

**“A Matrix of Polarities”:**  
***Experiencing the Body, Gender, and Culture in Erotic Labour***



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<sup>1</sup> Yarli Allison and Letizia Miro, still from ‘This is Not For Clients,’ film, ArtReview, February 21, 2021, <https://artreview.com/sex-work-is-work-the-artists-fighting-for-decriminalisation-ica/>

## INTRODUCTION

Our bodies are our anchor in the world. Our experiences, whether physical, sensorial, mental, emotional, or other, are mediated through and shaped by the body. Fortunately, the idea that 'the body' is a homogenous and clean category is being challenged increasingly. But what do potential variations look like in practice? If experience passes through the body in order to become real, what influence does the non-homogenous body have on this process? How do lived realities determine our embodied experiences? How does the sensing body make sense of life differently when it is a construction worker, an office worker, or a sex worker? A man or a woman? And to what extent does culture inform the body's experiences?

These questions have formed a foundation of curiosity and inspiration for this research, which studies bodily awareness and embodied cultural experience among erotic workers. Erotic labour has long been the subject of public fascination and academic debate, often viewed through lenses of morality, legality, or victimhood. However, the embodied experiences of erotic workers themselves are not often addressed, and their perspective on the body's cultural significance even less. Erotic labour finds itself at an interesting crossroads of several polarities. Dichotomies like object/subject, exploitation/empowerment, male/female, spectator/performer and expectation/liberation can all be recognized and challenged in the playing field of erotic labour, bringing together the ends of many spectrums in one case. This makes erotic labour an interesting case-study, with a lot happening underneath the surface. The research is led by the following research question: How does doing erotic work influence the worker's bodily awareness and what does that mean for their experience of their body as a gendered subject? As guiding tools I have formed the following sub-questions: What role does the body play in erotic work? What does doing erotic work mean for one's bodily awareness? How is the body culturally interpreted by erotic workers in the context of their work? To answer these questions, I conducted six semi-structured interviews with erotic workers in the Netherlands, and reviewed feminist, anthropological and phenomenological literature on embodiment, sexuality, gender, and erotic labour.

The first sub-question aims to clarify the physical realities of erotic workers. When studying embodied experiences, it is crucial to know what the body actually does at work, especially in the case of the sex industry, which can be very diverse. Saying one works as an erotic worker does not immediately make clear what the practicalities of the work look like. For this reason I will clarify the concrete role of the body in the work. The second sub-question studies the relationship between doing erotic work and bodily awareness. By bodily awareness I mean being aware of what the body does and how it moves, and being able to make conscious decisions about this. I look into if and how doing erotic work influences this awareness. The third sub-questions examines the subjective, cultural layer behind this. It seeks to understand what cultural ideas and processes are applied to this bodily awareness, and what categories are assigned to the observations one makes of one's body. It asks how workers interpret their physical presence within gendered cultural frameworks. It is one thing to be aware of what the body does, but another to culturally make sense of why. Even though these two processes are deeply entangled, the last two sub-questions try to distinguish between them in order to provide as much clarity as possible.

These are relevant questions to study for several reasons. This research adds to existing theoretical debates about gender and embodiment by grounding them in real-world practices, while portraying erotic labour as nuanced, meaningful and human(e) work. It shows how cultural scripts are performed and (re)negotiated in a concrete case-study and what role the body plays in this process, as it relies on erotic workers as epistemic agents rather than objects for scholars to theorize about. When discussing feminist theory, erotic work makes for an especially interesting case-study considering the role that concepts like agency and gender normativity play in the work. Additionally, my focus on bodily awareness and cultural experience of the body allows me to draw conclusions about the worker and their body outside of work as well. I am not just concerned with the body *at work*, but also what that might mean for the worker in a broader perspective.

Given the stigma and problematization that often surrounds the sex industry, I have set an explicit intention to write a sex work-positive paper and to steer clear of discussions regarding policy, violence, trafficking or crime, unless brought up by interviewees. I aim to do this by keeping a focus on primary sources; conversations with people who do erotic labour and their lived experiences. All people I spoke with do their work by choice. In doing so I hope to frame erotic labour as a site of agency, negotiation, and identity construction, rather than something inherently and exclusively exploitative and degrading. Making use of an iterative, ethnographic research design, the aim of this thesis is not to generalize across the whole industry, but to offer a nuanced, in-depth perspective on how the body is experienced, performed, and interpreted by workers themselves.

## METHODOLOGY

This research has followed an iterative research design as conceptualized by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey.<sup>2</sup> This means it did not follow a linear step-plan. Instead, several parts of the process unfolded simultaneously, continuously informing each other. I began working on this thesis in September of 2024 by starting a literature review. My literature is roughly divided into two parts. I started with collecting literature on gendered physicality and embodiment, after which I continued with literature about the specific case of erotic labour, and the role of acting in erotic labour. My initial literature search was loosely guided by articles I had read on RedInsight.org, a (non-academic) blog run by sex workers in the Netherlands. Especially the concepts of acting and performance feature in several articles posted on RedInsight.<sup>3</sup> After the first literature search, I conducted six interviews in the period from October until December 2024. In October I also had an informal conversation with someone I already knew who has worked as a sex worker, to familiarize myself with the field. She also helped me find my research participants by sharing a message I wrote including my contact details so people could reach out to me directly. She shared the message with a community for erotic workers, run by erotic workers. At first I did not know exactly how and where my message was shared, but through my interviews I slowly puzzled together an image of the kind of community this was. It seems to be a generally progressive group of people.

Since I initially did not know who and how many people would respond to my message, I did not set any criteria. If I would get too many replies I would find a way to select people adequately, but that turned out to not be necessary. The six people I ended up talking with were the only six people who responded, which is why I decided to not select further, despite their diverse backgrounds.

For the interviews I designed an interview guide. I chose semi-structured interviews to ensure the conversations would be comparable but open enough for each person to be able to tell their own story. Interviews lasted between 50 and 100 minutes. Two of my interviews are unrecorded. One of them is unrecorded because the interviewee did not want to be recorded due to privacy reasons. The other one is unrecorded because we had our conversation in public over a coffee, meaning there was a lot of background noise. Additionally, I had observed her dance class beforehand, so we had already started talking about my research and her perspective. This means that quotes from Belle and Cate are paraphrases, based on extensive notes I took during the conversations. Three of my interviews were held online, using services of Google Meet and Microsoft Teams. One was conducted over the phone. With Eliza and Cate I spoke in person. I will introduce my interviewees further at the end of this chapter.

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<sup>2</sup> Monique Hennink, Inge Hutter, and Ajay Bailey, *Qualitative Research Methods* (Sage: 2011), 4-5.

<sup>3</sup> Noor Wildeling, 'Drag show at the brothel,' Redinsight, February 8, 2023, <https://redinsight.org/articles/drag-show-at-the-brothel>.

Cat Astrophe, 'The inherent artistry of sex workers is on display in Amsterdam North,' Redinsight, November 11, 2023, <https://redinsight.org/articles/the-inherent-artistry-of-sex-workers-is-on-display-in-amsterdam-north>.

After all interviews were done, I started transcribing, going over my notes and analyzing. Based on my data I collected some additional literature, to complement and support findings from the interviews that were not yet covered by my theoretical body. I also found, after going over my interviews and making slight changes to my research questions, a part of the literature I had collected in September had become redundant; it no longer answered the question I was asking nor did it connect to my data. I made small changes to the research questions because I found my data and theory better built towards an answer to these questions rather than the angle I used before. I analyzed my data by going over the transcripts and notes many times, highlighting recurring themes and sections that seemed relevant to my research. I also noted down my thoughts while transcribing and hearing the conversations again. I wrote breakdowns of all interviews in a separate document and compared them to each other, and I also made a codebook, which can be found in the appendix.

I decided to work with this overall research design (i.e., iterative research cycle, ethnographic data) because of my explicit aim to produce an in-depth report of erotic workers' experiences. My intention was to write something based on the input from the people I spoke with, not merely about them, making the ethnographic data the cornerstone of my sources. Literature helped me contextualize and ground my findings in ongoing debates. Alternatives like using exclusively literature, or conducting structured interviews would not help me achieve these goals, since they would not enable me to construct a detailed and nuanced image of people's lived realities.

The diversity within my research group has brought a wide perspective, with voices coming from different corners of the sex industry. However, it also means that my findings are not watertight or applicable to the industry as a whole. The sector of erotic labour is an industry that knows a vast diversity in kinds of work, workers, working conditions, and so forth. Even though I deliberately steer clear from the problematized side of erotic labour, it is true that not everybody doing erotic labour does so by choice. As with all qualitative research, the interviewees greatly shape the outcome. My research participants, though having diverse backgrounds, all more or less match a similar profile. They all do their work by choice and they all, to a greater or lesser degree, enjoy their work. They are also all in the group chat of the community my message was posted in, which seems to be a generally liberal and feminist group. In addition, they all responded to my message, which inevitably mentioned some themes relevant to my research, like embodiment and gender, meaning they likely already had some interest in these topics. All of this is to say that I am not able nor do I intend to represent all of the sex industry. It is big and diverse and complex, and I have only seen a glimpse of it. About that glimpse I have tried to say something meaningful.

Finally, before concluding this chapter I would like to introduce the people I had a chance to interview. I structured my interviews alphabetically, and gave the person I had the interview with a pseudonym corresponding with the letter of their interview. I met with four people who do or have done full-service sex work: Ann, Belle, Dana and Femke. Ann and Belle are both independent sex workers. They both have a history of trying different things as well, like working in a club or working for an escort agency, but ended up starting their own business in sex work. They are very diverse in their work; they do bookings of only two hours, but also of several days, and everything in between. Both of them also do companionship dates, which are non-sexual meetings, as well as meetings with both a companionship and a sexual part.

Femke and Dana both entered the industry through sugar-dating: going on dates with people (often but not necessarily older people) for money or other kinds of payment like goods. There are online platforms to organize this. Sugar-dating may vary from going on single dates with different people, or dating the same person for a longer time. It also varies what kind of date it is; it can be including or excluding sex and other kinds of physical intimacy, depending on the sugar-couple. Both Femke and Dana discovered through sugar-dating that they enjoyed the work, and started working as full-service sex worker. Dana immediately started her own business as independent worker. Femke first worked for an escort agency for a few months, but soon switched to working at a sex club, still doing full-service sex work. Dana, after having worked as independent sex worker

for approximately four years, recently switched to working as erotic masseuse and BDSM domina, no longer doing full-service sex work.

Eliza also has experience as BDSM domina; it was her first job in erotic work. She had worked in a BDSM club for a year when it was temporarily closed. She also does erotic content creation. She is currently looking to expand her work and trying to start her own business as full-service sex worker. Finally, I met with Cate. She works as a dancer in a strip club. She has weekly pole dance classes, one of which I attended. At work she pole dances and gives private lap dances to clients. With Eliza and Cate I met up in person.

## **DATA MANAGEMENT AND ETHICS**

When working with personal, potentially sensitive information it is important to handle the collected data with care and discretion. For this reason I want to note in more detail how I ensured safety and anonymity during this research project. As noted before, I made an interview guide to structure my interviews. Part of the interview guide was my opening statement, in which I explained the research briefly, but also explained to the interviewee that the conversation is voluntary, that they can stop at any moment, and always choose not to answer a question or take a break if needed. I also mentioned they could at any point in the future still change their mind about participating, in which case I would not use their data for the research. Of course, there were no right or wrong answers, and their data would be anonymized, regardless of whether I knew their private name or their work name. Also any other information that could be traced back to them, like specific workplaces or the community my message was sent in, is not included in this document nor in other accompanying documents like transcripts, earlier drafts or the codebook, unless consent was given. Finally, I asked if they consented to being audio recorded.

Recordings were made on my phone, which is password protected, and the audio files were stored only there. One exception is my conversation with Dana, with whom I spoke over the phone. For this interview I used a recorder-app on my laptop to record the conversation. In both cases, the files were stored locally on my device, inaccessible to anyone else and not uploaded to any shared drive or cloud. The same goes for the transcripts and all other working documents I created in the process of writing this thesis; they are all stored locally on my personal laptop. Transcripts were made manually, with an exception of one portion of thirty minutes for which I used an online tool recommended by my supervisor. After the thesis process is completed I will save only the final product that contains exclusively anonymized information, and delete all other files. I will also destroy my handwritten notes, which have not been digitalized.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

In the following chapter I will give an overview of theory relevant to this thesis. The chapter is roughly divided into two sections. The first one discusses the ways in which the body is shaped by cultural norms, how far the consequences of this reach, and how people are taught significantly different 'rules' depending on whether they are assigned male or female at birth. The second section discusses erotic labour, different strategies workers may apply and what this means for their physical reality.

### *The body as a construction site*

A large theoretical building block this thesis rests on is the premise that movement and physicality are taught and not simply an unquestionable given. In postmodern feminist writing, this notion has been given a lot of attention. Renowned feminist scholar Iris Marion Young writes about it in a

famous essay.<sup>4</sup> She references a study conducted in 1966 to exemplify the significant difference between how young boys and girls use their bodies.<sup>5</sup> In this study the difference that was found was ascribed to a biological cause rather than a socio-cultural one, and even if the exact part of girls' biology that caused the difference could not be pinpointed, it was still maintained that their "mysterious feminine essence" was responsible for it.<sup>6</sup> Young argues there is a conceptual and theoretical gap that she aims to fill by tracing and pointing out conditions of feminine ways of moving and carrying oneself in space that are deeply cultural but often overlooked as such.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note here that 'feminine' for Young does not mean 'female'. Femininity is not a quality all women necessarily have by virtue of their biology, but rather "a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical *situation* of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves."<sup>8</sup> As Sandra Lee Bartky writes, "we are born male or female, but not masculine or feminine."<sup>9</sup> And however some may disagree even with that, I first want to explore what this statement means for Bartky and Young.<sup>10</sup> Both articles examine the societally taught behaviors of women, Young focussing on the body-in-space, Bartky on the body-as-ornament.

Young analyzes the ways in which physicality and embodiment are gendered, starting with the simple ways in which we sit and walk. Men have a more open physical attitude, move more confidently and take up more space (meaning they make bigger movements with their limbs).<sup>11</sup> Young continues to argue that the same principle can be applied to basically all facets of female existence; when it comes to the space directly around them, they are hesitant to *be* there. When it comes to physical tasks, even if they are simple, women tend to not trust that their bodies are capable to complete them and are afraid to get hurt, because of the deep-rooted cultural idea that women's bodies are fragile and weak.<sup>12</sup> They are afraid to look awkward and incapable, but at the same time afraid to look strong and capable (the one is uncomfortable, the other one will make you less of a woman). A key factor in all this is where these two articles come together: "the basic fact of the woman's social existence as the object of the gaze of another, which is a major source of her bodily self-reference."<sup>13</sup>

The concept of the female body not as autonomous entity but as object of aesthetic value for a (male) other forms the core of Bartky's argument. "A pan-optical male connoisseur resides within the consciousness of most women: they stand perpetually before his gaze and under his judgement.

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<sup>4</sup> Iris Marion Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl: A Phenomenology of Feminine Body Comportment, Motility, and Spatiality,' *Human Studies* 3, no 2 (1980): 137-156.

<sup>5</sup> Young boys and girls were asked to throw a ball; boys would take a few steps, assume a wide stance, move both their arms, their torso and shoulders while throwing. Girls held their bodies still. The only moved the forearm of the arm they were throwing with.

<sup>6</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 29.

<sup>7</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 30.

<sup>8</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 31.

<sup>9</sup> Sandra Lee Bartky, 'Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,' In *Feminism and Foucault: Reflections on Resistance*, ed. Irene Diamond & Lee Quinby (Northeastern University Press, 1988), 65.

<sup>10</sup> I think it relevant to make a brief side note concerning these two authors. Although they both make powerful arguments and provide valuable insights concerning often overlooked issues, it is also good to keep in mind the context in which the articles were written. Both originally published in the 1980's, they are inevitably inspired by second-wave feminism. This means the authors are clearly passionate, but also that they tend to generalize (*all* men, *all* women, *all* of society, etc.) and leave little room for nuance. I still use them because beyond this fact, their arguments are solid and still relevant today.

<sup>11</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 32.

<sup>12</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 34.

<sup>13</sup> Young, 'Throwing Like a Girl,' 39.

Woman lives her body as seen by another, by an anonymous patriarchal Other.”<sup>14</sup> Bartky’s article concerns itself with the ways women are expected to present themselves; using the right make-up, being slim and elegant, shaving, always smiling, etc. It describes the paradoxical patriarchal force every person assigned female at birth falls subject to. Paradoxical because it seemingly does not exist. There is not one authoritative figure demanding women do these things. It cannot be pointed at. It is nowhere and everywhere, no-one and everyone: “The anonymity of disciplinary power and its wide dispersion have consequences which are crucial to a proper understanding of the subordination of women. The absence of a formal institutional structure and of authorities invested with the power to carry out institutional directives creates the impression that the production of femininity is either entirely voluntary or natural.”<sup>15</sup> This ‘force’ has been part of our collective memory for so long that the source is untraceable and unknown; seemingly non-existent. This makes it hard to challenge, since what does not exist, cannot be rejected.<sup>16</sup>

These arguments presuppose phenomenologist truths about the body. They implicitly work with the idea that the body is not just a natural thing in space, but rather a site where culture takes place. Like Butler argued, there is no neutral, natural body; all bodies are necessarily shaped by culture.<sup>17</sup> Simply by existing we are tangled in a web of cultural norms, expectations, and moulding forces. Spronk argues that physical experiences in turn shape identity in her article about erotic bodily sensations and subjectivity.<sup>18</sup> “The experience of sex is informed by social meanings concerning gender, cultural identity and class, and, in turn, sexual practices mediate and constitute these cultural categories of self and others. It thus reveals the way in which the body mediates culture.”<sup>19</sup> She argues that the body realizes meaning, being the portal through which culture and identity are in a constant process of passing by each other back and forth.<sup>20</sup> Similar conceptualizations of the body can be found in a 1990 article by Csordas, who argues the body to be the “existential ground of culture”; not merely an object relevant to culture, but rather a manifestation of culture itself.<sup>21</sup>

Knowledge of these bodily processes, though, is often hard to verbalize because we are rarely required to do so, or might not even be aware of them.<sup>22</sup> Some research participants in a study done by Bosman, Spronk and Kuipers conclude from this difficulty that these experiences are therefore a-cultural, however the authors argue in the same article that such embodied experiences cannot be seen separately from a wider social context.<sup>23</sup> Still, it is not strange these research participants would think this: “language has the power to create ‘the socially real’.”<sup>24</sup> We speak things into being, and if we have no words for something, we easily conclude that it does not exist. Difficulty with verbalizing suggests that such experiences may be pre-verbal, pre-discursive, or pre-

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<sup>14</sup> Bartky, ‘Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,’ 72.

<sup>15</sup> Bartky, ‘Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power,’ 75.

<sup>16</sup> John S. Bankhead, ‘Queer(ed) Bodies, Spaces, and Forms in Selected Works by Reinaldo Arenas, Mario Bellatin, and Isaac Chocrón,’ PhD diss., (University of North Carolina, 2014), 2.

<sup>17</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, (Routledge, 1999), 164.

<sup>18</sup> Rachel Spronk, ‘Sexuality and Subjectivity: Erotic Practices and the Question of Bodily Sensations,’ *Social Anthropology* 22, no 1 (2014): 3-21.

<sup>19</sup> Spronk, ‘Sexuality and Subjectivity,’ 18.

<sup>20</sup> Spronk, ‘Sexuality and Subjectivity,’ 7.

<sup>21</sup> Thomas J. Csordas, ‘Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,’ *Ethos* 18, no. 1 (1990): 5.

<sup>22</sup> Izabela Ślęzak, ‘A Present and a Non-Present Body: Experiencing the Body by Female Sex Workers in Commercial Sexual Relations,’ *Qualitative Sociology Review* 14, no 2 (2018): 30.

<sup>23</sup> Myra Bosman, Rachel Spronk, and Giseline Kuipers, ‘Verbalizing Sensations: Making Sense of Embodied Sexual Experiences,’ *Qualitative Sociology* 42 (2019): 420.

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 146.

objective; they are bodily experienced before they are named or analyzed.<sup>25</sup> But that does not mean they are not culturally informed or socially constructed.

### *The body as capital*

In addition to Bourdieu's theory of cultural, social and economical capital, Hakim coined the concept of erotic capital. Erotic capital is attractiveness in the broadest sense of the word that can be obtained and used by individuals in their life. Hakim argues women generally have more of it, because they have been trained to work harder for it, but are simultaneously denigrated when they decide to use their erotic capital to their personal advantage. An example of this is erotic labour, but also in other forms of feminized labour like secretarial work there is a living stigma of women using their sexuality as a means for success, like wearing short skirts or sleeping their way to the top.<sup>26</sup> Hakim argues feminist theory has unsuccessfully separated itself from this patriarchal double-edged sword, since it often argues that exploiting one own's sexuality is submitting to the patriarchy, and she encourages women to use their erotic capital for their own benefit, as one would use any other kind of capital.<sup>27</sup> Choosing to use one's erotic capital for personal gain often involves choices about how to present one's body and sexuality, or how to 'seduce' another the most effectively. Such an empowering sense of agency due to the conscious choice to deploy one's erotic capital can be recognized in experiences from erotic workers, as will be elaborated on below.

Indeed, erotic labour can be seen as an act of women's ownership; to use their erotic capital in order to benefit economically. One strategy that is often used in this process is creating a work character, turning the worker into an actor and the encounter into a performance; a game of pretending.<sup>28</sup> "Some sex workers manipulate their own body capital and emotional and sexual labour to create a marketable character that will appeal, and implicitly conform, to the demands and expectations of the male client."<sup>29</sup> In other words, an accommodating work persona will simply make the sex worker more money, by using the stereotypical image of feminine sexuality to manipulate "the desires of men who conform to the cultural ideal of masculine heterosexuality."<sup>30</sup> The work character does not just appeal and conform mentally (i.e., being interested, welcoming, friendly) but also physically, through presentation (make-up, clothing, lingerie) and physical behavior (moving in ways as described above, for example). Additionally, it is also a tool of privacy and control. Having a work persona enables the sex worker to more easily keep their work and private life separate, which is convenient since clients tend to want to know about the worker's personal life.<sup>31</sup> In that case, the work identity allows the worker to share 'personal' information without *actually* doing so.<sup>32</sup> In addition, "a manufactured identity can be understood as an example of a resistance strategy that enables sex workers to control the workplace."<sup>33</sup> By deliberately conforming to the client's expectations, the worker may feel like she is more in control than he is, a notion which

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<sup>25</sup> Csordas, 'Embodiment as a Paradigm for Anthropology,' 8-9.

<sup>26</sup> Lorraine Nencel, "Que Viva La Minifalda! Secretaries, Miniskirts and Daily Practices of Sexuality in the Public Sector in Lima,' *Gender, Work and Organization* 17, no. 1 (2010): 69-70.

<sup>27</sup> Catherine Hakim, 'Erotic Capital,' *European Sociological Review* 26, no 5 (2010): 511.

<sup>28</sup> Ślęzak, 'A Present and a Non-Present Body,' 42-43.

<sup>29</sup> Teela Sanders, "It's Just Acting': Sex Workers' Strategies for Capitalizing on Sexuality,' *Gender, Work and Organization* 12, no 4 (2005): 337.

<sup>30</sup> Sanders, "It's just acting," 338.

<sup>31</sup> Teela Sanders, 'Male Sexual Scripts: Intimacy, Sexuality and Pleasure in the Purchase of Commercial Sex,' *Sociology* 42, no 3 (2008): 407-409.

<sup>32</sup> Sanders, "It's just acting," 328-329.

<sup>33</sup> Sanders, "It's just acting," 337.



also came up repeatedly in interviews. Doing this by choosing to use one's own recourses, like the body or mental attitudes, may also boost one's general confidence.<sup>34</sup>

Finally, erotic labour can also be used as a medium of identity exploration. A research into gender and sexual identities among sex workers concludes that of 45 interviews, a significant amount (the article does not mention exactly how many) said they felt sex work was a place of identity freedom.<sup>35</sup> Some of the interviewees even initially turned to sex work in order to be able to express and explore their identity, saying they were unable to do this in the environment they came from: "We found that a high degree of variation of sexual and gender identities exists among men and trans sex workers. For many, sex work facilitated the expression and exploration of stigmatized aspects of their identities. In some cases, sex work was the only environment available in which to do this."<sup>36</sup> One's job is often related to one's identity formation. Given the physical nature of erotic work, I argue identity exploration in this case might also have consequences for one's physicality and embodiment, whether that means learning to move in new ways, or gaining insights into what happens mentally and physically when meeting different clients.<sup>37</sup> A final crucial conclusion the authors of this article draw is that their finding of sex work as a free and creative space of exploration "disrupts the narrative that sex work is monolithically oppressive, and sex work experiences are uniformly negative for sex workers."<sup>38</sup> Although the latter is not immediately related to my research question, it is a relevant confirmation of many erotic workers' reality that my research is located in.

## EROTIC WORK: EMBODIED REALITIES

In the following chapter I will present what I found during my interviews and observations. These findings are structured in three main sections; one for each sub-question. Per section I will discuss relevant themes that I distilled from the interviews, in order to answer the sub-question as clearly and fully as possible based on the collected data.

As noted before, the sub-questions I aim to answer in this thesis are: What role does the body play in erotic work? What does doing erotic work mean for one's bodily awareness? How is the body culturally interpreted by erotic workers in the context of their work? The first question aims to clarify what the body actually does during erotic work. The second question asks about bodily awareness. What I mean by that is the ability to 'neutrally' observe one's body; being aware of what it does and being able to make conscious decisions about this.<sup>39</sup> The third question asks about cultural interpretation; the subjective layer on top of bodily awareness, the 'why' behind the movements. How do I experience my body and what does that mean to me? Experience of the body in this case means one's own interpretation of what the body does and is, informed by a gendered cultural framework.

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<sup>34</sup> Ślęzak, 'A Present and a Non-Present Body,' 33.

<sup>35</sup> Premala Matthen et al., "'I walked into the industry for survival and came out of a closet': How gender and sexual identities shape sex work experiences among men, two spirit, and trans people in Vancouver," *Men Masc* 21, no 4 (2018): 494.

<sup>36</sup> Matthen et al., "'I walked into the industry for survival and came out of a closet,'" 10.

<sup>37</sup> Even though some may say sex work is not as physically intensive as it is often presented to be, still the client's and worker's bodies and embodied sexualities are often a central focus point of the encounter.

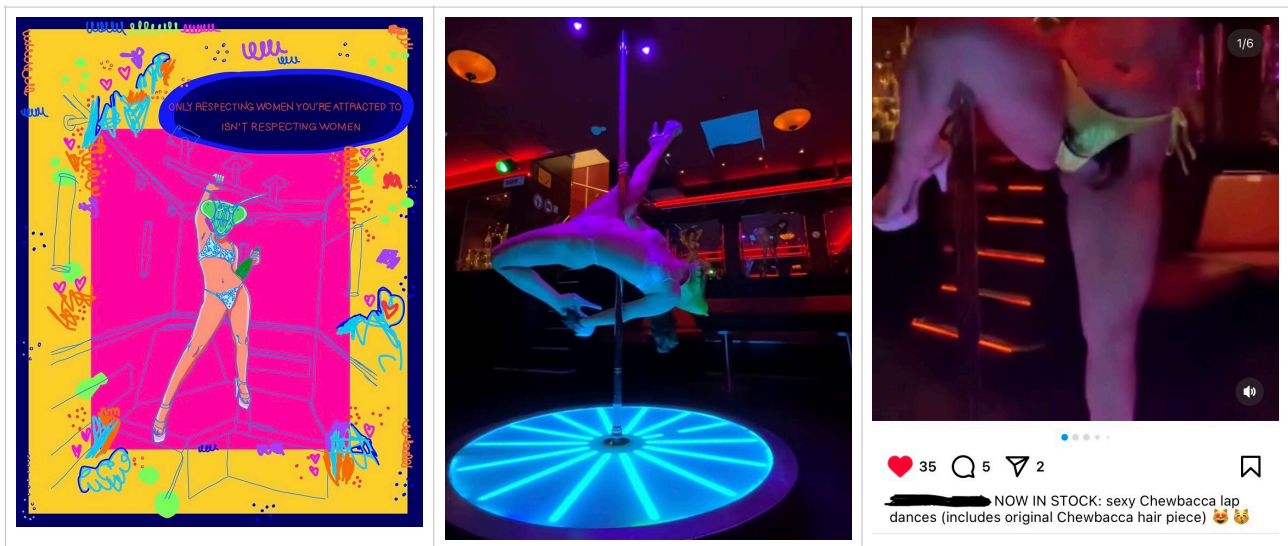
<sup>38</sup> Matthen et al., "'I walked into the industry for survival and came out of a closet,'" 11.

<sup>39</sup> 'Neutrally' is in quotation marks because I do not think fully neutral observations are possible; even meta reflections on culture cannot be separated from culture. I still chose to use the word to highlight the difference between bodily awareness and experience of the body as a gendered subject: observing vs. interpreting.

## *Role of the body in erotic work*

In the following section I will address the first sub-question: what role does the body play in erotic work? In order to be able to state anything about bodily awareness and body experience in relation to erotic work, we should first establish what the body actually does during erotic work - and what it does not do. Having an idea of the concrete reality of the body is a necessary first step moving forward.

In front of a stripclub I'm waiting for the pole dance class to begin. A few steps to my side a woman looking like she's in her mid-forties is smoking a cigarette. She starts waving to someone walking up from behind me. I look over and the woman walking towards us waves excitedly at me, too. She gives me a hug, introduces herself as Cate, and then gives the lady who, indeed, turned out to be the teacher a long hug, swaying from left to right a few times. As we enter the building, Cate asks her teacher, in broken Dutch, "Hoe gaat het met jou, lieffie?" to which she replies, "Just good to see you, my dear." We walk into the bar area, which has a typical outside-of-opening-hours strangeness to it. The regular lights are on, there is no smoke from smoke machines, no disco lights, the pole is glittering nakedly in the middle of the bare, unlit dance floor. "Welcome! This is it," Cate says. She asks me what exactly I am writing my thesis about. As I answer her, she starts to undress. We talk about normal conversation-starters like my studies and an interest in feminism we share while Cate strips down completely naked. She then puts on a tiny, glittery two-piece and a pair of high heels. Without bare legs, you don't stick to the pole, she clarifies. Later, when Cate and I are having a coffee, she tells me she had thought about first asking me if I was fine with her undressing in front of me, but decided to just do it, since that is how a normal class goes, and I was there to just observe after all. Cate starts warming up with some moves she knows well, and continues to practice moves she is still learning, the teacher shouting advice from the sideline. The two have a very comfortable, loving dynamic. I can tell they are like friends to each other, beyond their teacher-student relationship. There is a lot of mutual admiration and respect. At the end of the class, the teacher turns down the regular lights and turns on the club lights, and the lights in the dance floor. She turns up the music, a song Cate requested, points her phone towards the pole and starts recording. Cate starts dancing. The first few seconds just on the floor, around the pole, swaying her hips from left to right, but soon she climbs up. She's hanging horizontally, diagonally and upside down as the pole spins. Her toes are always actively pointed, continuing the line of her legs. Every part of her body moves elegantly and softly, skillfully hiding how much effort it takes to hang there, to curve and spiral, to make the body float. A few days later, when I have a look at her artist's instagram account that she gave me, I see the video she took during class. The whole page is filled with videos like that, teasing the viewer with what kind of sexiness can be expected in Cate's club. They are alternated with posts that send the message: we are not just your object of desire, this is our work, we will be respected and if you don't, we won't respect you either.





Her Instagram account's (see pictures above) attitude characterizes my conversation with Cate. "I am nice to everybody but if someone is shit, I will 100% match that energy," she says. At work, her body is a sight to be admired. During private lap dances that can be bought separately, in addition to the regular entrance fee for the club, the client is allowed to touch the dancer, but not everywhere. These rules are strict; if a client breaks them, the lap dance is over and if a client is being defiant about it, security will kick them out. In that process, the body can also switch quickly in its role. It can go from friendly and accommodating, compliant with what the customer wants, to harshly breaking with that by being assertive and defensive, and by explicitly claiming the control the dancer has over the situation. "The trick is to manipulate the men into thinking they are in control, but actually the women are."

Cate's Instagram-character also carries this duality: the body of an erotic dancer, but the face of a mantis. The mantis represents the strip club as a "matrix of polarities", as she calls it, where dichotomies like subject/object or empowerment/exploitation are challenged. Cate's own contribution to this list is seduction/destruction, derived from pleasure/pain. During the mantis' mating process the female eat the head of the male. But even after decapitation, a male can continue mating for hours. "These self-sacrificing males die in order for prolonged copulation to occur. Furthermore, his dying spasms increase the amount of sperm delivered. So the male's loss is his offspring's gain. How romantic to get seduced and destroyed."<sup>40</sup> This perfectly captures Cate's philosophy regarding her work.

Most other interviewees also expressed a sense of power through manipulation, although they did not all use this exact word. They said they can more or less follow a script, regardless of whether they worked in a strip club or as a full-service escort, giving the client exactly what he wants while remaining in charge. The concept of the script is also in literature a recurring theme, recognized as a tool for both maximal financial gain as well as a grounded sense of control over the present situation.<sup>41</sup> The predictability of the script provides control. Often more or less the same steps can be checked off, until the encounter is over.

<sup>40</sup> Quote taken from Cate's Instagram page.

<sup>41</sup> Sanders, 'Male Sexual Scripts,' 402.

The people doing full-service sex work also said they often have to use their bodies to comfort their client, and to make them feel at ease. Especially when working with female clients, it requires a lot of "emotional labour" to reach physical intimacy at all, even if that is just holding hands. Even if emotional labour is less strongly and explicitly provided with male clients, it is always an inherent part of the job, as confirmed by both interviews and literature.<sup>42</sup> With male clients, though, the script can be followed more strictly. Deviations do not happen often. Ann, Cate and Femke also mentioned they consciously use their bodies to flirt and build tension, for example by playing with their hair, making lots of eye contact, or accentuating hip and chest movements. Comparing how encounters with male and female clients differ from each other could be interesting and fruitful, however my research participants mostly had male clients and did not elaborate much more about female clients.

When it comes to sex, what the body does during it and how much, the answers differed. In my conversation with Dana I was only halfway through my introduction when she corrected my premise that sex work is body work. She said the amount of physical work can be limited to only a few minutes for a booking of an hour, and that the stereotypical idea that one must be strong and muscular to do sex work, is not at all true. Her current job in the erotic massage clinic, she said, is physically a lot more demanding. Femke, on the other hand, even though she also emphasized the talking-part of the job and compared sex workers to "a kind of psychologists" as Brents and Jackson also found, described the work as physically intensive and said she sometimes needs a rest day if she feels she has "done too much with her body" on a particular day.<sup>43</sup> When I asked her to clarify what it means when she has done too much with her body, she said it varied from simply too much penetration in a day, to a wrong angle, to the same position for too long, leaving her muscles sore and painful. Belle, too, said she invests in keeping her body flexible and in good condition because the work requires a lot of her body.

### *Erotic work and bodily awareness*

This thesis researches whether erotic work, being physical and physically diverse work, can increase the worker's bodily awareness. By that I mean the worker's awareness of how their body moves, what it does, and how it looks. The assumption is that erotic work might have this effect because of what it asks of the worker: every encounter is different and makes different requests of the worker and their body, expanding their physicality-palette.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, in this section I will analyze what my interviewees have said about bodily awareness, guided by the second sub-question: what does doing erotic work mean for one's bodily awareness? I will try to find out what it means to be physically aware to my research participants, when it happens, what they do with it, and what they observe in their bodies. I will not go too deeply into the cultural interpretation of these movements, for that is territory that belongs to the third sub-question.

All of the people I spoke with have become more aware of their body and how it moves since they started working in erotic labour. Some said so explicitly, others more implicitly. At the end of my conversation with Femke, when I asked her if she had any concluding comments, she said, "I think the most important thing is, it's just so fun how aware I have become that I use my body differently when I'm at work. I think that's very beautiful. And very positive, because I am increasingly using that in other facets of my life as well, more so than I already did before." Earlier we talked about how she, after working at her current workplace for some time, gained awareness of how she uses her body to do her job well. She tries to walk more elegantly, sway her hips, tense her glutes, push her

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<sup>42</sup> Barbara G. Brents, 'Gender, Emotional Labour, & Interactive Body Work: Negotiating Flesh and Fantasy in Sex Workers' Labor Practices,' In *Body/Sex/Work: Intimate, Embodied and Sexualized Labour*, ed. Carol Wolkowitz et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 80.

<sup>43</sup> Brents, 'Gender, Emotional Labour, & Interactive Body Work,' 84.

<sup>44</sup> Astrophe, 'The inherent artistry of sex workers.'

breasts forward, all to be able to do her job as successfully as possible. These are things she does consciously now, and that consciousness also extends to outside the workspace; when having a tough conversation with a superior, for example she will likely sit more wide-legged or with an elbow on the table for example. The same applies to different scenarios. "If I'm walking alone at night and I see scary people and it doesn't feel safe, then I channel my masculine energy, I walk differently, bigger. Often I then don't even get looked at." But the opposite also happens. When ordering a drink at a crowded bar, or when stopped by a police officer for not having lights on her bike, she smiles, plays with her hair, accentuates her breasts; strategic choices in order to reach a certain goal.

Others also mentioned their job has an effect on their physicality outside of work. Cate said she generally feels tougher and more confident because of her job, whether it is with public speaking or just about the way she sits. Belle said her work has made her more in touch with how much she enjoys her femininity, resulting in a generally more 'feminine' presentation, also in her private life. Ann mentioned she feels the need for anonymity and androgyny in their private life, because of the hyper-feminine role they play at work. She used to put on make-up or a dress for special occasions, but not anymore.

The people who did not refer as explicitly as Femke to their increased bodily awareness, also expressed in some way they feel more conscious control over how their bodies move and why. This was brought in connection with the idea of "entering work". All research participants mentioned that there is a kind of separation between themselves outside of work and themselves at work, to a greater or lesser degree. This is enhanced by their work "uniform" (lingerie, heels, make up) which was often quite different from their outside-of-work outfit, as well as by their slightly different work identity, who usually had a different name as well. In work-mode, while following the work-script as their work-characters, they also carry their bodies differently. However, Ann mentioned they did not consider this something sex work-specific, saying that "even if I would quit sex work, that aversion [to what it asks of her: compliance with beauty standards, behavioral rules, etc.] would not disappear. Or maybe only grow, that I'll be like, now I'm still expected to behave in these ways but now I'm not even getting paid well for it." Murphy also states that the need to perform as something or someone does not make erotic work deviant as a profession, arguing that all women need to perform their sexuality on a daily basis.<sup>45</sup> Similarly, Ann believes all work, also office work for example, can be stupid or humiliating at times. Sex work is no different in that regard. They also said that "sex work is just work in the service industry, in the end. If you're a waitress in a cafe you're also in that accommodating role. Then you also go like: (with a high-pitched, singsongy voice) 'heeeey, good afternoon, what can I do for you, it will be right there, there you go, thank you.'" Brents also writes about how work in the service industry relies heavily on emotional labour, stating that service workers deploy emotions and accommodating attitudes as commodities to successfully do their job.<sup>46</sup>

When asked if they feel they are acting or playing a role at work, all research participants gave a similar answer. First a convinced 'yes', followed by a more precise answer when asked what it means for them exactly. "It's a role, yes, but it's not fake. It's not like, I am not myself per se when I'm with a client, whatever that would mean, but it's kind of a part of my personality that comes to the forefront during work," Ann said. Belle, Eliza and Femke expressed the same experience. They are not fully their unfiltered selves, but they are not fully someone else, either. "[Workname] is a persona. She is basically [own name] without my vulnerabilities," Eliza said. Belle said: "I still see myself as myself, but I try to be my best version, and I can't conjure up qualities that I don't have. That's why I focus on the qualities that I do have, and amplify and enhance them along the way." Belle and Dana also said they feel the role is inherent to the work. "It's part of the service that is

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<sup>45</sup> Alexandra G. Murphy, 'The Dialectical Gaze: Exploring the Subject-Object Tension in the Performances of Women Who Strip,' *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 32, no. 3 (2003): 331.

<sup>46</sup> Brents, 'Gender, Emotional Labour, & Interactive Body Work,' 78.

being offered,” Belle said. A slightly altered comportment and physicality was considered an integral part of the role that is played at work, and something to actively orchestrate.

### *Cultural interpretation of the body*

Sexuality is something that is unavoidably and inherently entangled with cultural norms, regardless of whether one is having normative sex or not.<sup>47</sup> Even if one is not at all concerned with the politics of sex, gender normativity or feminism, then still these conceptual actors influence and shape the reality of one’s sexuality. After all, we can only do what we know, we only know what we get taught, and what we get taught is culturally determined.

The same is true for the body; it is a deeply cultural category. Over the last decades this notion has gained a lot in popularity, as scholars like Csordas, Butler, Bourdieu and Merleau-Ponty have written about the body as mirror or medium of culture. How we move, how we present it, what we do with it; it is all culturally informed rather than beyond culture, as is sometimes assumed.<sup>48</sup> Physical behavior is taught, and how we move our bodies is more culturally charged than often imagined. It is for these reasons that in this section I aim to analyze what my research participants have said about their bodies and what this actually meant for them in the cultural framework their work takes place in, or perhaps more importantly, the cultural framework *they* as people take place in. How do they interpret how the body moves? How do they make sense of what they observe in their bodies? I will do this guided by the final sub-question: how are the body’s movements culturally interpreted by erotic workers?

I want to come back to the quotes from Femke I referred to earlier. When she was talking about the examples of walking alone at night, having a tough conversation with a superior or trying to order a drink at a crowded bar, she categorized those behaviorisms as masculine or feminine. To walk and sit wide-legged is masculine, to push the chest forward and to touch your hair is feminine. Belle also repeated many times that her job made her feel very feminine and that she used her femininity in her work. This shows that not just theorists like Young, Bartky or Butler classify particular ways of moving and, in fact, ways of *being* as belonging to a certain gender, but my interviewees themselves as well. These ways of moving are in essence associated with, or rather reduced to social categories, no longer a neutral fact of its own.<sup>49</sup> Not only did my interviewees say they deploy their femininity during their work, they also said it was expected of them. Ann told me they have many clients that claim to want authenticity and realness, a phenomenon that is more widely recognized in erotic labour as Sanders finds, but when she actually shows up without make-up, they ask if she is sick.<sup>50</sup> “So I thought, you don’t want a look without makeup, you want a look with makeup that looks like I’m not wearing makeup. They don’t want authenticity, they want a version that seems authentic,” Ann said. This applies not only to how the body is presented, but also to how the body moves. Research participants mentioned they consciously draw attention to their femininity when with a client by caressing thighs, swaying hips, playing with their hair. Most people I spoke with do not usually do the ‘opposite’: purposefully moving in masculine ways to seduce a client. In BDSM-play, however, the domina does often assume a more ‘masculine’ role, meaning she might stand broader, be more dominant or bossy. Femke told me she does sometimes try to be more dominant during an encounter at work, and that every now and then, a man will soften up when she does that. She added that she thinks the masculine energy men walk into the

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<sup>47</sup> Spronk, ‘Sexuality and Subjectivity,’ 18.

<sup>48</sup> Deborah L. Tolman, Christin P. Bowman, and Breanne Fahs, ‘Sexuality and Embodiment,’ in *APA Handbook of Sexuality and Psychology: Vol. 1. Person-Based Approaches*, ed. Deborah L. Tolman & L. M. Diamond (American Psychological Association, 2014), 759.

<sup>49</sup> Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, (Routledge, 1993), 10.

<sup>50</sup> Sanders, ‘Male Sexual Scripts,’ 409.

meeting with is also a result of societal pressures. She said that these men often turn out to be curious to try anal stimulation, but are initially too scared to bring it up themselves. Dana also mentioned that most male clients who are interesting in anal stimulation are often very insecure about it, worrying that it will make them less of a man or even that it will make them gay.

Femke's comments show that breaking with the script does happen, and is sometimes also welcomed, even if it is not expected. The script remains in most cases the starting point. However, her comments also point to something that is not as often addressed in literature on erotic work: men have to follow a script as well. Femke mentioned that men often walk in with a lot of masculine energy, saying that she thinks they feel masculine when they "pick a pretty lady", and that for them it probably feels like the most "societally logical thing to do to assume that masculine role." Rosa also said that men walk in with the desire to feel masculine, and fulfilling that desire in turn makes her feel very feminine. They both said that clients assuming a very masculine role, pushes them almost automatically into a feminine role.

When talking more about these societal expectations regarding behavior and beauty standards, Cate, Eliza and Ann mentioned they think they are completely arbitrary. They spoke about them with disapproval. Ann said: "I think because of my work I realized even more what bullshit it actually is? Yes, it just really feels like putting on a costume for a role that everyone responds to so strongly. Like, okay, I am participating in a play from the sixteenth century and I put on a hoop skirt and suddenly everyone is like, 'oh my god, we're all having erections!' It's just so, so weird." Later she said: "I think a lot of sex workers feel like doing sex work is a kind of drag, even as a cis woman. It's the exaggerated performance of, not even of your own femininity, but of the concept of femininity." About giving private lap dances Cate said: "It's a performance, you're always performing the feminine part of sex, the receptive parts." About her dancing she said: "I make movement with my hands to draw attention to my gender, like caress my hips or thighs. Drawing attention to the parts that make you a woman."

Their phrasing ("drawing attention to my femininity", rather than "drawing attention to my chest or hips") suggests that these movements are not just movements alone; they represent something else, and they are deployed as such. This signifies how culturally charged the body is, and to how many invisible layers of interpretation and judgement it is subjected to. In one breath, the most subtle movements or choices are labeled as belonging to particular cultural categories. Regardless of whether one celebrates that fact, feels indifferent or opposes it, it is experienced by everyone. "The man-woman divide is something that we cannot get rid of, it's just how the world is," according to Belle.

These reflections connect back to the anonymous patriarchal force, as Bartky described it, that reaches further than just external presentation and beauty standards. Also behavior, in the broadest sense of the word (from how one sits to emotion regulation), is gendered and falls subject to this 'force'. It raises the question: to what extent is the worker actually in control? If having to follow the script is such a strict rule that is often adhered to, how much freedom do either client or worker have to do as they please? Indeed, if the (male) client's role is scripted too, then he has no true control either. Client and worker may trick each other into thinking the other is in control while feeling they are in control themselves, but the experience of control is always a limited kind of control. Personal control can only reach as far as 'the system' or 'the patriarchy' allows it. As much as the script offers the worker control and security, it also constrains and limits her, since some behaviorisms are (usually) just not allowed.<sup>51</sup> However, this condition certainly does not apply exclusively to erotic labour. In other jobs as well, and arguably even in all daily lived experiences, people are expected, and indeed almost forced to act in certain ways and not in others, ways that in part can be traced back to their gender and sexuality.<sup>52</sup> As noted before, working in the service

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<sup>51</sup> Murphy, 'The Dialectical Gaze,' 310.

<sup>52</sup> Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 23.  
Murphy, 'The Dialectical Gaze,' 330.



industry generally makes an appeal to women's stereotypically accommodating and nurturing role, and also people working in other kinds of feminized labour like secretaries or stewardesses 'have to' comply with a certain image of femininity that is expected of them.<sup>53</sup> In that sense, the work is a constant negotiation of power, where breaking with or even deliberately sticking to the script is an act of agency that in turn opens up opportunities for resistance.<sup>54</sup> Cate, for example, mentioned she sometimes makes a man bend over, stands behind him and asks his friends, "How many babies shall I give him?" To this she added that "guys are so easy", and that friends like the humiliation. These comments add some much needed nuance to the idea that everything is strictly scripted according to what is and is not allowed, and shows how complex this matrix is to navigate.

To conclude this chapter, I would like to add a side note to this last paragraph. Even though there may be some truth to the idea that in work and everyday life people, especially women, are expected to behave and present themselves in certain ways, the question of 'who or what is actually in control?' is not always a fair one. This thesis concerns itself with lived experiences after all, and some of the people I spoke with experience a strong sense of control. They feel very empowered by their own actions, by how they consciously choose to interact with a client and how they use their body in that process. Some said they have become more confident because of their work. To invalidate their feelings of control does not do justice to my research participants nor does it honor their stories as they shared them with me.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has applied concepts and arguments from feminist theory and phenomenology to the concrete case study of erotic labour. It has aimed to answer the following research question: how does doing erotic labour influence the worker's bodily awareness and what does that mean for their experience of their body as a gendered subject? Through six in-depth interviews with erotic workers in diverse branches of the industry, this research has shown that erotic work causes an increased awareness of the body: how it moves, how it is perceived, and how it can be used intentionally. Not only did research participants show a heightened sense of bodily awareness but in most cases also a clear understanding of the cultural scripts that inform and constrain their movements, behavior and presentation.

Opinions regarding what the work requires from them physically and how they feel about this differed, but in all cases it was clear the worker had become more aware of how they move their body while working and why. In most cases this awareness also extended to their non-working life. One person expressed she sometimes strategically uses those skills, for example when ordering a drink at a crowded bar or when walking alone at night. For others the bodily awareness they gained at work had consequences for their general presentation in their private life, for example wanting to look more androgynous, or being more in touch with one's femininity. As this makes evident, how increased bodily awareness manifests can differ greatly, but it was always present.

One key strategy that is often applied in erotic labour is the work-character; assuming a role and treating an encounter as a (partial) performance. All of my interviewees felt they play a role at work, to a greater or lesser extent, and this notion is also widely recognized by scholarly literature. A subtle difference between my findings and literature is the degree to which the encounter is an act. In literature it is often proposed that people's work-character differs greatly from who they are outside of work, however my interviewees expressed it is rather a partial role. They are still mostly themselves at work, but foreground certain characteristics and tone down others.

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<sup>53</sup> Brents, 'Gender, Emotional Labour, & Interactive Body Work,' 78.  
Murphy, 'The Dialectical Gaze,' 309.

<sup>54</sup> Murphy, 'The Dialectical Gaze,' 321.



The role that is played is a caricature of the stereotypical woman, an exaggerated performance of the concept of femininity. This is done both emotionally (smiling more, being interested and accommodating, etc.) as well as physically (swaying hips, playing with one's hair, arching the back, etc.). The 'doing' of the role is done deliberately; it is a decision to behave in these ways. It helps the worker satisfy the client, make profit and keep control over the encounter. However, it is in many cases also expected of her. This connects to the cultural scripts that inform and shape this role. An encounter is often a performance of expected kinds of feminine and masculine (hetero-)sexualities. Through interaction they bring this out in each other. As long as the script is followed, the encounter is more or less predictable, giving the worker a sense power and control. However, through the same processes, these scripts and expectations can also be renegotiated. As my findings show, sometimes the worker chooses to break the script, which usually has positive results. In order to further examine the lived reality of such cultural scripts, further research would be required. A future study could for example involve also the client's perspective on the encounter, or it could aim for more representative results by working with a more homogenous group of research participants.

As became clear from the interviews, the body and what it does can hardly be separated from the gendered cultural framework in which it is situated. Observing and interpreting was usually a singular action, without a clear separation between what the body does and what that means or represents. Several research participants said they sway their hips, not for a reason that ultimately has to do with the hips, but because the hips (among other things) represent femininity: the (assumed) desired product in this setting. This also shows how tightly entangled movement and gender are. Certain positions, presentations and (physical) behaviors are automatically classified as belonging to certain cultural categories, i.e., masculine or feminine, as was shown by both literature and interviews.

By studying physical realities as experienced by various kinds of erotic workers, this thesis aimed to analyze what effect their work has on their bodily awareness and their cultural interpretation of the body as a gendered subject. As can be concluded from my findings, doing erotic labour increases, and in fact almost necessitates, bodily awareness, because of the particular physicality this is often associated with an erotic labour setting. Additionally, in many cases the work highlighted for the worker how culturally gendered physicality can be. The research shows how deeply embedded gender norms are in the cultural framework it was conducted in. In the context of my thesis, the erotic workplace emerges as a complex matrix where sexuality, embodied knowledge, expectation and liberation meet. It is a meaningful site of mutual exploration of the self where norms and stereotypes are (re)negotiated, and where all these processes and concepts are allowed to manifest physically, in the interplay between bodies, using the body as the very matter of culture and identity.

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## APPENDIX - CODEBOOK

Code	Inductive/ deductive	Quotes	Interviewee
Bodily awareness	Deductive	[Work name] moves differently from me	Cate
		Ik merk wel dat ik inderdaad probeer wat galanter te lopen, dus iets meer met mijn heupen bewegen, iets meer mijn borst vooruit.	Femke
		Ik merk dat ik soms denk, ik ben nu hier naartoe onderweg, of ik zit nu in deze mindset, en ik merk dat ik me wat lekkerder voel, of dat ik wat meer vrouwelijker beweeg. Vooral dat bewustzijn is inderdaad wat gegroeid.	Femke
		Op een gegeven moment ging ik bellen voor een heel vervelend met mijn baas, en toen ging ik er eerst heel deftig bijzitten, en toen dacht ik, nee, zo voel ik me echt helemaal niet. En toen ben ik met m'n benen wijd gaan zitten, en met m'n elleboog zo, en toen ben ik zo aan de telefoon gaan zitten en toen dacht ik, ja, dit voelt echt een stuk meer empowering.	Femke
		Op het moment dat ik 's nachts op staat loop en ik zie enge figuren en ik ben daar alleen en het voelt echt niet veilig. Dan ga ik breed lopen, groot lopen, probeer ik heel erg in die mannelijke energie te komen.	Femke
		Ik ben meer vrouwelijk gaan bewegen sinds ik dit werk doe, anders lopen, zitten, kleden, meer rechtop en met meer zelfvertrouwen.	Belle
		Ja, dan beweeg ik iets sexier, iets meer met je heupen zwaaien. Bepaalde poses die ik aannam, om je schoenen uit te doen bijvoorbeeld.	Dana
Role/acting	Deductive	Stage name and mask help to get in the role	Cate
		Ik merk ook dat ik die naam uitspreek, mijn werknaam, en dat voelt gewoon niet echt.	Femke
		Ik ben eigenlijk continu bezig om zo dicht mogelijk bij de waarheid te blijven, want dan kom ik zo geloofwaardig en betrouwbaar mogelijk over.	Femke
		Ik draag op m'n werk ook altijd heel veel make up, dat doe ik normaal eigenlijk helemaal niet. Dat voelt dus ook wel een beetje alsof ik een masker op kan zetten om mezelf te beschermen.	Femke
		Het is een soort <i>improv theatre</i> eigenlijk. De klant zegt iets, en je probeert ook eigenlijk altijd met een 'yes, and' te antwoorden en daarop voort te bouwen.	Ann
		Ik zie het inderdaad als een rol, maar die rol is niet per se fake. Dus het is niet, niet echt mijn persona, ik ben niet per se mezelf bij een klant, wat dat dan ook betekent, maar ik denk dat het een soort, deel-persoonlijkheid is die dan tijdens m'n werk even de overhand neemt.	Ann
		Je stapt in een rol, op m'n werk draag ik een uniform. Het contrast is groot, ik draag normaal bergschoenen en meer outdoorsy kleren.	Dana
		Zeker weten dat er een rol wordt aangenomen, dat is namelijk onderdeel van de dienst die aangeboden wordt. Vandaar ook de andere naam.	Belle
		Alleen het stomme is, voor mij voelt dat niet als acteren, het voelt als larpen. Dus ik doe ook <i>live-action roleplaying</i> , dat snap ik wel. Maar dat is een soort van, want dan wordt het namelijk niet een vooraf uitgedacht stukje acteren. Het is een improvisatietheater zonder publiek.	Eliza

Code	Inductive/ deductive	Quotes	Interviewee
Beauty standards	Deductive	They say you have to be skinny but you really don't. The bottomline is, it's about how you carry yourself, that's what makes you attractive.	Cate
		Als ik dan echt eens een keer geen make-up op doe, dan vragen ze ook meteen van, oh, ben je ziek?	Ann
		Ook wanneer ik een keer een beetje aangekomen was, dan nog merkte ik dat het weinig uitmaakte, dat het eigenlijk hoe je bent veel belangrijker is, dat dat je aantrekkelijk maakt	Dana
		Ik heb geleerd make-up te doen voor mijn werk, dat deed ik eigenlijk nooit. Wat dat betreft had ik me niet zo geconformeerd aan dat schoonheidsideaal. Dat ben ik wel gaan integreren.	Dana
		Lingerie maaktje vrouwelijk, ik doe m'n nagels mooi. Ik draag make-up die mijn features versterken. Lang haar. Dingen die mij definiëren als vrouw.	Belle
		Schoonheidsidealen zijn heel erg maatschappelijke programmering. Die zijn er heel hard ingestampt, dat is heel toxisch.	Eliza
Gender norms	Deductive	Strip club is a matrix of polarities	Cate
		Als zij zich mannelijk opstellen, duwt dat mij in een vrouwelijke rol.	Femke
		It's a renegotiation of stereotypes. You shouldn't change the label, then you keep the stereotype in place. If I'm a woman who likes cars, and therefore a man, then that reaffirms the stereotypes more than if I can just be a woman who likes cars.	Cate
		I am destroying a lot of patriarchal beliefs because I am not the norm, I was always very boyish.	Cate
		Vroeger als ik een feestje had dan deed ik nog wel eens make-up op, of vond ik het leuk om hakken en een jurkje aan te trekken. Dat deed ik ook niet per se heel vaak, maar nu is daar gewoon een soort weerzin tegen gekomen.	Ann
		Ik denk dat de gepassioneerde afkeer meer met het patriërchaat en het kapitalisme te maken heeft en niet per se met sekswerk. En daarom denk ik dus ook dat ik wel met sekswerk kan stoppen, maar dat die weerzin dan niet per se zal verdwijnen.	Ann
		De man/vrouw-scheiding is iets waar we niet vanaf komen, zo is de wereld gewoon.	Belle
		Mannen willen zich man voelen zoals ik mij vrouwelijk voel, dat is mijn taak.	Belle
		Ik merk dat ik m'n werk het makkelijkste kan uitvoeren met mannen als klanten. Omdat ik m'n hele leven eigenlijk op mannen gericht ben, en heb geleerd m'n hele leven hoe ik ermee moet flirten, dat ik een beetje weet wat ze willen. Dus dat maakt het voor mij eigenlijk het makkelijkste omdat het natuurlijk voelt. Maar ik ben er ook twee jaar geleden dat ik biseksueel ben, en dat ik het met vrouwen eigenlijk net zo leuk vind, maar wel veel moeilijker omdat ik dat nooit geleerd heb.	Femke
Gender and identity	Deductive	It's what you make of it. There are some parts of 'woman' that I fit, others that I don't. It's a renegotiation of stereotypes.	Cate
		Vrouwelijkheid is een gevoel, gedefinieerd door hoe een man een vrouw ziet.	Belle
		Ik denk dat je vaak door het werk ook wel anders gaat nadenken over gender-identiteit. De meeste mensen komen toch wel, ja, merken dus wat een performance het eigenlijk is, het is gewoon een gender-performance.	Ann

Code	Inductive/ deductive	Quotes	Interviewee
Escort agency management	Inductive	Ik ben toen ook al snel voor escortbureaus gaan werken waar ik ook klanten zag die man waren. Ik heb bij veel verschillende gezeten en daar ook niet heel fijne ervaringen gehad. De klanten waren over het algemeen prima, maar die escortbureaus die waren gewoon allemaal niet heel tof.	Ann
		En daarna kreeg ik ruzie met die baas, omdat ik gewoon als product werd behandeld en niet als mens. Hij loog tegen me, hij maakte mijn werk super moeilijk terwijl ik voor hem werkte, dus toen dacht ik, nou dit is het niet, hier ga ik mee stoppen.	Femke
Empowering/confidence	Inductive	Since I started working I got more confident in all facets of life, not in a gendered way. Like public speaking, but also sitting. If you have problem with the way I sit that's your problem. I got way tougher, because the club is tough.	Cate
		Ik vind het echt een heel tof nummer, het straalt super veel power uit. En de reden dat het me aan mijn werk doet denken is omdat, eigenlijk al mijn klanten verliezen heel erg hun status als ze bij mij binnenkomen. Het maakt echt helemaal niet meer uit of het de koning is, ik heb al beroemde rappers voor mijn neus gehad, beroemde sporters... Elke man uiteindelijk komt daar wel een keer. Je komt gewoon omdat je seks wil.	Femke
		Het is super empowering, ik hoor op een degelijke basis hoe aantrekkelijk ik ben. Ik heb mijn lichaam moeten leren accepteren, mijn werk helpt daarbij.	Belle
		Ik ben een stuk minder onzeker geworden. Ik had bijvoorbeeld een beetje pleinvrees. Maar het is zover op de achtergrond gekomen. Ook onzekerheid over mijn lichaam is ook verdwenen. Ik heb zoveel gezien hoe mannen naar me keken, nou, ik heb echt geen onzekerheid meer.	Dana
		Dat is een beetje gerelateerd aan dat veel mensen zeggen, dat ze er een groter zelfvertrouwen van krijgen. Omdat eigenlijk, ja, hoe je lichaam er ook uit ziet, mensen gaan gewoon heel goed op je.	Eliza
		Zij is <i>basically</i> [eigen naam] zonder mijn kwetsbaarheden.	Eliza
Feminist activism	Inductive	Ik ben begonnen bij een lesbisch escortbureau. (...) En het voelde ook beetje als, ja, als een soort activistisch werk, omdat het gewoon iets was wat alleen maar gericht was op seksualiteit voor vrouwen en er is bijna niets in de wereld waar dat voor geldt.	Ann
Script	Inductive	Hetero flirting is like a script	Cate
		Maar dat script is gewoon, ik kom naar een hotel, ik ontvang m'n geld, er word me wat te drinken aangeboden, we gaan op een bank of op de rand van het bed zitten, we praten dus inderdaad een halfuurtje, en dan wordt er een <i>move</i> gemaakt, gaan we seks te hebben.	Ann
		Mannen gaan denk ik ook veel over hun eigen grenzen heen, dat ze gewoon niet verbonden zijn met hun lichaam, of stoer proberen te doen, maar ja, het resultaat is wel dat je dus soms meer mechanische seks hebt. En soms is dat voor mij ook makkelijker. Van, oké, je gaat gewoon meer door de <i>motions</i> van het toneelstuk, van het script heen.	Ann
Dissociation	Inductive	When people touch me I zone out. It's like having calluses all over the body, I don't really dissociate but I don't really feel it anymore.	Cate
Control	Inductive	In the club we're not actually feminine, we're assertive, defensive, calculative. I'm a sexy lady in disguise but actually I'm a man that tells you what to do.	Cate
		Het is een soort manipulatief spelletje. Op zo'n manier communiceren dat je iemand voorschotelt wat hij wil horen.	Belle

Code	Inductive/ deductive	Quotes	Interviewee
		Ik bepaal alles. Niemand vertelt mij wat er gebeurt.	Belle
		Ik merkte dat bij mensen thuiskomen als escort, je komt in iemands huis, dus die persoon voelt zich meer geautoriseerd om dingen, ja, meer vrijheid om meer je grenzen op te zoeken. En ik dacht, laat ik ook eens een keer thuis gaan ontvangen, kijken hoe dat gaat. En daarin merkte ik dat mensen veel respectvoller waren, dat als ze op bezoek komen bij je ze zich heel anders gedragen.	Dana
Physical flirting	Inductive	Movements that draw attention to the parts that make me a woman, like caressing my hips and thighs	Cate
		Ik ben heel veel aan het lachen, maak heel veel oogcontact. Denk dat m'n stem misschien iets hoger klinkt. Of ik zit nog eens aan mijn haar.	Ann
		Het inzetten van je vrouwelijkheid	Belle
Balance between conforming to beauty standards and sticking to personal preferences	Inductive	Because of work I shave my armpits and pubic hair. Some things I modify, some things I don't. I don't shave my legs.	Cate
		Ja, precies. En hoe ver wil je daarvoor gaan. Want ik kan m'n lichaamshaar scheren, wat ik doe, met m'n oksels en m'n benen, maar ik scheer bijvoorbeeld mijn schaamhaar niet, en dat voelt ook heel belangrijk voor me om dat niet te doen.	Ann
Natural make up look	Inductive	Guys are so easy. They want a make up look that looks natural.	Cate
		Dat ik denk, je wil niet een look zonder make-up, je wil een look met make-up die eruit ziet alsof ik geen make-up draag.	Ann
		Me mooi maken van tevoren, ik doe meestal een natuurlijk make-up look.	Belle
		Toen ik begon aan sekswerk was ik heel bang dat ik veel harder mn best moest gaan doen, inderdaad de make-up heel belangrijk was. Nu doe ik iets minder make-up op.	Femke
		Ik doe make-up echt minimaal. Ik kan in twee minuten klaar zijn.	Dana
Human/people work	Inductive	Wat ik er ook ontzettend mooi aan vind is dat er heel veel verschillende mensen bij mij binnenstappen, van toeristen tot zakenmannen tot mensen die maar heel weinig te besteden hebben maar zichzelf toch een keer een pleziertje gunnen. Het is zo'n vrijblijvende verhouding. Ik heb wel een paar encounters gehad met wie ik een uur lang alleen maar heb zitten praten. Dat was zo mooi	Femke
Female clients	Inductive	Met vrouwen ben je meer mentaal bezig, met mannen meer fysiek.	Belle
		Ik heb wel eens vrouwelijke klanten gehad waarbij ik gewoon een uur bezig was om ze genoeg op hun gemak te stellen om alleen maar hun hand vast te houden. Bij mannen heb ik dat nooit meegemaakt. Maar dat script is dus met vrouwen soms wat lastiger, omdat ik dan alleen al twee uur bezig met die intimiteit wat meer opzoeken.	Ann
Sex work as normal work	Inductive	Het is en blijft werk, hoor. Dat heb ik altijd als werk gezien. Dat is voor mij niet te verwarren met plezier. Dat is echt een andere categorie.	Dana
		Maar goed, ik denk dat dat voor veel mensen geldt. Ik bedoel, als je op een kantoor werkt, denk ik dat ook heel veel mensen zich niet vrij voelen om zich zo te kleden als ze zouden willen.	Ann
		Vergeleken met heel veel andere banen waar al die elementen ook in zitten, wat denk ik het meeste werk wel is, ook als je op een kantoor bent kun je soms ongelooflijk vernederd voelen door je baas of collega's of de klanten die je hebt. Maar ik word tenminste wel hier heel goed voor betaald.	Ann
		De negatieve kanten horen er ook gewoon bij, je doet het voor de 95% die wel leuk is.	Belle