Bodies in a Frame: Black British, Working Class, Teenage Femininity and the Role of the Dance Class

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Abstract

Historically the working class, black, female body has been defined by its sexuality and socially constructed as an object for heterosexual consumption; this article is concerned with how this manifests itself for young British women in educational settings today. I will argue that this historical bodily construction has been compounded for young women in this context by a contemporary popular culture which frames, glamorises and hetero-sexualises black female bodies. Drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, I will suggest that girls who perform a Black British, working-class femininity play a central role in their own construction as hetero-sexualised and consequently passive bodies, through an internalisation of and performance for a heterosexual 'gaze' within various spaces of the urban, post-16 college. This article ultimately focuses, however, on the potential for resistance. Based on research conducted into the experiences of four dance students at an inner London post-16 college, I will explore the dance class as a potential space for resisting the debilitating heterosexual gaze enacted within the public spaces of the college. I will argue that the dance class can be a space where the student can reconstruct and reproduce her own body in a way that grants it agency, rather than objectifying it within a metaphorical frame.

Keywords: *Body, Teenage, Femininity, Black, Working Class, Glamour, Hetero-Sexualisation, Gaze, Dance, Agency*

Introduction

'when you're in dance class you have a completely different frame'

1.1 In discussing the image of 'the young woman' within contemporary Britain, Angela McRobbie states that '[she] comes to be widely understood as ... an active and aspirational subject of the education system, and embodies the success of the new meritocratic values which New Labour have sought [and which the Coalition continue] to implement in schools' (2009: 73). McRobbie's discussion centres around how this discourse serves to silence 'feminist and anti-racist politics' (2009: 70); I would agree, in that the image of an 'active and aspirational subject' masks situations of inequality that still remain for young women within the British education system, and will discuss this in relation to young women who participate in the performance of a Black British, working-class, teenage femininity (BBWCT femininity hereafter). Here, I will examine a particular social process that hinders these young women from becoming this 'active ... subject' within their educational institutions: namely the 'visibility' (Foucault 1979: 202) of bodies marked by a BBWCT femininity, and the implications of this for young women's daily experiences of the education system.

1.2 The notion of the visibility of black women's bodies in Western media and art has been explored by a number of researchers; for example, bell hooks discusses how black women's bodies have historically been defined by their perceived (hetero)sexuality and socially constructed as objects for heterosexual consumption within the context of both a white and black male gaze (1994, 1997, 2001). Contextualising this further, Brooks and Hébert (2006) present a comprehensive review of research into media representation of black women, and identify three primary research interests within this context: 'the objectification of black women's bodies for the voyeuristic pleasure of men (Hill Collins 2004; hooks 1994; Jones 1994); the impact of sexual representation and ideal Westernized body images on young black

females [sic] (Perry 2003); and black female sexuality as a symbol of agency (Gaunt 1995; Hill Collins 2004; Rose 1994)' (2006: 300). Here, I anticipate both McRobbie (2009: 87) and Hammonds (1999: 94) who discuss how common responses to such bodily constructions on the part of black women have been strategies of literal and bodily silence – self-preserving acts of retreat that can result in a passivity and a paradoxical state of invisibility (of the active subject) within hypervisibility (of the objectified body). Further research suggests that this objectification of black women's bodies may be compounded for black working-class women, with McRobbie (1991) and Archer et al. (2010) discussing the ways in which working-class women have also been historically valued as hetero-sexualised bodies, this time with a defined domestic and reproductive purpose.

1.3 The hetero-sexualisation and visibility of young women's bodies – and their consequences – are things I seek to explore here within one specific research context: namely, the inner-London post-16 college. I argue that a version of this reductive bodily construction is present, perpetuated but also contested within the various spaces of the college that forms the basis for this study. In this context, I will look in particular at the informal but public spaces of the college that are traversed and used by students when outside of lessons, particularly the corridor. I will argue, drawing on the work of Judith Butler and Michel Foucault, that the student who performs a BBWCT femininity plays a central role in her own construction as a hetero-sexualised body through an acute awareness of and, at times, internalisation of a heterosexual 'gaze' (Foucault 1979; Paechter 1998) resulting in a performance of classed, racialised gender. Central to this argument is the idea that such a bodily construction within a space designed for various forms of production – in this case the college – can serve to limit the agency of young women who participate in it.

1.4 The notion of young women's agency is important to briefly delineate at this point. Brooks' and Hébert's third identified research interest, 'black female sexuality as a symbol of agency', points towards a key position that I seek to take: that while the notion of the entirely empowered neoliberal subject is inappropriate for describing the experiences of my young participants, neither will it do to conceive of them as passive victims of sexist, classist and racist social structures. These young women do themselves act within and against the discourses that construct them and their bodies as hetero-sexualised objects. Jessica Ringrose discusses the notion of agency in a similar context, concluding that 'what is needed is an approach that ... maps how power operates in the social but also maps how subjects negotiate these conditions and how the process of relational engagement transforms subjects and potentially shifts social discourses too' (2013: 69). It is the potential for resistance therefore – acts of 'negotiation' and 'transformation' – that is my ultimate concern. I will explore specifically whether the all-female, Advanced Level Dance class could act as a potential space for resisting the shaping (and debilitating) heterosexual gaze enacted within the public spaces of the college.

Methodology

2.1 This study draws on the experiences of four young women to whom I taught Advanced Level Dance at a post-16 inner-London college between September 2009 and July 2010. This college is situated in an economically deprived inner-London borough and the student demographic comprises mainly ethnic-minority groups, with Black British African and Black British Caribbean being the two dominant groups. All four young women were 17 years-old at the time of interview, all financially qualified to receive Educational Maintenance Allowance (arguably an economic marker of the working class) and all explicitly identified as heterosexual. Their names as they appear here are pseudonyms: Michelle identified as Black British Caribbean, Egypt and Tonya identified as Black British African and Demi identified as White British and Greek. I have decided to include Demi's experiences and thoughts in this investigation despite her European family origins for two reasons: firstly, in terms of her personal style and social life, Demi participated in the performance of a non-white femininity, particularly in relation to her friendship group and involvement with the Latin American and Black British clubbing scenes, where she performed as a dancer; secondly, her words are illuminating and at one point, provide an interesting contrast. There were two students from the course who did not participate in the interview session: Maya (who could not attend due to an appointment) and Sheena (who did not respond to my invitation to participate).

2.2 As detailed above, there were six students on this course and they took classes in this subject five times a week, with lessons shared between myself and another female teacher. The classes were a combination of dance theory and practice, and because of the physical and creative nature of the subject, they bred a sense of intimacy between its members. Students were encouraged to experiment with and develop dance styles with which they were already familiar, but the technique classes they received comprised largely 'contemporary' dance styles^[1]. Students also spent time outside of class in the dance studio choreographing and rehearsing, and as a result became quite close as a group. I was the personal tutor to the young women interviewed here, monitoring their progress through one-to-one meetings with them and sometimes their parents. In light of these contexts, I got to know them well. This of course had implications for the research context and approach.

2.3 I interviewed Tonya, Michelle, Egypt and Demi about their experiences of their first year at college in March 2011, six months into their second year of study. At the time of interview, I was no longer teaching at the college. I had informed the students via email that I was completing a Masters in Education and wanted to interview them about their experiences during the A Level Dance Course. I conducted the interview in the form of an informal group discussion, on a weekday in a quiet coffee shop near their college. When the young women arrived, I told them the general topic I was exploring (their experiences at college and of A Level Dance) and that I only had a couple of questions planned because I was hoping we could have a more open discussion. A central principle of my research approach here was that their voices and experiences should form the starting point and basis of exploration, in a way that is consistent with the principles of feminist action research, where 'those who are directly affected by the research problem at hand must participate in the research process, thus democratizing or recovering the power of

experts' (Gaventa & Cornwall 2006: 75). By explicitly inviting the young women to participate in a research project, having them guide the discussion and having it take place in a relatively neutral location (where they were not classed primarily as students), I hoped would lay the foundation for these young women's 'experiences and knowledges [having] epistemic authority' (Skeggs 1997: 38).

2.4 In her discussion of feminist action research, Griffiths highlights the dialogic character of 'voice', and I aimed to achieve such a 'dialogical process' (1998: 124) within the talk, in which I did not aim to 'give a voice'^[2] to the participants, nor guide them towards a particular discourse, but aimed to create a space in which participants could raise and reflect upon issues that were important to them. Of course, there were particular dynamics present within the group which influenced the communication that took place within it. First was my position as the young women's (former) teacher who had come to know them well and gain their trust: a key area of concern within this approach was that I did not exploit the participants' willingness to talk, leading them to being 'roped into the Foucauldian confessional and thereby [be] re-colonised' by me as the researcher (Usher 2000: 35) – or, just as problematic, that they would feel the need to 'tell me what I wanted to hear'. To reduce this risk, I made it clear before we started that I wasn't here as their dance teacher, but to seek their help with my research and so I was interested in their honest opinions, but nor should they feel the need to tell me anything if they felt uncomfortable. Another dynamic to be aware of here was the prime social position that Tonya and Michelle held in the group (see later). What was interesting (and perhaps lucky) here was that there ended up being two discussion sessions: Demi was late to meet us, and so Egypt decided to stay on after Tonya and Michelle had left to continue the discussion. I believe that this 'second interview' led to more open contributions from Egypt.

2.5 Before the interview, I was interested in how the dance class came to be a positive space for these young women, and what they experienced as negative in the college. In analysing the data, it became clear that ideas about fashion and physical appearance affected almost all their ideas about both these initial research questions. Thus, I will now define what I refer to here as the performance of a BBWCT femininity: an identity performance rooted in 'glamour' as a stylistic feature.

The body as construct and a Black British, working-class, teenage femininity

3.1 In *Discipline and Punish* (1979) Foucault describes a 'material' process through which a body becomes an object of knowledge, through inscribing 'systems of signs and representations' upon its surface (128). The body becomes inscribed with norms that are read, then policed and enforced via a 'normalizing judgement' (177). Because the body has been constructed in this manner it becomes a 'docile body'; one that, through being 'analysable' can be 'subjected, used, transformed and improved' (136) against those norms which construct it. This 'normalizing judgement' can be read in terms of Butler's 'heterosexual matrix' (1990: 208) which refers to the set of fixed gender conditions, or norms, against which bodies are rendered 'intelligible'. For Butler, in order for a body to 'make sense' as something that is properly 'humanized' (or socialised) (2010: 484), it needs to map onto the culturally intelligible norms prescribed by the heterosexual matrix, which insist that it is either recognisably heterosexually female (through a perceivable femininity) or heterosexually male (through a perceivable masculinity). Butler emphasises that the consequences for an unintelligible body that appears/presents itself as outside of this matrix are 'punitive' (484). This leads to a system of 'compulsory heterosexuality' in which the individual takes it upon themselves to 'perform' a gender role that coheres with the norms set by the heterosexual matrix.

3.2 A particular gender performance was prevalent among female students at the college, including my participants, which I refer to as Black British, working-class, teenage femininity: a performance that rendered the young woman's body 'intelligible' within this particular raced, classed and aged context. This performance in fact went beyond official markers of ethnicity, class, age and sexuality (as noted earlier) and can be recognised by the adoption of a particular style – a system of signs and representations – especially of appearance, but also extending to dialect and accent, and tastes in music, food and boys. I will focus on the way many young women in the college styled their appearance – the most visible marker of their identity and that which dominated the girls' discussions. Key to this was the styling of the body to appear glamorous, unmistakably feminine and hetero-sexualised, but in a way that was marked by ethnicity. The key features of this style, as I observed it while teaching at this college, were: jewellery that was highly visible, either through its size or (often gold) colour; clothing that emphasised/created a slender yet 'hour glass' shape (including tight clothing and the use of belts); clothing that revealed the skin of hetero-sexualised body parts (through low-cut tops or short-skirts), mixed with 'street-style' which could be quite masculine at times (for example, trainers and caps); hair styles that took time to produce, were difficult to maintain and at times were signifiers of Blackness (for example, the maintenance of Afro hairstyles, the use of weave, hair straighteners and hair-dye); glamorous use of make-up (including fake-eyelashes and lip gloss) and long, decorated and often acrylic nails. Beyond the college, this style is recognisable in the Black female celebrities who members of the dance group appeared to hold as aspirational and beautiful.^[3]

3.3 Young women in the college would play with these stylistic elements, at times mixing them with those of other fashion codes; however, what their inclusion always ensured was that the students adopting them appeared to be glamorously feminine and, to varying degrees, hetero-sexualised in a way that secured stable (and prime) position within the college's very own heterosexual matrix. This is reminiscent of McRobbie's discussion of the role 'glamour' plays in defining the powerful, heterosexual working-class girl. McRobbie notes the hyper-feminine ways in which working-class girls adorn their bodies, drawing on the cultural capital of glamour to gain social mobility and respect, arguing that for these young women, 'glamour is celebrated as a mark of aspiration' (2009: 132). Archer et al. write in a similar way about working-class teenage girls' performance of a (feminine) 'Blackness' through the ostensible adoption of glamour as a style: 'girls combined elements of Black, urban US styles (notably "bling" fashion) with ...

hyper-feminine "sexy" clothes, make-up and hairstyles' (2010: 70).

3.4 In this, it is also important to see that the adoption of such a style acted as an important marker of group membership and social status within a context of compulsory heterosexuality, in particular, one nuanced by teenage, working-class Blackness (three main aspects marking the social make up of the college intake). To identify as anything other than heterosexual in this particular college (a place where homophobic language and open displays of heterosexual relationships were common) was to place oneself within the minority and risk social exclusion. To clarify this point, I turn to the minority of female students within the college who visibly rejected this code, and the implications this had for the way they inhabited the college. Two key examples were the small number of Muslim girls who adopted Islamic dress codes, such as the hijab and jilbab (the majority of whom were North and East African in origin), and a group of young women who I had heard some teachers refer to as 'the lesbian crew'; to my knowledge there was only one openly gay member of this friendship group, but what all its members had in common was the rejection of the glamorous fashion code described above and the adoption of sometimes sporty clothing styles. It was rare to find either group spending time in the designated social spaces of the college, such as the canteen and large 'study' area; more often, these groups would congregate in smaller spaces, such as in the corridors outside the prayer and music rooms. They also tended to keep to themselves, and did not appear to mix much with other students in the college (with male students in particular).

3.5 Such a dynamic was also detectable on a smaller scale within the dance class itself. Some students had gained a reputation for being (as I overheard one group of male students in the college saying) 'those buff^[4] dance girls', with Tonya and Michelle receiving particular attention for their attractiveness from both male and female peers. Tonya and Michelle also came to take prime position within the dance group itself, in terms of compliments they received from the other students for their outfits, routines and performances, as well as their early levels of confidence. In contrast, Maya and Sheena occupied positions on the periphery of the dance group, particularly early in the year. It is outside the scope of this article to discuss this in detail, but briefly Maya tended to shy away from working with Tonya and Michelle, and both Tonya and Michelle had told me they thought Sheena did not 'like' them. Neither Sheena nor Maya participated in the performance of a glamorous, hetero-femininity as much as the other girls: Maya experimented with a 'geek chic' style and Sheena adopted an all-together more gender-neutral clothing style. Furthermore, Sheena was openly gay and her primary friendship group in the college was 'the lesbian crew' mentioned earlier. Neither Maya nor Sheena participated in the group interview (Maya citing an appointment she needed to attend, and Sheena, who by now was studying at university, not replying to my email). Without their accounts we can only speculate, but this raises questions about how stepping outside of this glamorous, heterosexual code has implications for social inclusion – even within a small, otherwise close-knit group who came to form something of a sub-group within the hegemonic space of the college (see later).

3.6 Tonya and Michelle's prime position within the dance group seemed to dissipate throughout the year, as the girls' identities as 'dancers' took stronger hold. Furthermore, despite Tonya, Michelle, Egypt and Demi's adoption of this glamorous, hetero-sexualised bodily style, their experiences of engaging in this identity performance were not without problems. Indeed, both McRobbie (2009) and Archer et al. (2010) point out that generating capital in this way can lead to difficulties for young women. Archer et al. discuss how glamorous young women are positioned as disinterested in their education, while McRobbie discusses the construction of a BBWCT femininity in the form of the 'global girl' (2009: 87): the girl who maintains a sense of heterosexual allure and adornment of the body in a way that actively avoids more confident and 'masculine' performances of sexuality. McRobbie contextualises this performance of a constrained, non-assertive feminine heterosexuality within black women's historical strategy of silence, one that leads to passivity and invisibility. The pressure to maintain the 'right' appearance, sometimes at the expense of performances of self-confidence and empowerment, is certainly something that the research participants discussed.

3.7 I will now turn to their discussions, and ask the following questions: How does the process of producing and maintaining this culturally intelligible body operate within the informal spaces of the urban sixth form college? Does this process serve to reduce the agency of young women who participate in it? How can the space and bodily practice of the dance class serve as a form of resistance to these reductive bodily constructions (and where, within this, do these practices of policing the body still exist)? This will be explored through a feminist Foucauldian analysis of the experiences of the four participants, with later reference to Maya and Sheena who did not participate.

The field of visibility, fashion and the passive body: 'they're looking at you like an object'

Demi: you're always in a frame when you dance ...

CS: To use that word you've just said, Demi, do you ever feel like your body is in a frame in college outside of dance class?

Egypt: I feel that.

Demi: Same, yeah. Like in the canteen and between lessons.

CS: And how do you feel it there, in those places?

Egypt: I feel watched, like when I'm wearing leggings/

Demi: /Yeah [laughs]

Egypt: And I've got a big behind *[both laugh]* so when I wear leggings I feel that ... you're constantly being watched, do you know what I mean? You're always being watched, especially in [college's name], always being watched.

CS: Who do you feel is watching you?

Egypt: Everybody, not even only guys – guys and girls.

Demi: Yeah.

CS: What do you think they are watching you for?

Demi: The way you look – what they'll like, what they'll dislike.

Egypt: Yeah, what they'd like to wear, what they wouldn't like – some people will be looking at you because they want to see something bad about you, some will be looking because they're like, 'Oh I just love that piece of fashion', or 'I love that bag' – that's what I like to look for. But yeah, there are different types of look.

4.1 Demi and Egypt's words here can be interpreted in relation to Jagodzinski's discussion of the 'synopticon' (2010), to be read in light of what Foucault calls a 'field of visibility' (1979: 202). In drawing on Bentham's model for a prison, the panopticon, Foucault gives us a way of understanding the operation of power: through a process of surveillance the individual understands that they exist within a 'field of visibility', where their bodies and actions can constantly be viewed, weighed and ultimately punished against normalizing judgements. In this, the need for externally enforced discipline actually diminishes as the individual 'assumes responsibility for the constraints of power ... he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles' (1979: 202). Jagodzinski discusses how the framework of the panopticon has become inverted for this contemporary age of consumerism and mass media, in which established reality is deconstructed: 'it is being replaced by the postmodernist designing visual regime of the oral [i.e. consuming] eye as its *inversion*' (2010: 75, original emphasis). Jagodzinski conceptualises this inverted framework in terms of Mathiesen's (1997) *synopticon* where, instead of the many being watched by the anonymous few (as in a prison), the few are watched by the visible many (as on a stage): an apparatus for this is seen in the operation of the mass media and the visibility of celebrity bodies for consumption, a process which enacts/exposes 'a "dissolved" or "constructed" subject position, a *surface visual effect*' (2010: 76, original emphasis).

4.2 The impact of this for the individual is that, rather than being fixed and shaped from within by the anonymous gaze, they perform for their audience, consciously 'de-signing' an image of themselves in response to the 'visual discourse' they perceive (2010: 76): 'surveillance has now become fashionable as a desire to draw the "look" or social gaze upon oneself: to be seen by the many' (2010: 81). This world is one in which the young women interviewed are deeply ingrained: contemporary icons of glamorous Black femininity, such as Beyoncé and Rihanna, arguably exist only within carefully designed media images, something that is highlighted through the impenetrable transience of their constantly changing styles, celebrated in fashion shoots, music videos and outfit changes at awards ceremonies. I had witnessed the four young women featured in this article mimic this staging and designing of self in their own approach to fashion (a different, completed outfit or 'look' everyday) and the act of frequently taking posed photographs of themselves for exhibition on Facebook, the ultimate synopticon for the non-celebrity.

4.3 For these young women, the corridors and canteen of the college seem to act as a kind of synopticon, a field of visibility constituted by the 'frame'-d images of their own bodies (resembling the media framing of celebrity bodies) which they carry with them wherever they go. The experience is similar to that of being in Bentham's prison cell in that they are being watched 'constantly' and 'always', but different in that the young women can see themselves being watched by 'everybody', a highly visible audience to whom the young women must perform and who are judging and weighing up their performance of femininity. The ubiquitous and inescapable 'gaze' that follows the young women here is judgemental and normalizing ('what they'll like, what they'll dislike') and it is apparent that the barometer for judgement centres around fashion and the appearance of certain, commonly sexualised, body parts ('I've got a big behind'). The ways in which the young women feel as if they are being watched and judged relate directly to how heterosexual femininity is culturally conceived and inscribed onto their bodies. It is as if the corridors of the college act as a potentially fatal catwalk (and tightrope) where, while being surveyed for the desirability of her body and fashion, the 'model' could experience a social downfall with one step out of line of the heterosexual matrix. It is clear from talking with these glamorous and 'global' girls, for whom the correct performance of fashion and beauty is a vital form of cultural capital, that this unavoidable catwalk experience is a source of considerable stress that can even be debilitating and paralyzing:

Michelle: When you're in college, even though you're meant to be doing your work, you still have to wear the clothes that you'd want to be – you don't want people to think 'oh, she can't dress' – it's horrible/

Egypt: /Yeah, I think like when you're in an uncomfortable position, for example, like, when I wear heels I feel like people are watching you – like you're in this, like, box, like they're staring directly at you and you feel like, 'Oh I can't do this'

4.4 In Egypt's use of the word 'box', again we have the language of confinement and the idea of a body being pinned down (or up, as in the 'frame') for its surveillance. Indeed, these comments can be read in light of Berger's suggestion that, in her visibility, a woman can become passive: 'A woman must continually watch herself ... She has to survey everything she is and everything she does because how

she appears to others ... is of crucial importance for what is normally thought of as the success of her life ... One might simplify this by saying: *men act* and *women appear*' (1990: 40–41, original emphasis). The social and cultural importance of appearing appropriately fashionable and feminine for these young women can result in a state of inaction: for Michelle, the stakes are so high when it comes to being able to 'dress' that the clothes you are wearing become a distracting concern when 'you're meant to be doing your work'; for Egypt, the failure (as I interpret her comment) to walk well in high heels can serve such a damaging blow to one's identity as a successfully feminine young woman that it can lead to a fear of action itself ('you feel like, "Oh I can't do this"'). In these instances, these young women did not achieve the capacities and freedoms we might expect of McRobbie's 'active and aspirational subject'; however, I witnessed something quite different occurring within the space of the dance class.

4.5 As Demi acknowledges, 'you're always in a frame when you dance – they're always looking at you – so you have to make that frame look really good'. Dance, as both a discipline and a performing art, requires the presentation of the body as something to be looked at, and in this respect, could be conceived as a problematic medium through which to resist the paralysing effects of the heterosexual gaze; however, it is apparent that, for these young women, what the body is looked at for in the dance class is quite different to what it is looked at for in the catwalk-like spaces of the college corridors:

CS: [During a discussion about clothes the girls wear in the college] Could you describe how your clothing is different inside and outside the dance studio?

Egypt: ... in dance class you wear clothes you'd feel comfortable in at home – you'd wear leggings, socks – so it's more free.

Michelle: Yeah, you don't have to worry about fashion.

Tonya and Egypt: Yeah, yeah.

Michelle: You don't have to worry about how you're looking 'cos nobody's really judging you, it's the movement they're judging.

4.6 In dance class, the young women concur that they do not have to 'worry' about fashion: their bodies are not looked at in order to judge whether or not they fall acceptably into a performance of adorned and decorated femininity; the body is looked at, according to Michelle, in order to judge the quality of movement it can produce, something she conceives as distinct from herself ('nobody's really judging you, it's the movement they're judging'). Although the idea of dance as a liberating space becomes problematic in the students' later discussion of dance as a means of personal expression, at the very least dance can be seen as a bodily practice that allows space for safe experimentation before any conclusive and potentially entrapping identity work is undertaken through it.

4.7 The notion of bodily liberation (and resulting action) can also be read into the role of clothing in the dance class, as Egypt mentions above. I remember distinctly the start of each dance class with these young women and the ritual of sorts they would go through: they removed the visibly binding types of fashionable clothing they wore 'outside' the dance studio (such as high heeled boots, tight jeans, tight buttoned-up shirts and heavy jewellery), replacing them with 'comfortable' clothing that allowed for freedom of movement (such as leggings and vests); the bodies of these young women would become, rather than objects for feminine decoration, agents of potential movement. These bodies were not bound-up, smoothed-down and held-in for the performance of a respectable-yet-glamorous femininity; they were ready for action and for the expression of identities precluded by fashion. The notion of freedom of expression is something that Egypt and Demi also refer to when discussing the difference between being watched inside and outside of dance class:

Egypt: I think in dance [being watched is] a nice thing – because I think that all dancers like the attention of people looking at them when you're dancing but/

Demi: /Yeah you've got to show what you've got/

Egypt: /you enjoy it.

CS: So, why is it different?

Egypt: You want to show people the creativity that you've made and see you perform, express yourself but in clothing they're just like, looking at someone's body parts and you don't want them to do that – it's, like, 'why are you looking there?'

Demi: *[laughs]* Yeah ... it's like when you're in dance you have a completely different frame, you have more space, you have more mind to show who you are and what you've got – like, prove what you want – um- when you're just standing there in clothes it's like, only what you see is what you get.

Egypt: Yeah, from the outside frame, they're looking at you like an object, not at something that you're doing, do you know what I mean? It makes you feel uncomfortable, it makes you feel, like she said, that you're just standing there and not even to say or express how you're feeling.

Again, we can observe that the young women experience their fashioned and fashionable bodies as constructed as passive outside of dance class ('they're looking at you like an object'), in contrast to the sense of bodily agency they experience through being watched in dance ('you have more space, you have more mind to show who you are and what you've got'). The agency they refer to here is specifically one of self-expression, something that, paradoxically, they also feel about fashion:

CS: Do you enjoy the fashion and the style that you have outside of dance? Do you enjoy doing your make-up and your hair and your clothes?

Demi: Yeah.
 Egypt: I do.
 Demi: Yeah.
 Egypt: 'Cos you have like your own self – it's nice to get yourself, like, dressed up and look yourself and to feel like you're expressing yourself through what you're wearing and things.

4.8 This paradox can be explained by Bordo's reference to "style" [as] the rhetoric reconstructed for the 1980s to pitch "self-expression" and "power" (1997: 104). In Egypt and Demi's feelings about fashion we have another example of the deceptive discourse of the 'active subject', one that ignores situations of gender inequality and oppression (McRobbie 2009); what is interesting here is that the young women themselves participate in this 'rhetoric', but then deconstruct it within a conversation about dance ('it makes you feel ... that you're just standing there and not even to say or express how you're feeling'). In this, we can detect a moveable sense of agency: in some respects, the young women use fashion as a means of empowering self-expression, but can also feel stifled – even paralysed – when the very same fashion draws attention to their bodies. Their discussions about dance do not seem to present such a tension however: through being watched in dance, the young women view their body as an agent of creativity and expression. Rather than being static in its surveillance and resulting construction, the dancing body constructs itself and so serves as a form of bodily resistance against heterosexuality's 'technology of power' (Foucault 1979: 196).

4.9 I will conclude this particular discussion with a problem that emerged from my observation of the young women. Namely, that there were in fact processes of fashioning the body that took place in the dance class: the students did style themselves and take interest in what they wore in these classes. In many ways, this process did resist the heterosexual gaze discussed above: the 'styles' the young women would experiment with were consistent with the identity of 'the dancer' rather than the 'sexy and glamorous girl' (e.g. leg-warmers, ways of tying or even cutting t-shirts to allow ease of movement, ways of covering hair or tying it back to prevent it falling in the face). This development of a 'dancer-style' also served as a group bonding process and started to mark these young women as a sub-group within the college. However, I also observed ways that this process created forms of pressure for the young women, for example, with Egypt one day commenting that her bum looked 'big' in her dance leggings, and there being an element of comparison – or even competitiveness – between the members of the group for who had the best outfit that day (even though the criteria by which best was judged were less heterosexualised inside the dance studio than outside).

The laborious production of glamorous bodies: 'looking all crisp and proper'

5.1 Foucault names the processes and procedures of a 'technology of power' that produce and construct the individual's body through making it knowable (and therefore 'normal'), as 'disciplines' (1979: 70). For Butler, the 'disciplines' associated with gender, take the form of 'specific corporeal acts' (Butler 2010: 483) which are repeated by the individual to the point of an unnoticeable ritualised mundanity. Such a 'sustained and repeated corporeal project' (2010: 484) requires tools; something that the young women of this case study certainly corroborated.

5.2 During the course of the discussions, these young women referred to the following items: lip gloss, high heels, nail varnish, hair scrunchies, hair weave, liquid eye-liner, mascara, fake eyelashes, hair brushes, eye shadow, jewellery, hoop earrings, mirrors and moisturising body cream. These items appeared to comprise a common language for them, and their use was a regular part of their daily activity. Bordo (1997) and Bartky (1997) discuss how Foucault's concepts of 'docile bodies' and 'disciplines' can be applied to the processes of marking and shaping one's body through cosmetics and hair-styling; processes that still, in large part, belong to the construction of a heterosexual femininity, and are clearly identifiable features of Black, working-class, feminine 'glamour'. One way in which these 'substantial corporeal acts' or disciplines are restrictive for the young women who perform them is because of the time, space and energy they take away from other forms of production: 'Through the exacting and normalizing disciplines of diet, make-up and dress – central organizing principles of time and space in the day of many women – we are rendered less socially oriented and more centripetally focused on self-modification' (Bordo 1997: 91). Indeed, one of the young women in the case study group, Tonya, fell into conflict with a teacher for applying make-up in the classroom, and another of my students, when quizzed on her repeated lateness for morning lessons, admitted that she took over an hour to get ready for college each day and would rather be late for class than arrive without perfectly applied make-up. These two examples are indicative of a general trend in how young women in this college spent their time, which was also evident in the way that the girls' toilets were transformed into something resembling hair and make-up salons in break-times, between lessons and even during study periods. More damaging than the time such processes took from their studies however, was the ways in which the young women were viewed as disinterested in their education as a result, as Tonya's experience above suggests (see also Archer et al. 2010).

5.3 This form of constraining the body so that it safely resides within the heterosexual matrix is again challenged within the space of the dance class. The young women discuss the need to present a glamorous and polished body:

Egypt: there are certain girls that would always wear make-up.
All talk – unclear
 CS: What would they feel without make-up you think?
 Michelle: I think they'd feel naked/
 Tonya: /it's not nice
 Michelle: Yeah it gives you insecurities – whereas when you're dancing/
 Egypt: /You're only focusing on how you dance.

Again, we have the idea that dance removes attention from the body's superficial presentation and re-focuses it on what the body can do. The fear of feeling 'naked' without make-up, articulated by Michelle, is also challenged and resisted within the dance class:

Tonya: Because when we come in and when we leave we look entirely different from when we first came into the lesson – when I came in with lip gloss on that day.

[All laugh]

Michelle: Yeah, with the sweat, it all slides off!

CS: Do you like that – that opportunity to have everything wiped off when no one's looking at you?

Egypt: Yeah.

Michelle: Yeah.

CS: Why?

Egypt: Because you feel comfortable – you literally feel like you're at home.

Michelle: Yeah.

The dance class not only dismantles and liberates the straight-laced fashionable body, but it also wipes away the superficial polish of glamour. The young women do not feel uncomfortably 'naked' without their make-up in dance class, but instead express a sense of comfort and liberation. The physical exertion and discipline undertaken in dance class replaces the restrictive disciplines used in the production of glamour and, 'with the sweat', seems to cleanse their bodies.

5.4 The idea of a new, empowered yet ultimately safe identity also seems to be facilitated by the dance class:

CS: Would you feel comfortable being non-fashionable outside of dance class?

Demi: Ummm. Yes and no. Um. Yeah ... I wouldn't mind, because then again, you're a dancer and you come out of a dance studio in like, your dance clothes, and stuff – and like, your hair's still up and everything and you're kind of like a dancer 24/7 physically and mentally, so, you won't really care what people think ... and you think, 'yeah. I'm a dancer' in and out of the/

Egypt: /It shouldn't change once you're out of the room.

Demi: Yeah.

CS: What about the way you look after dance class, how it's affected your hair and face and clothes. Does it matter to you that you look that way after dance class?

Egypt: I like it when I look that way after dance class – if I had long hair, I'd have a little scrunchie, put it up [laughs] ... 'cos it shows that you've worked hard

Demi: Yeah.

Egypt: If you come out looking all crisp and proper, I don't think it shows that you've worked hard.

Demi: Yeah, I feel like I've worked hard if I come out like that. If I came out feeling lazy, kind of chilled, I'd feel like I wasn't getting nowhere. If I come out feeling tired, 'cos I know I've got to that point where I've been working so hard and I, like, look a mess, I don't care. I'm like, 'I've been dancing. That's what I do.'

For Demi, there seems to be something about taking on the identity of a dancer that protects her from the 'outside' world's normalizing judgement and the corresponding need to discipline and mark the body to a debilitating degree. This could be because, in being a dancer, the body takes on a new purpose and role, one of production and hard work. This is a role that, it seems, is more satisfying than a successful performance of impeccable glamour: 'I don't care – I'm like, "I've been dancing. That's what I do." The confidence and pride with which Demi makes this final statement indicates that in this bodily practice and space, the young woman can find a sense of empowerment and ownership of her body and identity, as Irigaray suggests: '[the girl] dances, thereby constructing for herself a vital subjective space ... The dance is also a way of creating for herself her own territory' (cited in McRobbie 1991: 189).

Conclusion

6.1 We have seen how the dance class can act as a space – with a corresponding bodily practice and range of bodily possibilities – that can deconstruct the framed, constrained and 'docile body' of a BBWCT femininity in a way that allows the young woman a safe space for bodily experimentation and agency. We have also seen how the identity of 'dancer', when taken up by the young woman, can become a refuge – a fortress of sorts that legitimates hard work and the transformative effects of hard work upon the glamorous body. Another bodily site and practice that is fundamental to this argument is bodily movement and comportment; it is outside the scope of this article to explore the potential for both constraint and resistance within this bodily practice, but it is nevertheless with reference to this that I articulate a key and concluding problem. In discussing the contemporary dance techniques they had learned within A Level Dance, the young women referred to these dance styles as 'weird' yet explained they came to feel more comfortable about doing them throughout the year:

Tonya: and it's like, you let go ... you do it and think, 'well, why not?' – it's not like you're doing it in the corridor!

Michelle and Egypt: Yeah.

CS: Would you do the same things in the open spaces of the college, like the corridors or assembly hall, that you do in the dance studio?

Michelle: No! [all laugh]

6.2 This discussion makes explicit a tension that was perceivable throughout both the interview and my time teaching these young women: there seems to be a barrier between the liberating space of the dance class and the hegemonic space of the college. The processes of bodily deconstruction and reconstruction that took place within the dance class seemed to find no clear and safe route into the 'outside world' (as Egypt referred to it), and as Michelle said at one point in the discussion: '[dance class] feels like a different world completely ... when you come out you feel like it's "ok, back to normal again"'. The only person who expressed an ability to find a way out of the 'bubble' (Egypt) of dance class and transfer the same body from one space to another was Demi, but this was within the protective and somewhat defiant identity of 'the dancer': 'I don't care ... I'm a dancer – that's what I do'. Further, the dance class itself was not entirely immune to the discourses the young women found stifling: namely, the importance of constructing a visually intelligible body through fashion (in this case, a 'dancer'-specific fashion) and (still) the primacy of a glamorous, hetero-sexualised femininity as an identity code. The presence of this second discourse within the dance group can be inferred by Tonya and Michelle's initial prime social place within the group, and Sheena and Maya's place on its periphery. It is important to note here again that this particular dynamic diffused throughout the year, as Maya and Sheena became more confident in their abilities as dancers, and as Tonya and Michelle became more open to 'letting go' (as Tonya put it) and exploring other ways of looking and moving. However, the dance class was never a space entirely without constraint.

6.3 Further, the young women seemed resistant to the idea that they were affected by a culture that required them to be feminine in a way that was restrictive. Throughout the interview, they referred to situations indirectly and in the third person, taking themselves literally out of the frame and showing signs of defensiveness, for example: 'there are certain girls that would always wear make-up'; 'but I don't really myself care that much'; 'I personally wouldn't care'. It appeared that they too had bought into the discourse that McRobbie questions: '[there is] a suggestion that young women have now won the battle for equality ... and this has replaced any need for the feminist critiques of what Mohanty labels hegemonic masculinities' (McRobbie 2009: 57). This abandonment of critique is not restricted to institutional discourse and action, but is so insidious that it has penetrated the thought-processes of the young women themselves; this means they are held in a double bind. It is perhaps only through the creation of alternative, subversive and resistant bodily practices, like those experienced through dance, that they have the opportunity to critique the cultural norms that lead to their constraint; perhaps it is only here, in these spaces that generate critique through bodily practice in addition to critical dialogue, that the dominant discourses can be deconstructed by the young women themselves. However, until these young women stop feeling like they have to step out of the dance class and onto the catwalk, the power of these bodily enactments of critique will go un-channelled.

Notes

¹ Students learned dance techniques informed by their teachers' training in Cunningham, Limone and Release techniques and Classical Ballet. While it is not within the scope of this paper to define these techniques, nor fully explore the ways in which they shaped the culture of the class, please see the following video links for clarification on the kinds of movements the students would be learning in class:

<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kxCPbihCw14>>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6vjVb_fXcbE>

² This is something that many feminist and action researchers warn against, highlighting the impossibility of such an act when understanding 'voice' as in relation to 'empowerment' (see Maguire 2006, Usher 2000).

³ In particular Rihanna and Beyoncé Knowles.

⁴ Within the student vernacular of this college, 'buff' means good-looking or physically attractive.

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