciplining of the body allows us to see the body as materiality that can be shaped, morphed, pushed in extreme ways. Working through the pain, as explained by Uraz Kum, reveals this tension between discipline and affect. In this example, the authority figure, which in this case is the instructor, normalizes the pain she felt and told her to push through it with the promise that Özge can be as cool and flawless as her if she can learn to manage her pain. For Özge, perceiving her instructor as cool and flawless played a role in her willingness to disciplining her body and manage her pain. This management of the pain requires an affective reframing of pain from something to be avoided to something integral to the practice.

2.2 Docile bodies in the pole class

High-tempo music blares from the speaker, and the students, all next to their poles and on their mats, look at the instructor in the mirror. The class begins with a warm-up: The heads are turned, the shoulders are shrugged, the arms are circled, the abs crunched, the legs raised... All muscle groups are warmed up in 10 to 15 minutes of

the 60-minute class. The instructor also provides specialized warm-ups that mimic the tricks or combos that the students will practice that day, effectively preparing them for the pole. The warm-up part of the class aims at preparing the bodies of the students for the high-intensity workout that awaits them, firing the muscles for the day, while strengthening the students in the long run, preparing them for more advanced tricks to come, and preventing injuries. The warm-up is a full-body workout. The instructor explains each exercise as she demonstrates it and counts the sets. Soon, the studio is filled with grunts of students who push themselves a little bit more with each set. At the end, the students are all flushed on the face, sweaty, their heartbeats raised, and their breaths faster. They are ready for the remaining 40 minutes of the class, which will consist of more training, more muscle use, and more sweating, but this time on the pole. The warm-up has a double role: One, preparing the student for the class that awaits them, and two, getting them stronger and more flexible in increments so that they can safely attempt more advanced tricks that require greater mastery of the body in the future. This mobility increase is crucial: The tricks build on one another, each requiring more strength and flexibility of the specific muscle groups. Sticking to a carefully planned curriculum, the instructor tells the students to put away their mats and begins the main part of the class.

After a few giggles and the chugging of water, students gather around the instructor who begins demonstrating the trick. As she shows how to do the trick, she explains each step in technical detail: How to grip the pole, how to position your body, what to do and what not to do, which specific tips help you stay safe. After the demonstration, the students go back to their poles. Depending on the trick, some of them bring out crash mats or tatamis to ensure safety. As they attempt the trick, the instructor walks around the class to ensure correct form and safety. She verbally

gives instructions to each student, as well as physically spots them whenever necessary.

The difficulty of the trick is relative to the level of the class. For the first few classes, the students are encouraged to understand the centrifugal force, how the pole feels in their palms, how it spins. The tricks are upright; there are no inversions. They walk around the pole, do pirouettes and basic spins that introduces hanging from the shoulder and leg holds. They get used to the uncomfortable sensations of pole dancing. They work towards more painful tricks (for the beginner level) like a pole sit and more strength forward tricks such as a pole climb. At the same time, the instructor carves out time from the class to introduce eroticism. At the end of the class, she dims the lights, opens a sensual song, and instructs the students to dance to the song using the elements they have learned. She tells them to open their chest, push out their bums, trace their bodies with their hands, do hair flips and body rolls. As the level of the class progresses, the tricks get more advanced as well. Inversions are introduced, the individual tricks are demonstrated in succession to form a combination or a “combo”, and it takes longer and more work to nail each trick. In the beginner class, it takes from instant to a few weeks to successfully do a trick, but as the tricks get more advanced, sometimes students work for months or even years to get it. While at the beginning the warm-up is enough to prepare the body, as the level increases the students are encouraged to support their pole journey with additional practice hours on the pole and other physical conditioning such as going to the gym, other fitness classes, or specialized pole fitness and pole stretching classes that address common areas pole dancers might struggle with. Given the time spent together, the students and the instructor get more familiar with one another, and more laughter and conversations occur before, during, and after each class. This social

aspect helps the safety of the class as well. As the level progresses and inversions are introduced, spotting becomes more crucial. In time, the instructor starts demonstrating how to spot each trick safely as well as how to do it. As a result, in more advanced classes, the students begin working in collaboration, watching one another, helping each other through verbal and physical means.

At the end of the class, the students grab their mats one more time, this time to cool down. They stretch their necks, shoulders, backs, chests, hips and legs with the instructor. This session only takes around 5 minutes, but it is crucial: Without cooling down, the soreness of the muscles would be much worse the next day, and the body would be more prone to injuries. After these stretches, the students go back to the dressing room to change into their regular clothes, talking about both the class itself, and what is going on in their lives while the instructor begins the warm-up of the next class she teaches.

2.3 Discipline and training to become a pole dancer

The scene I just described doesn't really resemble what comes to mind when the majority of people think about pole dance. It resembles any other dance or fitness class, one that is aimed at the rigorous disciplining of the body. In the pole class, the bodies are transformed through intensive working out.

In the *History of Sexuality (Vol.1)*, Foucault (1976) envisions the physical body as the main locus of analysis, rather than how it is perceived, effectively shifting the focus from the representation of the body to the materiality of it. Instead of focusing merely on the discursive, he writes about:

how the deployments of power are directly connected to the body—to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one

another . . . but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective. (pp. 151–52)

This focus on the physical body allows Foucault to envision a “history of bodies” where the material body is at the forefront, rather than a “history of mentalities” where the body is only perceived and given value, rendering it secondary. The body, then, becomes the site where the power, both punitive and disciplinary, is exercised.

Understanding power as productive and relational, Foucault (1977) suggests that it flows through all relationships and practices, and while all interactions and relationships have power relations, it is usually asymmetric where one party has a greater capacity to exercise power. In his analysis, the body emerges as a site where power operates. Through disciplinary techniques, the bodies are managed through the organization of time, space, and movement, resulting in the production of docile bodies, as Foucault calls it, which are shaped through everyday practices that seem ordinary and repetitive.

In his book *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) talks about the bodies of the soldiers, how through repetitive training they learn to:

(hold) their heads high and erect; to standing upright, without bending the back, to sticking out the belly, throwing out the chest and throwing back the shoulders; and, to help them acquire the habit, they are given this position while standing against a wall in such a way that the heels, the thighs, the waist and the shoulders touch it, as also do the backs of the hands, as one turns the arms outwards, without moving them away from the body. (p. 135)

This body is docile for Foucault, and the process through which it becomes the soldier is through disciplinary power. Of course, the training pole dancers go through has different goals than soldiers, so docility is relative, however, the methods have similarities. For example, the correct form that soldiers learn to adapt can also apply to pole dance: Both involve training the body in a way that certain postures and movements become second nature. In the case of the soldier, such training produces

docile bodies that can take orders and kill, in pole dancing, however, having the correct form can be the difference between achieving a trick or getting injured.

When looked at from this Foucauldian perspective, the pole class can be understood as a space where the pole dancer body is produced through instruction and training, and where one becomes a pole dancer. Just like the soldiers in Foucault's narration that are trained through exercise, pole dancers go through a similar training that shapes their bodies, and along with it their identities as pole dancers. Foucault says: "the soldier has become something that can be made, out of a formless clay, an inapt body, the machine required can be constructed . . . in short, one has 'got rid of the peasant' and given him 'the air of a soldier'" (Foucault, 1977, p.135) The soldier becomes who he is through the disciplining of the body and similarly, the pole dancer becomes who she is through disciplining her body as well. It is worth noting that such training is not a one and done process. It is through constant training that one becomes a pole dancer, and not by trying it a few times. For example, as explored in the previous chapter, Griffiths (2015) does not consider herself a pole dancer even after taking classes. This example shows that becoming is an extended process that requires certain level of dedication to disciplining of the body.

The disciplining of the body is not isolated from the materiality of the studio (Clark and Markula, 2003). Such disciplining occurs not only at pole studios, but at other dance studios as well, especially classical dance such as ballet. In their study on recreational ballet classes, Clark and Markula detail Foucault's disciplinary techniques in relation to ballet. The studio carries the characteristics of the disciplinary space, as envisioned by Foucault, of being enclosed, partitioned, functional, and ranked. As a result, bodies are managed in space through their

distribution. Secondly, the studio itself has a timetable that manages bodies through time. How bodies use certain spaces are dictated through the control of time. Lastly, Clark and Markula details how ballet movements get longer, more difficult, complex and technically demanding in increments, how each movement build on one another in an analytic manner. The movement itself becomes a disciplinary tool that manages bodies. Even though Clark and Markula talk about ballet studios, these disciplinary techniques that manage the bodies in space, through time and movement, occur in pole studios as well. The pole class scene described above has similarities with university ballet or modern dance technique classes as explored by Jill Green (2002) in that they all aim at a pedagogy that disciplines the body of the dancer. At the classes Green describes, the students line up across the mirrored wall and the teacher, they wear specific clothing that allow the teacher to see their bodies, and she, in turn, focuses on specific corrections, body placements, and proper technique. In the traditional pedagogical approach, the teacher has the power to manipulate the student's body. Green suggests that such a setting allows for a Foucauldian analysis of disciplining of the body and creation of docile bodies.

2.4 Progress and strength

I am in a pole technique class taught by Sevgi. "Come on Berfin, you can do it, squeeze your abs, open your chest, lock your shoulders and really focus on hiking yourself up" she says as I attempt a trick she demonstrated. There are 6 other pole dancers in the class. My back is on the pole; I lean my shoulder to it and hold it between my arms above my head towards my neck. I need to deadlift myself up into a straddle so that I can catch the pole with my leg. This trick is called *shoulder mount*, and it is an intermediate level invert that I have been inching towards at the

time. I feel like my muscles are going to give up at any second. But I am determined. I push myself, really push. Everything burns, my muscles are using up all the oxygen so I must breathe. “Breathe,” Sevgi says as if she can feel what my body is feeling thanks to her 11 years of teaching experience. I hear my classmates cheering me on as well. But at that moment, all I can focus on is my body and Sevgi’s voice guiding me. I can feel and see my legs coming closer to my chest. I grunt. I’ve been grunting this whole time. A little bit more, and I can touch the pole with my ankle. It takes a bit of maneuvering and using my leg to hold myself higher since I am not strong enough yet to carry my weight above my head with only my shoulder as an anchor, but I do it. I manage to do my very first shoulder mount that day. I am ecstatic. I get down, start clapping and jumping around. My classmates, who were all tuned in, gather around me. We all hug, we talk about my progress. I glance at myself in the mirror as we are talking. My hair is all messy, my smiling face is all red from blood rush, and my body is gleaming with sweat. My shoulder is red from being pushed to the metal, but I vaguely register the pain since the adrenaline keeps me from feeling the extent of it. Tomorrow, along with muscle soreness, I will feel a bruise forming there but I don’t mind it at this moment.

As I try to catch my breath, I watch my classmate, Şirin, attempt the shoulder mount. She already did this trick in the previous weeks, but she is working towards consistency. On the other side of the room, Saliha, another classmate, is trying to lift her feet off the ground. In a moment Sevgi will go to her and physically help her get up so that even if she is not strong enough yet she can understand the rest of the technique, i.e. the leg part. Saliha knows she has a while to go, perhaps more than the rest of the class, but she feels more comfortable doing the tricks that require more flexibility, and she knows that’s what she excels at. I recall the previous week when

we all looked at her splits in awe. All of us have our strengths and weaknesses, we are all aware of what those are. We are all working towards something. With each trick conquered, each milestone achieved, we feel proud of what our bodies can do. “I want to get stronger,” says another classmate, “I want to get my splits.” These words express an overt desire to discipline the body.

A common sentiment I hear at the studio is how “Nothing beats the feeling of realizing how far you’ve come on the pole. Realizing you can easily perform a trick that you couldn’t 6 months ago.” But this is also followed by a list of new tricks to conquer. The tricks that seemed impossible in the beginning can become easier in time, so much so that you can use them to rest while still dancing. But as you get these tricks, new goals emerge. In that sense, progress assumes a cyclical nature rather than linear: Each milestone unlocks new demands. This mirrors Foucault’s “never-ending exercise” of discipline, where the body is perpetually unfinished and subject to improvement. The adrenaline-fueled joy of nailing a trick, such as the shoulder mount, obscures the labor of docility. The pole dancers constantly work on some aspect of pole dance.

The disciplining of the body through pole dance becomes apparent, perhaps, through the physical strength and fitness of the dancers. All types of bodies can do pole dance, no matter the age, gender, height, weight, or previous experience in sports or dance. This aspect of pole dance leads to different approaches to pole dance. Some studios focus on the dancing aspect and the artistry, while others market themselves as a fun fitness class. “Did you know that in one pole class, you can burn up to 500 calories?” says a marketing video on Instagram as a fit woman spins on the pole while carrying her weight with her arms. Nicholas et.al (2019) found that pole classes can meet the recommended levels for improved health and fitness when

performed regularly and can be classified as moderate intensity cardiorespiratory exercise. Pole dancing then is closely linked to fitness and strength, but not everyone partakes in pole classes for fitness.

When Sevgi, mentioned above, told me she didn't have any sports background before starting pole, I found it difficult to believe. She is one of the most driven pole dancers I have seen, always pushing her limits. She seemed to conquer everything she put her mind to over the last decade that she has been doing and teaching pole dance. And she looked the part, too, with her muscular body. She said she found pole difficult in the beginning but kept on practicing. After more than a decade of pole dancing, she is now a renowned pole dancer among the international pole dancing community, giving classes in studios located in other countries and participating in international competitions. Just like Sevgi, this desire to push myself to exceed the limits of my body over and over again was something I discovered through pole dance. Like some of my participants, the reason why I wanted to try pole dancing was more to do with dancing and less to do with getting fit, but in time, I found myself enjoying this rigorous physical activity for how strong it made me as well. Even though the physical benefits are apparent, Sevgi doesn't want to categorize pole as primarily a type of sport or exercise. "Yes, you do get fit, but that is not the main thing. The main thing is pole dancing itself," she says. This shows that the disciplining of the body is about pushing the bodily boundaries: As the pole dancers discipline their bodies towards their physical goals on the pole, the main objective is to go that extra mile, to push themselves a little bit more, and become the version of themselves that have a perfect strength, flexibility, or the technique, whatever perfect means for each individual.

Pole dancing is not equal to exercise, but it is not separate from exercising either. The majority of the dancers I talked to talked about how, with pole dancing, their attitudes towards exercising shifted. One of the dancers I spoke to is Alev. She is a dentist and a PhD student. At 35 years old, Alev has been pole dancing for 7 years and has experience writing her own choreographies and shows for the majority of that time. She claims that she really doesn't like the purely exercising part. For her, doing the crunches is the necessary evil for nailing down her inverts. "If I could get away with not doing any other exercise, I would be so happy. So I get around this by warming up longer than necessary and tricking myself into thinking I am not really exercising, but preparing for pole," she says. By shifting her perspective from exercise to warm-up, Alev manages to frame these exercises as part of the whole pole routine. For her, disciplining her body involves making the difficult drills more palatable by reframing them as part of becoming a pole dancer.

In *Technologies of the Self* Foucault (1988) talks about how through the technologies of the self, individuals operate on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being to transform themselves. This transformation leads to a certain state of happiness. In that sense, exercising becomes the technology through which pole dancers transform themselves. While this transformation can take material form, such as muscles and the ability to perform certain tricks, it is also related to becoming a pole dancer. Alev's reframing of exercise as pole warm-up shows that the meaning of exercising is contingent within the pole dance community.

The dancers think about the physical benefits of pole dance through how it transforms their bodies, but also how well they perform on the pole. In Alev's case, she says she felt so strong when she managed to do a trick she had been working towards for months. In a way, pole performance becomes a measure of how fit or

strong you are. You need strength to stay on the pole, and you get strong by being on the pole. Whether you do pole for pole's sake or for the sake of getting fit, in both cases, the goal of getting fit gets intermingled with the goals of the pole. One can't exist without the other, and they feed one another. Both getting fit and getting good on the pole function as technologies of the self that transforms the individual into a pole dancer.

Many of the pole dancers that I talked to enjoy the physical transformation of getting stronger that their bodies go through. After a class we took together, I talked to Defne, a 28-year-old journalist. During that conversation, she demonstrated her muscles by saying, "Here, feel my bicep while I still have the after-work out pump,". She was beaming with post-workout sheen and pride of having accomplished difficult tricks. All of the people in the studio gathered around her, complimented her on her muscles and the difficult trick she performed with ease, and showed one another their own muscles as well. They compared notes on which protein powder tastes the best, what to eat before class to have maximum energy, and how to get stronger quadriceps. "I feel like we are gym bros, or athletes," said Defne. "We are all obsessed with getting our protein intake, and we all rejoice in having firm muscles."

When understood within Foucault's conceptualization, the practices related to strength and fitness, such as workout regimes and eating habits, can be seen as the very operations of technologies of the self that Foucault talks about. Strength and fitness are crucial in the self-formation of pole dancers. Seeing and feeling the transformation of their bodies leads to satisfaction; they celebrate themselves and their peers. As can be seen from such collective celebrations and sharing of knowledge on the technologies of the self, such as protein intake and muscle growth, the production of the pole dancer is usually a communal one.

2.5 Queering feminine bodies

Dance scholars have focused on Foucauldian concepts of power and surveillance to understand disciplinary training and the production of docile bodies. Mirrors that line the walls of dance studios work as the enablers of constant surveillance, promoting the disciplining of the body (Clark and Markula, 2003). Green refers to Foucault's analysis of the modern prison system in her analysis of the ballet studio. Foucault suggests that the punitive system has adopted a surveillance-based approach at disciplining bodies and correcting behaviors rather than torture-based punishment. Highlighting the constant surveillance of the instructor and the existence of mirrors, Green (2002) suggests that the students learn to adapt to a certain standard themselves, leading to the production of docile bodies that are self-regulated and habituated. Expanding upon Green's work, Kleiner (2013) also focuses on the Foucauldian concepts of power and surveillance, and likens the ballet studio to the Panopticon, a place where the promise of constant surveillance leads to self-imposed docility. In the case of ballet, the dancer's body is molded to fit a specific aesthetic ideal, sometimes to the detriment to the health of the body. In the case of pole dance, however, while similar aesthetic ideals exist, safety is a big concern for both the instructor and the dancer as well. Allowing the instructor to manipulate the body has dual purpose in this setting: One, to get strong enough and flexible enough to execute a trick safely; and two, to get strong enough and flexible enough to execute a trick beautifully. The docile body of the pole dancer is one that is strong and flexible both for the sake of safety and aesthetics.

Green argues that by creating docile bodies, the dance class not only produces efficiency of movement, but also a "normalization and standardization of behavior" (Green, 2002, p. 100) As a result, she argues, this approach limits dancers from

exploring their own style and searching for their own movement, preventing them from questioning the norms of ideology and dance conventions, effectively limiting the number of more political artists. Whatever this is the case for ballet is debatable in an of itself, but in the case of pole dancing, the docile body can be instrumental in accessing that artistic and political voice in the first place.

Buse, a 28-year-old pole dance instructor and the owner of MoveHaus sees technical expertise as a steppingstone to have freedom of expression. Coming from a theatre background, Buse sees the potential of pole for the performance art. Her dream is to establish a crew of dancers who she can create pole performance pieces with and go to festivals. To that end, she created a pole intensive program at her studio that focuses on pole technique, improvisation, and movement. While she takes advantage of her experience in performance arts to build up the improvisation skills of her crew, she also thinks building up a repertoire of basic tricks is crucial for having artistic freedom. Buse says:

For me, to have freedom to express yourself on the pole, you need to master the beginner tricks. You need to have such a level of ease with those movements that you are not limited by your technical ability to express yourself through dance.

I talked to one of the dancers in this crew, Yeşim, who has been doing pole dance for 3 years. After graduating from the architecture department, Yeşim quickly realized that she would much rather have a career in a more creative field that uses her body than what architecture offers her. At 26 years old when she started pole dance, she didn't have any prior experience in dance and sport apart from yoga. Now, she trains with Buse in this intensive class to further her career goals. She describes the process of the program as such:

First, we identified which beginner tricks were going to be important. We are not all at the same level, so the things we had to work towards were all different. But one commonality is that after getting the proper technique, we

keep working on it. Approaching it from different perspectives, playing around with the quality of expression... For example, we focused on different parts of our bodies, different speeds, different emotions. We used a lot of improv techniques. By trying the same trick, combo or choreo over and over again, I feel like I get better at finding my own dance style and expression, make the combo or the choreo my own.

In Yeşim's experience, extensive and repetitive training to achieve ease with basic tricks allows her freedom to express herself in a way that feels attuned to her own body and movement, and through such disciplining, her dancing becomes her own.

People outside the intensive have similar experiences with creative freedom and mastering tricks as well. When preparing for a showcase, I had the chance to talk to many people who felt limited by their technical ability to perform in a way that they desired. One such dancer is Alev:

When I'm writing choreographies, I feel like I have a repertoire of tricks to choose from. Before I try anything on the pole, I take my pen and paper and write down what I want to add to my choreo. One thing I always wish I had is a handspring ayesha. I feel like that specific skill opens so many possibilities for choreographies.

In all these cases, pole dancers express overt desire to manipulate their bodies in a way that allows them creative expression. This manipulation, or docility, as understood by Foucault is not an obstacle in having artistic freedom, but the very condition to achieve it. The power over the body of the pole dancer is not repressive, but productive. What's produced, in this case, is a pole dancer that is not limited by what she can do on the pole in terms of strength, flexibility or ability. As a result, by being able to execute tricks with ease, they "unlock" their creative voice.

In the cases outlined above, being able corresponds to an aesthetic ideal as well. Being able to perform without showing signs of struggle or performing tricks that are deemed more difficult is an aesthetic concern pole dancers have. Eagleton (1990) suggests that aesthetics is tied to history, ideology and politics rather than the realm of beauty and taste. Focusing on the embodied aspect of aesthetics, Eagleton

suggests that it has always been about the body or “born as a discourse of the body.” In the case of pole dance, having straight lines, pointed toes, a calm manner that does not show the effort necessary to perform difficult tricks are aesthetic concerns of dancers themselves. These concerns, maybe even more prominent in ballet, are the result of cultural ideology of what a dancing body should resemble that reproduces notions of femininity and masculinity (Sherlock, 2013). In ballet, femininity is linked to having the sense that the dancer is feather-like. This weightlessness is achieved through methods such as dancing on pointe, high leg extensions, and considerable muscle control that allows the dancer to move in a way that looks delicate. Similarly, in the case of pole dancing, the femininity is achieved through having long straight lines thanks to pointing the toes and not showing the signs of effort that’s required to perform. And like ballet, such effortlessness is achieved by disciplining the body through rigorous training and gaining physical strength.

This link between aesthetics and femininity became more apparent to me after sharing a video of myself dancing an easier choreography on social media. In the video, there were not any elements that were difficult for the level that I was at. As a result, I was able to move through individual elements seamlessly, focusing on my quality of movement rather than whether I was going to be able to perform the tricks in the first place. The dancing looked effortless. That video got a lot of reaction from non-pole dancers, especially men. They told me how better I’ve gotten, how well I was dancing, and how feminine my dancing looked. I was uncomfortable with their reaction. My intention of posting this video was not to show my technical ability or “how well I’ve gotten”, but to show a fun dance routine. This was affirmed by other pole dancers who commented how fun it looked and how nice my attitude (embodied style, emotional expression) was. When I post videos of me attempting

difficult tricks and showing signs of effort such as pushing, grunting, sweating, and not having perfect lines, my progress is celebrated mainly by pole dancers. Those tricks that are difficult to perform are only celebrated by the general public when they start to look effortless. Even though such effortlessness is achieved through masculine assigned qualities of physical strength, the end result is celebrated as feminine.

In a pole technique class, the role of physical strength is more visible, but in dance choreography classes, the feminine aesthetics conceal the effort necessary to perform. For example, pole exotic classes emphasize sensual movement, musicality, floorwork, and flow, often incorporating heels, leg waves, body rolls, hair flips, and choreography that blends erotic expression with technical skill. In these classes, the instructor teaches how to position the body in a way that shows off the best angles and how to move in a sexy way. In these classes, sexiness is taught through technical explanations and carefully planned choreographies. The dancers use high heels that are common in strip clubs. Such performance of sexiness requires a disciplining of the body, but it also requires a sense of flow, effortlessness that is only possible through repetitive training.

The masculine quality of physical strength does not always correlate to feminine aesthetics. One example of this rupture is what pole dancers call among themselves *erkek pole'ü* or man-pole. Yeşim explains:

Man-pole is when a man can do a trick instantly that takes you months of training because he is physically strong. It is infuriating, because they don't even try to look good. They don't point their toes; they don't care for the aesthetic concerns women have. They can very well be doing calisthenics. . . Of course, some of them do care about it. They look more feminine.

The men Yeşim talks about have the physical ability to perform difficult tricks, but their performance does not denote an aesthetic quality. As a result, Yeşim likens their

practice to calisthenics, a form of street work-out that uses body weight training and shares some tricks with pole dancing such as the human flag. For Yeşim it seems, the masculine demonstration of tricks is not enough to make up for the dancing part of pole dance. Given that some men or people assigned male at birth can have that aesthetic concern, femininity is not about which bodies perform, but how they do it.

There are also instances where dancers may choose not to conform to the aesthetic ideals. For example, one technique, called edgework, takes advantage of flexing the feet to explore a wider range of ankle position when compared to pointe-work. On a website advertising edgework class, the technique is explained as such:

We play with sickled, winged and flexed ankle positions to create mesmerizing shapes and pathways. It can feel like ‘breaking the rules’ at first, and it’s so much fun to explore! Edgework opens up a huge variety of gorgeous movements to add to your dance vocabulary.

As can be understood by the expression “breaking the rules”, having sickled, winged and flexed ankle positions do not fit with the aesthetic ideals that are laid down by classical dance conventions, for example, ballet. However, it is presented as a fun way to open up new possibilities of movement. Edgework is considered a break from dance conventions in that it is an intentional technique that is taught and worked on. As a result, it is the extension of disciplining of the body as understood in Foucauldian terms. This breaking of the rules is not simply a lack of focusing on the feet and whether it is pointed or not, but having the intention of not pointing, and using it differently. This intentionality of edgework is crucial in creating space for resisting the ideology of the aesthetic.

As can be seen from these examples, disciplining of the body is not necessarily a repressive practice that limits the exploration of artistic and political voice of dancers, as Green argues, but in the case of pole dance, it can be the very condition of such explorations. In these explorations, femininity becomes a

performance that is aided by the masculine-assigned trait of physical strength. This shows that the disciplinary practices explored in this chapter are not an obstacle for queer and feminist possibilities but are the very conditions through which such possibilities emerge. Far from being a passive product of control, the docile body of the pole dancer becomes a body capable of queer reorientation and femme performance.

To reiterate, this chapter understands becoming a pole dancer as a slow process that involves disciplining the body and pain management. The pole studio emerges as a disciplinary space where bodies are trained, corrected, and conditioned through meticulously structured routines and increasingly difficult tricks, echoing Foucault's analysis of discipline and docile bodies shaped through spatial, temporal, and kinetic organization. Instead of being about controlling the pole dancer, docility allows the dancer to have creative freedom. In such artistic expression, masculinity emerges as the tool of feminine performance, allowing us to question the categories and politics of feminine aesthetics. Discipline is not merely imposed but actively sought after by the pole dancers through what Foucault calls technologies of the self, or the operations that transform the self through the body. In that way, becoming a pole dancer involves repeated and ongoing disciplining of the body that is never complete, which is aided by pole dancers' engagement with affectively reframing pain as necessary or desired. Instead of moving away from pain, pole dancers learn to stay with it, to reframe it as progress, even intimacy, which Sara Ahmed calls the reconstitution of bodily space. This intimate relation with the pole forms the affective ground of becoming a pole dancer, a transformation that is both material and symbolic.

The material disciplining and transformation of the pole dancer's body, that I explore through pain, training and strength in this chapter, might appear as a straightforward Foucauldian process of producing docile bodies at first glance. Yet as I argue in this section, docility is not only a condition of subjection but also one of possibility of symbolic transformation as well. The disciplined pole dancer body becomes the ground from which new possibilities of queer performance to emerge. Drawing from Butler's (1990) notion of gender performativity as I briefly explore in Chapter 1 subsection Theoretical Framework, pole dance rearticulates femininity in ways that destabilize its naturalized status. The feminine aesthetics of pole dance are learned, stylized and exaggerated in a way that is possible through its recombination with masculine-coded strength, angularity, and endurance. This results in a queer performance that exposes normative femininity as a construction. This resembles the femme as articulated by Duggan and McHugh's (1996) *A Fem(me)inist Manifesto*, a figure who "occupies normality abnormally," refusing heteronormative containment while embracing femininity. The embodied aspects of pole dance reveal this abnormal occupation of normality. Borrowing from Halberstam's (1998) female masculinity, pole dance illustrates the destabilization of the naturalized link and association between masculinity and male bodies by blurring the lines between femininity and masculinity through strength and feminine aesthetics. Pole dance allows pole dancers, often assigned female at birth, to embody strength as an aesthetic and affective practice, rendering masculinity available to bodies coded feminine, opening possibilities for queer identifications.

Braidotti's (2002) theory of becoming illustrates how the bruises, calluses, and repetitions that shape the pole dancer's body reveal it not as a fixed entity but as a process of continuous transformation, exemplifying what Braidotti calls "female

feminist subjectivity”, one that is dynamic, desiring, and politically agentic. The pole dancer disciplines herself, endures pain, but derives pleasure from this process. Pain itself becomes part of this becoming as a mediator through which the dancer’s body acquires new capacities, orientations, and forms of desire.

In this way, the pole dance exemplifies Irigaray’s (1985) call to embrace femininity rather than reject it. The pole body thus becomes a queer/femme body: one that resists phallogocentrism, blurs gendered distinctions and insists on the political and affective power of embodied femininity.



CHAPTER 3

SPACES OF POLE COMMUNITY

In November 2024, MoveHaus, a pole studio in Istanbul, announced the Movefest on its Instagram. The opening event of the festival was a panel where the dancers got together to talk about the issues regarding the community. There were people from different studios at the event. Some people even came from other cities such as Bodrum and Izmir. Even with such a diverse crowd, people knew one another from parties, classes they took at different studios, and if not from face-to-face interactions, from social media. Even when that's the case, something caught my eye: At the event, after mingling around and talking to everyone, when the panel started, people sat with others from their studio. It was almost like pole dancers belonged to the studios; they represented a smaller community within the larger pole community.

The owner of MoveHaus and the main organizer of the event, Buse, says, “I think in Turkey and in Istanbul too, the pole community is very fragmented.” As a pole dancer and an instructor, she explains her situation as such: “I have my community at my studio, which urges me to dream and then allows me to realize those dreams. I don't know whether other studios say the same for themselves, but my intention for this festival was to bring those different communities together.” As Buse suggests, the pole dance scene in Turkey is not a homogeneous community; rather, it is a sum of fragments that is centered and shaped around different studios.

In this chapter, I aim to explore the relationship between the studio space and the sociality among pole dancers. How does the pole dance studio function as a queer

feminist counterspace in Turkey? What is the relationship between the material and spatial conditions of pole studios in the social relations within the community?

This chapter begins with a description of how the studio is experienced as a safe space for the pole dancers, as exemplified by nakedness, and drawing from Lefebvre's theory on space, it explores the production of the studio space in Turkey and its co-constitutiveness with the pole community, and the pole studios as physical spaces. The conflicting narratives on the origins of pole dance reveal a multiplicity that creates alternative histories, which also become part of the space itself.

3.1 Nakedness

“As women and queer people, we don't really get to take our clothes off that often without being judged,” says Arzu, one of the dancers at the studio, as we were grabbing breakfast and coffee, and discussing the book of the week at our Feminist Book Club. Arzu is a 31-year-old software engineer. She has been pole dancing for over 4 years. This was our Sunday routine for over a year. As pole dancers at Spin and Flow, we formed this book club after realizing our insatiable thirst for coffee and talking about pole dance, trying to understand the pole and ourselves. Each week, our discussion was guided by feminist literature and aided by our experience as pole dancers. We all identified as women, but not all of us were heterosexual. As a queer woman in her early 30s who works a white-collar job, Arzu talked about how she liked getting naked in the studio saying, “I feel safe at the studio to get naked because I am surrounded by women and other queer people. There aren't a lot of places where men are the minority.” Her words were met with approval around the table. We joked among ourselves, saying how, as time goes on, people feel more comfortable in their own skin and with their own sexuality, so they wear skimpier

clothes. At the pole studio, nakedness is practical. Clothing makes it so much harder to dance on the pole. Contact between the skin and metal is crucial to have a solid grip. It is possible to bypass this necessity by using latex clothing or silicone poles to create friction, but these are definitely exceptions, not the norm. As a result of this practical necessity, the studio is a place where nakedness is casual, so much so that people may choose to wear skimpy clothing to the classes where it is not necessary to have that skin-to-metal contact. Even when there is a designated dressing room, people change their clothes all over the studio, while having casual conversations. Nobody bats an eye at naked bodies. This casualness is expressed by Sueda, 25-year-old employee of the studio: “When we order water to the studio, I don’t think twice about opening the door to the deliveryman in my underwear. The studio is our space. But I wouldn’t feel comfortable doing that at home.”

In both Arzu’s and Sueda’s experiences, the studio becomes a space where being naked doesn’t have the usual connotations it would have in the outside world. They feel a sense of safety at the studio to get undressed. When I reflect on the nakedness I witnessed at the studio, I understand that getting used to my own nakedness was aided by other bodies that I saw there: Bodies at the studio are young, but they are also old and aging. They can be thin, muscular, fat, short, tall. They have body hair, ingrown hair, stretch marks, and skin “imperfections”. This sense of safety and comfort seems to permeate the space and encompasses all of us.

How the nakedness is experienced in the pole dancing context and the studio becomes much more substantial when juxtaposed with how women’s bodies are policed in the broader cultural context of Turkey. As we talked about nakedness at the book club session, Alev reminded us of the case of Ayşegül Terzi, a young woman who got beaten up on the public transportation for wearing shorts by

Abdullah Çakıroğlu back in 2016. This event resulted in country-wide demonstrations by women and feminists. Women's clothing has long been erroneously cited as the reason behind their harassment and assault. As Sehliskoğlu writes, "over 90 percent of the victims were harassed by their male acquaintances, rather than random men sexually aroused by their attire." (Sehliskoğlu, 2011) However, how women dress themselves is still an area of control and judged by the notion of morality (Morgenroth et. al., 2024). In that sense, both Arzu and Sueda attributed the safety and comfort they felt at the studio to get naked to the collective normalization of nakedness and the absence of the penetrative gaze of men. While Arzu openly linked the safety she feels to the absence of men and a sense of belonging in the studio space, a similar sense of belonging helped Sueda be comfortable with her nakedness when having encounters with the outside world in the studio context.

3.2 The pole space

In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre (1974) suggests that physical spaces are not merely containers of social activity but are active in the production of social relations through their material and spatial dimensions, while being transformed by said social activity at the same time. In that sense, the pole studio operates as a dynamic space where the material and the social coproduce one another in a continuous dialectic. Lefebvre's theory of the production of space reveals how the studio's material conditions generate specific social configurations while simultaneously being transformed by the community that inhabits it. In order to do pole dance, there needs to be a pole. This material reality shapes the pole dance scene and the community relations because it creates a spatial requirement that dictates where, when, and how

pole dancers can get together, making the studio a site where spatial and social practices become intertwined. The necessity of the pole as a fixed apparatus makes the pole studio a community hub, where social bonds are formed.

3.3 Emergence of pole studios in Turkey

“I brought pole dance to Turkey,” proudly claims Esin. We are at the opening party of the pole festival organized by MoveHaus. As I look around the room, I saw familiar faces of pole dancers and instructors. I have heard of Esin as the instructor of my instructors, but I have not met her before this event. Esin catches the attention of everyone with her bold claims. I soon realize that everyone has heard of her at one point or another and judging by the amount of questions she got that day, people were curious.

Esin is one of the founders of Echo Studio, one of the first pole studios in Istanbul. She has been pole dancing since 2010. As an interior design graduate, she says she has tried her hand at different occupations, from tattoo artist to motorcycle mechanic, but found her calling with pole dance. Sitting in the middle of the room, she tells the story of how she met pole dancing and how she opened her studio:

My father needed equipment from New York, and as the only one who could speak English and had a visa, I was tasked to bring it here. I had to stay there for almost 2 months because the equipment was not ready, and I was so bored that when I saw a tent with people flying inside, I walked in without giving it a second thought.

This was a circus training center where people trained for a variety of aerial arts, including trapeze and silks. Esin instantly booked classes for the duration that she would be there but couldn't learn much due to not having the body strength necessary. She asked to film the classes, what she needed to work on, and when she got back to Istanbul, she trained herself. She had a semi-nomadic lifestyle back then

as a tattoo artist. During one of her travels to Australia, she took pole dance classes. By this time, she was already familiar with circus aerials, so she learned quickly.

Esin came back to Turkey from Australia in early 2013 with one goal in mind: To open a pole studio. Soon she found out that there was already a studio present: Latin Hall in Taksim. "The physical conditions in Latin Hall were subpar," says Esin. The studio was originally designed for ballroom and Latin dancing, but it also hosted pole dance classes. It was located in the same building as a nightclub. One of the things that bothered Esin about the studio was the condition of the poles. "The poles wouldn't spin, and their circumference was much bigger than what was being used in Australia," she says. Unsatisfied with these conditions, she started searching for a space suitable for pole dance classes, which turned out to be a nightclub in Karaköy that had a spare room. She convinced the owners to rent the space, promising a big chunk of her earnings. She designed every aspect of the studio herself. The poles were also designed and produced by Esin and her father, who is an architect. The spin poles that they reverse-engineered from the ones abroad were a step up from the static poles in Latin Hall. In time, they designed a pole that could be both spinning and static. Such poles existed widely abroad, but they were a novelty in Turkey, where exchange rates and customs limit the availability of these instruments. "That studio in Karaköy wasn't profitable since I was giving the majority of my earnings as rent to the nightclub", Esin says, "but I found my footing there." After her lease had ended in a year, she moved on from the nightclub to open her own place, and so the Echo studio was born. Esin says she designed every single aspect of the studio herself, from the flooring to the interior.

Esin's journey in establishing her pole studio can be seen as a case of spatial production in action as understood by Lefebvre. Her narrative shows that the pole

studios are shaped not just physically but also socially and symbolically. Lefebvre's theory of space illuminates how the emergence of the pole dance studio as a localized, materially grounded space helps shape Turkey's contemporary pole community.

Lefebvre's conceptualization of space denotes that it is not a static container, but a social product that is constantly produced and reproduced through relationships, power, and everyday life. He understands space in three dimensions. First, the perceived space is the habitual and physical dimension of the space. It is the spatial practices of people that shape the space, and people are being shaped by the space as well. Secondly, the conceived space is the construction of space by professionals that is formal and planned via the abstract order of designs, regulations, and official discourse, which translates into the representations of the space. And thirdly, the lived space is the experiential, lived, and symbolic dimension of the space. It is the relational space, or how people experience and emotionally inhabit a space. Lefebvre suggests that operating dialectically, these three dimensions each shape and are contested by the others. While spatial practices associated with the perceived space dimension anchor abstract plans in everyday routines, Representations of space try to order and rationalize space. Representational space, as lived, imaginative, and symbolic, reinterprets planned and practiced space.

Esin's physical production of the pole space depends on her spatial practice, or the structuring and reproducing of space through everyday routines, bodily movements, and material uses. Her and her father's reproduction of the pole as a material instrument is a crucial step in the production of the pole space: The poles are fixed features of the studio, with a certain distance from one another based on how they are used by the bodies inhabiting that space. The wall facing the poles is

covered with mirrors; there is a bathroom, a dressing room, and a waiting area. Echo Studio has moved from that initial space, so I could not see it with my own eyes, but Esin's description matches what is commonly associated with pole studios today. Using her technical expertise from her education in interior design and her observations in Australia about what a pole studio looks like, Esin was able to produce a dedicated pole space in Turkey as well. Her embodied practices of circus arts and pole dance are extended and reshaped through her physical navigation of urban space as she scouted for venues that would be suitable to create a pole studio. Based on her spatial practices in Australia, she wanted a big room with high ceilings. Given the lack of such buildings in the urban residential areas, she settled in an industrial neighborhood. The material conditions of both Latin Hall and the first location of Echo Studio at the nightclub demonstrate how spatial practices are initially constrained by existing representations of space.

When Esin tried to find a place that would be a good pole studio, she ran into problems. In Esin's experience, creating a pole studio that suits her spatial practice was limited by the material conditions of the conceived space. In that sense, the construction of the space becomes a negotiation between the physicality of the space, body, and urban constraints that leads to the production of the pole studios as we know them today. For example, Buse explains that she ran into a similar problem when trying to find a space for her pole studio. Finding a space with tall enough ceilings and big enough rooms was a challenge. Another challenge was that the neighborhood should be accessible enough to the dancers, but also distant enough from residential units that noise would not be a problem. Such places existed, but rent was also a huge concern. As a result, Buse had to establish her studio in Fikirtepe, a neighborhood with political dispute. Going through urban

transformation, one side of the slums of Fikirtepe neighborhood has been turned into huge residential buildings while the other side stayed as is due to legal dispute between citizens and companies. The first time I visited the studio, I ran into a small protest organized by neighborhood citizens who were uncomfortable with such urban transformation and gentrification. When I talked to Buse about this, she expressed support for the protestors, but also her discomfort about having to open a studio at such a space.

Lefebvre's theory of space helps us understand how Esin's and Buse's journey in establishing pole dance studios in Turkey is not just about creating physical locations but actively producing new social spaces that would transform cultural norms and bodily practices. In Buse's case, opening a pole studio in such a contested neighborhood is part of a broader urban transformation while Esin's act of designing studios reflects the creation of a lived space that would properly accommodate the emerging practice. Esin's background in interior design helped her negotiate with the representations of space in a way that allows her to materially reconfigure space, enabling new bodily practices and social relations to emerge. The pole space, while being shaped by spatial and embodied practices, also shapes these practices in turn. The production of the specialized and dedicated pole space transformed the expectations people had from the pole space, and the conventional practices, such as material standards of a studio, curriculum, and hygiene, so much so that Latin Hall, once the best option for pole dance, is criticized for not meeting the criteria that are commonplace today.

One of the first students of this pole studio is Filiz. She is 41 years old and has been a pole instructor for 11 years. At the time, she was already taking classes at Latin Hall. In time, she became a pole instructor herself, opened her studio, engaged

in a similar design and creation process, and later passed it on to another instructor whom she had taught with for years. She describes the change in conventions and standards as such:

In Latin Hall, the floors were dirty because there was a Latin class right before our pole class. It was open level. The poles wouldn't spin either. In the first class I took, I was told to try the caterpillar.

Filiz was teaching this trick in the class I was in when she told us this story right after demonstrating the move. The caterpillar is an inverted trick where the dancer climbs up the pole while being upside down. As an intermediate-level pole dancer with approximately 3 years of experience, I was shocked to hear that the caterpillar was the first thing Filiz had tried. It was something that I wouldn't feel comfortable attempting on my own, even after years of experience, let alone doing it successfully. Caterpillar, for me, was decidedly much more advanced than anything I've learned in the first year of my pole dancing journey. I found the lack of a progressive curriculum in the 2010s shocking.

This approach to pole dance back in the 2010s is different than how it is practiced today. Nowadays, the studios are cleaner, the curriculum is more structured by level, and there is a variety of classes that focus on tricks, conditioning, choreography, and even improvisation.

Just like the commonplace practices, the pole brand that Esin and her father have created is still a well-known name in the pole community today. Nowadays, there are a variety of pole brands that one can purchase, but their poles are still sought after. The pole I have in my apartment that I got second-hand from a fellow pole dancer was made by him as well. When he brought it to my apartment, he said, "This is one of our first models that we designed in the early 2010s. We have had

many more versions since then." The instrument that they created in the early 2010s is part of my pole practice over a decade later.

The steps towards the institutionalization of pole dance taken by Esin helped create conventions of pole dance, or what the pole dance practice should look like.

Esin says:

At Echo, we established a lot of the systems that are being used today. We came up with a curriculum, and we created class levels. I used to administer exams to each class level. If a student couldn't pass that level's requirements, it meant they had to work more. As the student body grew, I needed more instructors. That's when I came up with the instructor training program. Almost all of the instructors today are either my students or the students of my students.

3.4 Narrative multiplicity

As I talked to people over the course of this thesis, I came to realize that while Esin's story has some truth in it, it is not the complete story. Alternative versions of events emerged during the interviews. As mentioned above, Esin reframes her story of opening the studio as "bringing pole dance to Turkey." However, other accounts show that she was not alone in the foundation of the Echo studio. She had a business partner who is also a pole dancer and is still part of the community today. I was not able to talk to Esra, whom Esin omits from her narration, but the interviews I conducted with other pole dancers showed that her version of the story is just one narrative among others. As one of the first students of Echo Studio, Filiz says:

Esra was my friend from high school. I told her that I was doing pole dance. She was friends with Esin back then, and I knew of her. Esra said, you know, when Esin gets back from Australia, we will open a school, you should come to that. There was also Rachel, who was from Germany.

From Filiz's words, it becomes apparent that Esra played an equally important role in the establishment of Echo studios as Esin. In Esin's narration, her act of opening a pole studio comes across as revolutionary and a personal success, while in other

narrations, different actors emerge as playing equally important roles. Not only that, but Esin herself immediately contradicts her statement by saying that pole dance classes existed in another studio, Latin Hall. By suggesting that she brought pole dance to Turkey, Esin effectively produces a history of pole dance, one that positions her as a mythical founding figure. While doing that, she also establishes the characteristics necessary for a place to be a pole studio. For example, she highlights the fact that Latin Hall was initially designed as a ballroom and Latin dance studio. What is considered a pole dance studio is contingent, as can be seen from her acceptance of Echo Studio as the first pole studio, since it is designed as a pole studio. She also mentions the material conditions of Latin Hall, especially of the poles, to emphasize that Latin Hall is not a proper pole space. In that sense, for her, pole dance requires specific material conditions. The dissatisfaction Esin has with Latin Hall is not just about materiality, though; it reflects a representational struggle over what pole space should look and feel like. Here, pole dance is not only performed but also imagined. This imagination leads to the foundation of a physical space, in the form of Echo Studio. Esin's act of creating such a space is an assertion of what kind of pole practice is possible and desirable. However, this imagination also includes a lineage of pole dancers that can all be traced back to her legacy as the pioneer of pole dance in Turkey. While it is true that she had an influential role in the foundation of dedicated pole studios in Turkey, over the years, the pole community experienced ruptures from Esin's studio and her social circle, the details of which were told to me off the record. This shows that Esin's construction of a legitimate origin story of Turkish pole dance is different than how the community of pole dancers experience it. Her narrative embeds itself into the space, while also creating a version of a pole dance community where she is the originator. However, the

multiplicity of narratives shows alternate histories, relationships, and experiences. These narrative tensions highlight the contested nature of space as Lefebvre describes it: a product of overlapping practices, representations, and experiences that are competing to define the community.

This physical proximity that all of the people I talked to highlight is established through the unique spatial configuration and material demands of pole studios. As Lefebvre suggests, space and the social are mutually constitutive: the material conditions of a space influence social relations, and in turn, those relations transform how the space is experienced and used.

Pole dance studios are settings where pole dancers train in close proximity, often sharing the space and engaging in physical practices like spotting, which foster trust, intimacy, and mutual support, especially in vulnerable moments such as hanging upside down and being danger. These embodied practices foster social bonds, often described by dancers as feelings of intimacy, sisterhood, and solidarity.

To reiterate, in this chapter I explore the pole studio as a space that is continuously produced through material arrangements and communal practices. Drawing on Lefebvre's (1991) notion of space as socially produced, the studio is both the backdrop for training but also a lived space, shaped through the material entanglements of dancers, poles, mirrors, and the space itself. In turn, the physicality of the studio allows for the production of particular social relations and practices as well, for example, feeling empowered to get naked. While the space itself is constructed, pole dancers engage in the construction of alternative narratives, which influence how the dancers experience or relate to the community.

CHAPTER 4

AFFECTIVE SPACE OF POLE DANCE

While narrative and spatial contestations shape how the community is remembered and imagined as explored in the previous chapter, it is through the everyday practices at the studio that the community is most intimately lived. Along with being functional training spaces, pole studios also operate as community hubs where bodily proximity, shared routines, and mutual care generate strong interpersonal bonds.

This chapter explores how practices of spotting, vulnerability and encouragement generate a sense of intimacy that is instrumental in the emergence of pole community and belonging. Drawing from Ahmed's theories of affective economies and orientation, this chapter showcases the role of affects within the pole space in becoming part of pole community. Through an exploration of how affects of sensuality and trust circulate in the pole studio among the bodies, I aim to show how the bodies orient towards one another and how pole dancers engage in the production of queer feminist counterspace.

4.1 Shared movement and vulnerability

For a lot of the pole dancers, training is a community-based activity as much as an individual practice. The pole dancers I talked to stated that they like to practice and train together. Taking classes, doing practice sessions, and dancing are not solitary activities for many.

During our interview, Sevgi says, "Back when I first started, we always trained together. It was me, Damla, Beliz, Filiz, Efsun... We were at the studio all the time, learning things, practicing dancing, and having fun."

Yeşim gives an example of how training together might contribute to people's pole progress. She talks about a training session she had with other pole dancers at MoveHaus. They were all at different levels, but they all benefited from training together. Yeşim says, "Arzu didn't know how to invert. She has been practicing in class for a long time but couldn't nail it. In a practice session I encouraged all of us to warm up longer, and in that session, she finally managed to invert." It wasn't only the practical aspect of warming up longer that helped Arzu achieve this trick. During that session, everyone was cheering on Arzu, which Yeşim thinks has "significantly contributed to her achievement". Nevin, another student at MoveHaus, comments on Arzu's progress: "Me and Arzu are very similar. We are both actresses, and we have similar performance styles. Up until recently, we were both unable to invert. Now that she can, I am so proud of her." She didn't express any jealousy or bad feelings towards Arzu. On the contrary, she expressed a longing for the community that she had to be separated from. "I had to go to Izmir for extended periods. As a result, I couldn't be part of the practice sessions where everyone was there. Even though I am not present in the studio physically, my heart is always with them." In other words, Nevin credited Arzu's progress to the communal aspect of training without really diminishing the hard work Arzu has shown.

Sara Ahmed's work on affect, particularly her concepts of affective economies and orientation, provides a valuable framework for understanding how emotions circulate within communities and shape social attachments. These concepts allow us to understand community not as a stable, shared essence, but as something that is constantly being made and unmade through emotional circulation and bodily alignment. In the case of the pole studio, where proximity, vulnerability, and mutual

support are core features of practice, these concepts help us understand it not just as a physical site of training, but as a space of affects, bodily orientations, and emotional attachments that influence how the community is experienced by pole dancers.

In *Communities that Feel*, Sara Ahmed (2001) argues that emotions are not individual experiences that belong to a subject; rather, they circulate between bodies, signs, and spaces, forming the “skin of the community”. In this view, feelings like trust, fear, or joy are not private experiences but are social practices that help form collective identities. In Ahmed’s analysis, the circulation of emotions has material and political outcomes: They shape bodily attachments, spatial belonging, and collective becoming. Ahmed understands this as affective economies, where emotions gain value by moving within the community. In doing so, they stick to bodies, objects, and histories, creating “sticky” associations that align some bodies together and position others as threats or outsiders, resulting in an orientation of bodies. In *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed (2006) explores how bodies take shape through the directions they take in space and describes orientation as the way bodies become directed toward certain objects, people, or spaces through repetition, habit, and affective investment. It is through repetition and familiarity that certain orientations feel natural or comfortable. As a result, orientations involve both physical direction and emotional alignment; it refers to how bodies inhabit and move through physical space, but also to how people align themselves affectively and socially. For example, the collective joy of the pole dancers that both Sevgi and Yeşim describe orients the pole dancers towards one another and also towards the studio. As a result, the studio is not simply a place where community happens, but how community feels, which is enacted through the movement of the bodies, physical touch, encouragement, and shared vulnerability of being suspended in the

air. As the dancers cheer each other on, celebrate successful tricks, or express pride in one another's progress, they engage in an affective economy that orients them towards each other and towards the studio as a site of comfort, safety, and connection.

For example, spotting, a technique that ensures safety, is a practice that depends on and recreates affects such as trust, care, and mutual responsibility among dancers. As these feelings circulate, they are collectively reinforced through repetition. In the session Yeşim describes above, one of the dancers says to others: "I am scared of this next move, would you spot me?" As the rest of them watch closely, she begins climbing the pole and transitions into the move. As she gets to the difficult part, one of the dancers approaches her, guiding her body to the correct place while making sure that she doesn't fall. Her request to be spotted circulates her fear as a collective responsibility.

Common in gymnastics, spotting is the act of physically guiding someone during a trick with touch and cues (Sorzano, 2023). It is used to prevent injuries, to mitigate risks, and to help sustain the correct form (Sorzano, 2023). In pole class, it may look like helping someone get into the trick by holding them up, carrying them, hiking them up during an invert, or catching them as they fall. At the instructor training program, Sevgi explains:

Spotting requires technique so that you don't hurt yourself as you try to help your student. Each trick requires the instructor to assess how to best help the student, while making it easy for the instructor herself. In the beginning, we don't allow students to spot each other because they might hurt themselves or their friends. In time, we introduce it as they progress and gain bodily awareness.

I was surprised to hear her say that. Over the years, spotting my fellow pole dancers and being spotted by them has become second nature for me, so much that I forgot a time when we were not doing that. This became more apparent from the classes I

have observed. The students at the beginner classes stuck to their own poles, rarely interacting, while in more advanced classes, people moved around more freely, touching one another for varying reasons such as spotting, high fiving one another, hugging after a successful attempt, and joking around. “I feel more comfortable when my friends spot me,” says Alev. “I find it difficult to trust a dancer I don’t know.” While it is not surprising that she wants to trust this person, given the role spotting plays in safety, this feeling of trust, circulating in the studio can also help sustain social bonds. The social aspect of pole gets entangled with the physical act of spotting. The physical intervention in the form of spotting exemplifies Ahmed’s concept of queer orientation, or the process of deliberately reworking how bodies inhabit space to defy normative expectations (Ahmed, 2006). Through spotting, the dancer’s disoriented body is physically reoriented, resulting in an alternative bodily orientation that is collectively produced. This reorientation is as figurative as it is literal. Yeşim says:

When you try something for the first time, you are literally hanging upside down, you don’t know where’s up and where’s down, where’s left and where’s right, you are disoriented. Knowing that someone is holding you is what makes all the difference. You get more confident; you can attempt things you don’t imagine are possible.

For Ahmed, orientation also includes disorientation, or the deliberate disruption of normative bodily and spatial orientations like gravity, gender expectations, or social hierarchies to create queer and feminist possibilities. In Yeşim’s experience, the bodily disorientation she feels leads to new possibilities through the act of spotting and trusting the spotter. Yeşim continues:

I only trust my friends or my instructors to spot me. Not any other person. Of course, things can go wrong when you think you don’t need spotting, so anyone catching you when you fall is appreciated. That’s why I don’t like to try anything I’m not 100% confident in on the pole at my house.

Being in close vicinity to other pole dancers, whether her friends or not, gives Yeşim confidence and a sense of security. Similarly, another pole dancer, Arzu, talks about the safety she feels when she is with other pole dancers:

When I train at home, I sometimes ask my boyfriend to spot me. He is strong enough, but he doesn't understand what exactly my needs are when I ask him to spot me. He is great at catching me so I don't fall, but he can't help me during the trick like other pole dancers can because he doesn't know the trick. There is a pole dancer that I really like, she never takes classes in studios, trains by herself at home, and she is always alone. And she has been doing it for a very long time, longer than 6-7 years. I really think training like her is truly difficult. I don't think I could do it if I were in her shoes.

In both Yeşim and Arzu's experiences, being outside of the studio or away from other pole dancers produces feelings of longing and disorientation. From their experience, it becomes clear that both the community and the studio become part of their affective landscape. Going back to Ahmed's concepts, this reveals how the dancers orient towards one another and the studio, and how their disorientation disrupts the affective economy that circulates among bodies and spaces.

4.2 Pole sensuality

I am blindfolded. The studio is drenched in red dim light, but I can't see myself in the mirror. I hear the music start. The instructor has told the class "to hear the music, listen to your body, don't try to do anything hard, and simply dance," just mere minutes ago. As I feel the familiar shape of the pole in my palm, I begin to walk around it. I let my body loose; let it move on its own accord. I focus on how each muscle feels as I roll my body, derive a sense of pleasure from slowing down, from not knowing what to do next, from improvising. It is deeply sensual. The song ends soon enough, and I uncover my eyes, only to hear claps from other people in the studio.

As I was considering doing research on pole dance during the inception stages of this research, I was curious about what people thought about sexiness when it comes to pole dance. I knew that looking sexy was something that I could train towards. As I explore in the previous section, through disciplining my body I knew I could learn the techniques, look effortless, and achieve a feminine aesthetic that is sexy. I also knew that there was another side to this sexiness, something more inherent to the practice itself, but at that time I was not able to put my finger on it. As I tried to make sense of my experience and shape this research, I talked with Melis, a 35-year-old woman who works in communication. She has been a pole dancer for 3 years and performed on stage a couple of times before. As we were walking to the public transport after a pole party where we watched other dancers performed, I had the chance to ask her what she thinks about pole dance and sexiness. Melis says:

I don't have a single answer to whether pole is sexy. For example, when I look at Sevgi or other pole dancers, I find them really sexy, I like it. But when I look at myself, I don't see a sexy woman, or I don't feel sexy like that.

When talking about pole and sexiness, Melis refrains from assigning any given meaning to the nature of pole itself. She doesn't find herself sexy when she pole dances, but she doesn't erase the fact that pole can look and feel sexy either. Even when this aspect of pole dance is not relevant to her own experience, by suggesting that she finds other women sexy while pole dancing, she showcases the multiplicity that's present in pole itself. Pole dance doesn't have an inherent quality of being sensual, or it is not devoid of sensuality. This sensuality is explored by Buse:

You know how I mentioned that there was a period when I had a "pole room"? During that time, something would come over me in the evenings. I'd get into a certain mood. I'd go into that room and dance in my pajamas. Without the pole, actually, just on the floor. And it was like my own kind of masturbation. I would love myself, dance, roll around on the floor. I think I was doing something beautiful and erotic.

After talking to Buse, I did not exactly know what to make of her words for a while. What she described was closely linked to sensuality, but it was not the overt sexiness that one usually expects from a pole dancer. Her eroticism included herself in pajamas, not necessarily clothing that's usually associated with pole dance and sexiness, in the pole room, without really needing to use that instrument. In her experience, even the presence of the pole created an atmosphere where her own eroticism became pleasurable for her. Eroticism has stuck to the pole through repeated encounters, as Ahmed would call it, circulated in the pole room, through her body. She calls this practice "her own kind of masturbation" without an audience. From the lack of audience, it can be inferred that this innate feeling of eroticism is not necessarily about how she looks and performs for an audience, but about how she feels in her body next to the pole. The pole is not just a prop but a participant in Buse's intimate relation to her body. These examples reveal that sexiness in pole dance is not fixed, but it circulates depending on the context, body, or orientation.

Understanding this circulation of sexiness through Ahmed's framework helps make sense of how sensuality clings to the pole and the pole space through repeated bodily encounters that charge it with erotic potential. As a result, dancers access forms of sensuality and eroticism that exceed representation, mixing the visible performance of sexiness with the lived sensuality of private practice.

4.3 Queer feminist orientations: pole sisters and witches

As explored in the previous section through Sara Ahmed's concepts of affective economies and orientation, the circulation of emotions within the community and the movement of the bodies enable queer and feminist possibilities of world-making for pole dancers (Ahmed, 2004).

On March 7th, 2024, Yıldız, a pole dancer of more than a decade and a pole instructor based in Bodrum, announced her upcoming novel on her Instagram. Addressing her fellow pole sisters on the post, she dedicated the book to them, saying, “I hope you’ll enjoy reading about our pole world and its transformative adventure, evolution, complicity, and sisterhood reflected in a fantasy novel.” The novel features a pole studio in Kadıköy, and the dancers there make up a witch clan worshipping the Goddess Hekate. Her choice of painting the pole dancers as witches is no coincidence: By resisting the gravity and spinning on poles installed in the shape of a pentagram, the dancers in the novel perform witch rituals, threatening the men who pose a threat to them while protecting the studio at the same time. Ertekin writes, “In short, our stance in life is closely related to our attitudes towards gravity,” referring to being feminists and pole dancers. By defying gravity, the pole dancers defy gendered expectations that are inscribed upon them. This defiance can also look like getting naked in the studio, as explored above.

On November 2nd of the same year, 5 dancers performed the ritual described in the book at a pole party as Yıldız’s narration filled the room. They wore masks and capes, walked in with torches, drank wine, and danced in frenzy as the ritual progressed. One of the performers, Alev, said, “I truly felt like a witch. When I think about this performance and witches, I see that the pole is the epitome of the state of impropriety or marginalization that witches were blamed with. It’s almost like we are the witches of this era.” She then suggests, “I sometimes think we are reclaiming the stakes that were used to burn witches, and we are making it our own.”

The use of “we” is significant in both Yıldız’s and Alev’s words. As can be seen from common phrases such as “We are the daughters of the witches you weren’t able to burn”, the witch has been a figure that many identify with, especially in the

feminist context (Macias Alonso, 2019). Both witches and feminists emerge as evil women who endanger family values by asserting their independence, outspokenness, sexual freedom, and choices (Wells, 2007). By reclaiming the figure of the witch, empowerment and defiance circulate within the pole dance community; and the pole dancers construct an affective economy of resistance, solidarity, and feminist world-making. The witch becomes a shared feminist symbol that is transformed into the collective power of the pole dancers. Alev's association of the pole with the stake exemplifies Ahmed's notion of how emotions stick to objects: The stake, once the tool of patriarchal oppression and control, becomes a tool of empowerment and reclamation of power in the form of the pole. The reorientation of the bodies of the pole dancers in the form of a pentagram both in the novel and in the performance exemplifies the disruption of gendered expectations through the symbolic association of the witch.

Physical strength and ability also play a role in how pole dancers relate to gender and empowerment. For example, Buse says, "For me, staying on air, defying gravity is empowerment. I always felt weak, as if someone could easily pick me up and put me down somewhere else. But thanks to pole practice, I got stronger. I can carry myself." For Buse, reclaiming the masculine-assigned trait of physical strength is empowering. Both Yıldız and Buse think about pole dance in abstract terms such as magic and flying. They derive empowerment through this physical strength, which is intermingled with the powerful image of the witch when it comes to pole dance. A break from traditional gender roles that assign weakness to women is inherent in her understanding of what pole dance entails. This is exemplified by Defne's comments on feminism: "I am a feminist. I will not conform to what patriarchy demands from me. I will be sexy if I want, strong if I want. Pole is that place where I can be

anything I want with other women who do the same.” Non-conformity plays a role in how pole dancers understand their practice. In that sense, they disrupt normative gender roles and create new possibilities for queer feminist world-making. Their defiance of gravity mirrors their refusal of gendered constraint, which reflects a literal and symbolic reorientation. In a way, the bodies of the pole dancers collectively turn toward queer feminist possibilities. Filiz states:

“Back when I first started, I couldn’t tell anyone what I was doing. There was no Instagram back then. The only people who saw what you do were other pole dancers, and that created a bond.” Yıldız suggests that there is “a bond that’s forged through the knowledge that we are doing something secret and forbidden. We used to joke that we were some sort of Fight Club.” She understands the pole dance community as a marginalized group of people who find one another through a shared deviancy.

The sense of doing something “forbidden” creates a shared orientation, a turning toward one another and away from dominant norms. In a way, social bonds are formed not despite marginalization but through it. Pole dancers build alternative worlds that queer the gendered expectations through embodied rituals, affective ties, and spaces of collective deviance, as can be seen from Filiz’s words.

Being separated from the community, and the affective environment has its consequences on pole dancers as well. After moving to Berlin, Arzu complained about being severed from her community. “The thing I miss the most about Turkey is my pole sisters. Even though I take classes here, it is not the same. People don’t interact with one another to the same extent. I think I feel this way because there is a language barrier too. I wonder if I would have an easier time finding community here if I spoke German”. She adds, “In Berlin, everyone is focused on their own practice

and nobody talks as much. And nobody spots one another. I find it strange.” For her, the lack of interacting with one another via talking and touching in the form of spotting means difficulty in finding community. Arzu credits the lack of community she saw in Berlin to how the studios structure classes as well. “Here, you don’t enroll in a specific classroom with a specific day and hour where each week you see the same people. You book each class as its own so each time there are different people. In Istanbul, when I was seeing the same people each week, we would eventually start talking and get to know one another. We would spot one another. We would sometimes grab food or coffee after class and chat some more. I made great friends through this. And even those who didn’t become my friends became people I at the very least know of.” She said that her efforts to grab coffee with classmates were falling short so far, but she said she will give it time.

Arzu says she felt the anxiety of losing her community long before she actually left. “When I was searching for jobs in Berlin, I was always thinking about pole and my pole sisters. I was doing a photoshoot with Ceylin who recently moved to the US. We had to do it online due to the distance, so I took screenshots instead of photos. When I looked at Ceylin, I kept thinking about myself and my plans to move to Germany.” Similarly, Lale, who moved to Canada to pursue her PhD, expressed similar sentiments. Before moving, she had to get rid of her pole equipment.

Saying goodbye to my pole, my shoes, my friends is so difficult. I want them to go to good homes so I will sell or give them to my friends. For me, it is a sentimental thing. I want to be able to look at their videos and think that those shoes used to belong to me, or I used to dance on that pole.

For Lale, knowing that her community will hold on to her material belongings and use them frequently made the separation easier. The other people were also sentimental about her leaving. “Filiz wrote a nice choreography to this song I like for my last class. I really enjoyed learning it with my friends and dancing together. It

was a nice farewell gift.” In both these cases, pole dancers expressed anxiety and sadness over being separated from their community. But even with physical separation, the bonds they built over the years stayed consistent online. Arzu says, “I send my pole videos to my pole sisters so that we can talk about it. Even though we are not together, they still cheer me on.”

Arzu and Lale’s stories show that shared routines, gestures, and presence are all factor in how deeply the community is felt. Being apart from the studio and the community unsettles both their practice and the affective attachment they feel. The absence of these everyday practices of casual conversation or spotting created a sense of disorientation. They felt this fear of separation even before leaving, however, as Ahmed suggests, the stickiness of the emotions persist through photoshoots, shared videos and messages, and the continued circulation of objects, memories, and encouragement.

4.4 Trust and queer-feminist counterspace

When the feminist book club initiated by the pole dancers heard about Yıldız’s book, everyone expressed excitement over it. Alev said, “There’s not much that’s written about pole dance. Every time I get excited over a piece of media or literature that features pole dancing, I get disappointed because they are clearly made by people who don’t know what pole dance is. I am looking forward to reading Yıldız’s book because she is one of us, she gets us.” Agreeing with Alev, the book club decided to dedicate a session to Yıldız’s book and invited her to that session so that they could talk about it together. Soon, the event grew larger, a poster was made, and other pole dancers were invited to that session of the book club. Gathering interest from pole

dancers, the event itself became a space where people got together and talked about their experiences with pole dancing and the pole dance community.

Yeşim reflected on how the pole studio was attacked in the book. She commented: “I feel like this is a space we must cherish and protect.” In this event, even though the book was fictional with fantastic elements such as summoning Goddesses and time travel, the eventgoers related to it on a more personal level, identifying with the dancers themselves. Seeing their own experience in the book because it was written by someone within the community.

For the majority of my interlocutors, trusting outsiders with their pole experience is a vulnerable thing. During the fieldwork of this thesis, I heard this sentiment from a number of people. Alev said “I am glad the person who is writing this thesis is you. I would be annoyed if some curious academic came to me to ask these questions. You know what it’s like; you get my experience in a way an outsider wouldn’t be able to.” Similarly, Defne suggested that “I know you will give it [pole] the care it deserves.”

Trust moves between our bodies, shaping attachments and boundaries. It emerges from shared orientation and lived proximity. I am trusted as an insider, because my affective and bodily investments are oriented toward the pole community, while outsiders are met with caution. This influences not only who is believed or welcomed, but what forms of knowledge are seen as legitimate. As a result, my thesis process was encompassed with this affective economy of trust. While this trust gave me confidence, I also felt a sense of responsibility towards the community. As a result of these affects circulating among us, I oriented towards certain subject matters, and away from others. Instead of focusing on the image of

the pole dance and the conflicting discourse on whether it is feminist or not, I oriented towards the embodied and communal aspects of it.

In both the case of Yıldız and my thesis, it is clear that coming from within the community creates a sense of trust both in the creator and the product that what will be presented to the outside world will be true to the common experience of the pole dancers. There is a resistance to the outsiders looking in. Same as written works, the same attitude towards the encounters with the outside occurs with the visual media.

Sevgi talked about the disrespect she faced towards her craft at a music video set: “I was dancing for hours on end. It was really difficult. I had to warm up quite a lot; we had to do a lot of takes. In the end, when I saw the final music video, they didn’t even use any clips of me dancing.” For her, the time it took to shoot the video was frustrating since they didn’t include her footage because the crew didn’t really understand the physical demands of pole dancing. Similarly, Arzu talks about a photoshoot she did as a dancer with a photographer. “I had to stay in a pose for a very long time. The photographer didn’t get how much effort it takes. He was concerned with angles and lighting while I was hanging on by a thread. It got frustrating.” This lack of understanding of pole becomes a problem with pole performances as well. Pole dancers expressed their preference for being photographed by people they trusted. Defne explains:

On a performance we did, the photographer didn’t understand pole at all. All my splits were shot from weird angles, and all the photos were mid-transition. They didn’t capture the trick in its full glory at all. I really liked the photos Arzu took at the show. I wish her camera battery hadn’t died so she could have taken my photos as well. She knows how to make a photo look flattering.

In response, Arzu says:

I think as a pole dancer, you can anticipate what transition might lead to what pose, so that you can predict which angles to shoot are coming when someone is performing. Also, you can guess what a dancer might want to highlight in a picture and try to capture that.

For many dancers, editing plays an important role in how they want to see themselves in a photo as well. Defne expressed her dislike towards a photographer's editing style saying, "He makes everyone's skin look unreal. We don't want to look like shiny robots; we are real people. Editing doesn't mean erasing all skin texture and photoshopping body parts."

To reclaim how the pole dancers are portrayed, Alev and Arzu did a photoshoot, highlighting the body features that other photographers erase by deeming them imperfect, such as cellulite, body hair, stretch marks, as well as temporary redness from pole dancing. They aimed to address this attitude of photographers to over-edit the pole dancers and showcase the real bodies that pole dance. They first decided on what poses they wanted to capture and under what kind of lighting to use. Arzu talks about their intention and the ethical dilemmas they faced as such:

In this project, in the simplest terms, we aimed to look at the body with a realistic gaze, to see it as it really is. We wanted to capture the dancer in the photograph as we see her every day in training, as we know her, free from tricks of light, smooth skin filters, and misleading shooting angles. However, I think that it is inevitable to add an interpretation to reality every time we frame it; therefore, a photograph that shows reality as it really is is not possible. Then I jump on the branch. Searching for the real image is a futile endeavor, okay. But how is it possible to cleanse a pole dance photograph from the patriarchal gaze? As soon as I ask this question, I realize that I am trying to find the gaze I am looking for by accepting the not as the norm. On top of that, I am startled by the risk of unintentionally marginalizing what I am trying to show if I give my back to the not and open up a little too much."

Arzu says she overcomes this dilemma by trusting women. "Sometimes I don't know exactly what to do and how to do it, but I always know that when I set out with women, I will get where I want to go." In a way, as a photographer, Arzu not only has the trust of the community, but she trusts her community to guide her as well. Having their support or doing things together has a feminist function for her.

Alev adds:

As a part of this system, I experience first-hand that loving the things we are told are flaws may not always have a healing effect, and in addition, it may not always be possible. I know that I have the potential to be better when I am together with women and queers with whom I can share these experiences. I am glad Arzu was there, I am glad Berfin, who supported us during the shootings, was there, I am glad the Plus studio opened its doors to us, I am glad all the women with whom I shared ideas beforehand were there.

When I found out about this photoshoot, I asked them to observe it for this thesis.

They said yes, even though it was such an intimate and vulnerable thing for Alev.

Soon, I found myself helping her get into the pose, spinning the pole so that she faced Arzu's camera just right, helping Arzu by holding lights at a certain angle, etc. Being in the studio space where helping one another is instinctual, pulled me into their photoshoot. Even though I was there for research purposes, I found myself oriented towards Alev and Arzu. As Ahmed (2006) suggests, emotions do not reside in subjects but emerge in encounters; here, the mutual trust and responsibility we felt meant that I became a part of the photoshoot as well.

These moments of collective image-making, support, and vulnerability reveal a process of queer-feminist worldbuilding that emerges from how bodies come together and how they are oriented. By choosing the so-called imperfections of the body, the stretch marks, calluses, or the physical exertion, the dancers create a shared reality that rejects the world which they must come across as sexy yet demure, strong yet feminine, over polished without trying. This is not simply a form of representation; it is a material and affective practice that allows the emergence of an alternative world, which is held together by intimacy, trust, collaboration, and resistance to gendered norms.

To reiterate, in this chapter, I have shown how the pole studio is a lived and affective space where bonds of trust, sensuality, and solidarity are cultivated through

everyday practices such as spotting, cheering, sharing vulnerability, and engaging in collective rituals. Dancers generate forms of intimacy that orient them toward one another and produce a sense of belonging. These practices enable the emergence of a feminist-queer counterspace, where the meanings of sensuality, empowerment, and representation are constantly negotiated and redefined.



CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have talked to numerous people, both from academia and from the pole scene, who helped me shape this thesis. The questions I had at the beginning were transformed through a constant negotiation between my embodied experience, the interviews I had with pole dancers, and conversations in academia to make sense of what I tried to uncover. The pole literature is laden with research that focuses on the discursive. When I tried to make sense of my own experience, what I've read did not touch upon the things that I was curious about the most. As I spent countless hours at the studio and reflected on the space, my own body, and the people around me, I felt a powerful urge to approach pole dance in a way that reflects these elements: the bodily experiences of pole dancers and how they feel towards their bodies, the space, and the community. This approach was aided by my involvement with the practice and my being a part of the community.

The first draft of this thesis reads more like a journal than a thesis. One of the biggest struggles I had was to ground my embodied experience and the ethnographic fieldwork with theory. The writing of this thesis necessitated a constant negotiation with the theory to make sense of the field. As I engaged in theorizing the first draft, I was instinctually drawn to the material and affective aspects of the field. As a result of such negotiation between the field and the theory, this thesis focuses on the disciplining of the body, the role pain plays, the studio space, and affects that play a role in becoming a pole dancer.

Although I initially wanted to have a more comprehensive approach to this research topic, I soon realized that this study is subject to certain limitations. As I

was trying to bridge the gap between the pole dance literature that focuses on the empowerment/oppressive dichotomy of pole dance and my own experience, I embarked on a journey to understand the roots of pole dance that stems from sex work. This led me into a history rabbit hole, which can be a study in and of itself. The history that's mentioned in pole literature was superficial, but through looking at sources that detail the history of sex work, burlesque, and belly dancing, I was able to reveal a history of pole dance that is deeply rooted in colonialist practices, sexism, and orientalism. While the first draft of this thesis includes an entire chapter on this history, I soon realized that this project was headed towards a more material and affective direction. However, it is important to note that while this thesis does not touch upon this history, pole practice carries the impression of it.

Other aspects of pole dance emerged during the field that I have not explored in this thesis. For example, the business side of recreational pole dance, its influence on the community, and its affective economies are not explored here since the fieldwork of this study consists of only 2 studios. Secondly, while the material entanglements at the studio are touched upon, the role of social media as a digital materiality is not touched upon either. Even though I have talked about the queer feminist counterspace, queer identities are not explored in detail. Lastly, the sex workers in Turkey who are also pole dancers are absent from the scope of this study as well.

This thesis explores becoming a pole dancer as an embodied, spatial, and affective process. I have drawn from the theoretical work of Sara Ahmed, Foucault, and Lefebvre to make sense of this entangled experience, each of whom provides a critical entry point into understanding the disciplinary, spatial, and affective dimensions of pole dance that shape the embodied experience of the dancers.

Foucault's conceptualization of discipline and the docile body allows me to frame the pole dancer as one forged through repetition, bodily control, and pain management. As active agents who voluntarily engage in intense physical disciplining, pole dancers seek the disciplining of their bodies to become pole dancers. Through masculine-assigned physical strength, pole dancers perform a mode of femininity that opens up possibilities of queering such categories of femininity and masculinity. The capable pole dancer body, as a result, one that gains expressive freedom from the docility of the body. Through this lens, the studio appears not only as a site of self-fashioning, but as a micro-political space of transformation.

The spatial aspect of pole dance is further explored through Lefebvre's conceptualization of space as something that is not simply occupied but produced. Pole dancers engage in the production of the space, while the space helps shape the pole practice and the community in return. Here, the bodies do not just move but coproduce the very spatial and social dynamics of the studio. The studio space emerges as a counterspace that challenges dominant spatial orders by enabling queer and feminist expression.

I turn to Sara Ahmed's theories of orientation and affective economies to understand both the discipline and the spatial experience of the pole dancers. Affects circulate and stick to the studio, the pole and the bodies, shaping not only the feelings, but also what kind of subjectivities can emerge. These affects, which are enacted through the physical practices, result in the orientation of the subjects towards the practice, the studio, and one another, and can result in queer and feminist reorientations. The affective charge of pole dancing resists easy categorization as

either oppressive or liberatory, opening up space for the pole dancers to negotiate their own experience.

Pain has emerged as a crucial and recurrent theme that is a constitutive part of the pole dancer's becoming. From a Foucauldian perspective, pain can be understood as part of a disciplinary regime that shapes the body through repetition, correction, and control. But Ahmed's theory on pain allows us to explore beyond a purely structural reading and consider how pain works affectively: feeling and managing pain is crucial to becoming a pole dancer.

Through these theoretical interventions, the pole studio emerges as a queer feminist counterspace where new bodily possibilities are imagined and performed. Rather than choosing between empowerment or objectification, athleticism or eroticism, discipline or freedom, this thesis shows how pole dance holds all of these tensions together in the body, in space, and in feeling. In this way, becoming a pole dancer is not a stable identity, but an ongoing process of embodied and affective negotiation. It is in this becoming and the emergent community that we may find gestures of queer feminist world-making.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Can you introduce yourself? (Age, occupation, gender, preferred pronouns, etc.)
2. When and how did you start pole dancing?
3. Do you have a pole installed at home?
4. How does pole dancing make you feel? How do you feel when you are in the pole studio?
5. How would you describe your bodily experience while pole dancing?
6. How has pole dancing affected other areas of your life?
7. What are the most challenging, the easiest, and the most surprising aspects of pole dancing for you?
8. How would you describe your relationship with pole dance?
9. What changes have you observed in your body since you started pole dancing?
10. Has your relationship with your body changed since you started pole dancing?
11. Have you received any comments from your surroundings about your body and the changes you have experienced?
12. In your social circle, who knows and who doesn't know that you pole dance?
What factors influenced your decision to share or not share this information?
How have people around you (family, relatives, friends, partner, colleagues, etc.) reacted to your pole dancing?

13. Do you feel sexy when you pole dance? What do you think is the relationship between pole dance and sexiness/eroticism?
14. Do you feel strong when you pole dance? What do you think is the relationship between pole dance and strength?
15. Have you gained a new social circle through pole dance? How have these people influenced your relationship with pole dance?
16. (For instructors and studio owners) When did you become an instructor and how did you decide to pursue this path? What was the process of opening your studio like?



APPENDIX B

ETHICS COMMITTEE APPROVAL



T.C.
BOĞAZİÇİ ÜNİVERSİTESİ REKTÖRLÜĞÜ
Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (Sbınarek)

Sayı : E-84391427-050.04-217484
Konu : 2025-09T Kayıt Numaralı Başvurunuz
Hakkında

23.01.2025

Sayın Prof. Dr. Biray KOLLUOĞLU

Tez danışmanlığımı yürüttüğünüz öğrenciniz Berfin Su Kazaklı'nın "Encountering the Self on the Pole : Recreational Pole Scene in Turkey" başlıklı projesi ile Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Sosyal ve Beşeri Bilimler İnsan Araştırmaları Etik Kurulu (SBİNAREK)'e yaptığınız 2025-09T kayıt numaralı başvuru 17.01.2025 tarih ve 2025/01 sayılı kurul toplantısında incelenmiş ve projeye etik onay verilmesi uygun bulunmuştur.

Bu karar tüm üyelerin toplantıya on-line olarak katılımıyla ve oybirliği ile alınmıştır. Onay mektubu tüm üyeler adına Komisyon Başkanı tarafından e-imzalanmıştır. Bilgilerinizi rica ederiz.

Saygılarımızla,

Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Işıl ERDUYAN
Kurul Başkanı

Bu belge, güvenli elektronik imza ile imzalanmıştır.

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Adres: Boğaziçi Üniversitesi 34342 Bebek/ İstanbul
Telefon No: Faks No:
e-Posta: İnternet Adresi: www.bogazici.edu.tr
Kep Adresi: bogaziciuniversitesi@hs01.kep.tr

Bilgi için: Nuryen MUNAR
Mühendis
Telefon No: 0 212 359-6749



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