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Embodied Transformations in Neo-Burlesque Striptease

Sherril Dodds

> We stride forward, women on the edge of a nervous breakdown, stop dead, put on black thick-rimmed glasses and glare at the audience. Stooping down to pick up a pair of pink rubber cleaning gloves, we wriggle our fingers in, irritated by their failure to slip on obediently. Housewives in heels, pencil skirts, and soft woolen cardigans, we step hesitantly downstage toward five bright yellow "hazardous materials" bags, out of which we each pull a plastic baby doll by the ankle (see Photo 1). Repelled by these grubby specimens, we rock them abruptly, dangle them in disgust, toss them through the air, and wind them manically to the sound of an uneasy folk ditty, "What'll We Do With the Baby-O." Eventually, we ditch these infantile encumbrances on some poor male spectator and stand for a moment, hands on hips. A piece of raunchy bump-and-grind music kicks in and I cannot resist exuding an enormous smile before turning my back on the audience to wiggle my butt to the percussive instrumentation. We each collect a luscious feather boa and strut around the stage, hips undulating, feathers flying. With heavy seductive eyes, we pull off a rubber glove, spin it around and pop out the air filled fingers one at a time. The other we bite off, to cast it aside without a second glance. Slowly, cardigans are unbuttoned, skirts unzipped, and the slightest raise of an eyebrow or fleeting wink prompts the audience to whoop in encouragement. Down to black bra and sensible knickers, we command the stage space, twirling boas as we smile in collusion with one another. Inwardly counting the precise timing, I drop boa, turn to back, unclip bra, slip out each arm, drop bra, deep breath, and round I go. Flamboyantly twirling the shocking red tassels that briefly cover my breasts, a massive wave of audience applause washes over me in a suspended moment of pure performance pleasure. Again, I cannot help but smile in sheer delight.

This performance experience takes me back to my former British life, where I produced, choreographed, and performed in several neo-burlesque striptease shows. While I have since relocated to the United States, the number I describe was performed at the Korova Milk Bar in Guildford, Surrey, UK, on April 21, 2008.[1] In recounting this

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Photo 1. "Scarlett Korova" in the "Desperate Housewives" number. Photography by Alan Tan. Used with permission.

performance spectacle, it strikes me that discourses of transformation are inscribed both upon and in response to the neo-burlesque body. With the aid of false eyelashes, heated rollers, and other cosmetic applications, I was transmogrified from 40-year-old professor and mother of two from Guildford to Scarlett Korova, "burlesque artiste." Gradually, through a deliberate tease, we removed layers of garments, shifting from a body masked by feathers, gloves, zippers, and buttons through to an overt display of soft flesh. In response to this act of disrobing, the audience–performer interface was also marked by a distinct process of change. Early in the performance, the crowd was relatively quiet, respectfully observing the *mise-en-scène*. As we slowly peeled away our clothes, with a cheeky wink or raise of an eyebrow, audience members began to whoop and whistle in encouragement. At the moment of the "big reveal" (a colloquialism in the neo-burlesque community for the exposure of the breasts), the spectators cheered wildly, galvanizing the performer to luxuriate in her spectacle of undress and celebrate her body as display. I therefore posit that neo-burlesque performance produces an accumulative spatio-temporal exchange, whereby spectators are encouraged to offer aural and kinetic feedback, which then prompt further revelations within the striptease act, only to create more intense and enthusiastic audience affirmation.

In this article, I set out to explore how notions of "transformation" are articulated in the production and reception of female neo-burlesque striptease and to reflect on the extent to which this paradigm offers opportunities for change beyond the site of performance.[2] In methodological terms, experiential, ethnographic, and critical perspectives inform my writing. Over a four-year period, I choreographed and performed for an all-female neo-burlesque troupe, the Komrades of the Korova Milk Bar, and for La Bouche Burlesque as part of a "sisterly" duo named "Emmental" and "Baby Bel" La Bouche (see Photo 2). Through regular rehearsal and performance opportunities that gave me license to design and inhabit neo-burlesque choreography in dialogue with female collaborators, my physical practice offered a tangible embodied knowledge. In conjunction with this experiential framework, I also employ qualitative research methods.[3] Between October 2005 and November 2008, I attended twenty-five neo-burlesque shows across London and New York,[4] I participated in two burlesque workshops led by Jo King from the London School of Striptease, and I conducted semistructured interviews with six neo-burlesque performers: Amber Topaz, Kitty Bang

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Photo 2. "Emmental" and "Baby Bel" La Bouche. Photography by Sheryl Tait. Used with permission.

Bang, and Fancy Chance in London, and Little Brooklyn, Creamy Stevens, and Darlinda Just Darlinda in New York.

The critical corpus that informs my thinking is primarily located in scholarly research: historical studies of burlesque performance and imagery (Allen 1991; Buszek 2006; Pullen 2005; Schaefer 1997; Shteir 2004; Urish 2004); analysis of the neo-burlesque scene (Willson 2008); research on "stripping," "exotic dancing," and "erotic dancing"[5] (Dodds 1997; Hanna 1998, 2011; Liepe-Levinson 2002; Roach 2007); unpublished dissertations/theses[6] (Blair Murphy 2009; Peluso 2010); and explorations of eroticism and sexuality in art performance (Harris 1999; Midgelow 2007; Schneider 1992). In addition, I also call upon writings in the popular press (Athorne 2005; Blanchard 2003; Dawson Scott 2005; Gumbel 2003; Harris 2004; Shepard 2005) and neo-burlesque publications intended for a general interest readership (Baldwin 2004; Von Teese 2006; Weldon 2010).

Transforming Bodies Across Past and Present

On reflecting upon themes of transformation, the history of burlesque performance is characterized by discernible changes in the staging of the female body. The etymology of burlesque derives from the term *burla*, meaning a joke or farce, and originated as a sixteenth-century European literary tradition that satirized the classical works of the period (Hanna 1998). The arrival of music hall performer Lydia Thompson in New York in 1868, however, marks the beginning of burlesque as a platform for female spectacle (Allen 1991). Thompson and her troupe, the British Blondes, created lampoons in which, frequently taking the role of male characters, they drew upon popular song and dance to ridicule New York society. Initially burlesque circulated among the middle class milieu and was awarded concomitant critical acclaim; yet, these "male-impersonating, revealingly attired, slang-spouting, minstrel dancing women" (Allen 1991, 138) soon provoked social anxieties, and by the early twentieth century, burlesque had become a working class male entertainment high in risqué content (Shteir 2004). Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, burlesque performers employed an economy of tease through which to tantalize male audiences, but by the 1950s images of the naked body within the context of pornographic films and magazines created a demand for strippers to perform increasingly explicit acts (Shteir 2004). The demise of striptease occurred during the 1960s in response to the sexual revolution's permissive attitudes toward nudity and some voices within the burgeoning feminist movement that critiqued its perceived objectification of the female body (Shteir 2004). For several decades after, burlesque striptease disappeared from the mainstream

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stage, until the 1990s when it re-emerged and became demarcated as "neo" or "new" burlesque (Gumbel 2003; Harris 2004; Shepard 2005).

While the diachronic development of burlesque reveals a shifting matrix of class, gender, and moral values, I suggest that contemporary neo-burlesque performance also mobilizes embodied transformations that complicate questions of female spectacle and power. The first discursive shift I explore is in relation to neo-burlesque's reconfiguration of the idealized female body. Whereas modern capitalism promotes a figure that is slim, taut, and youthful (Featherstone 1991), neo-burlesque is noted for "the polymorphous perversity of the human body" (Gumbel 2003, 18). At Starshine Burlesque in New York (November 8, 2007), Darlinda Just Darlinda comes bounding through the audience dressed as a big brown teddy bear. She lollops along to the upbeat rhythm of James Brown's "Night Train," playfully waving at audience members, and then mounts the stage. Slowly, she eases off the big fluffy suit to reveal a long silver dress, stiletto heels, and opera gloves. A voluptuous woman, she luxuriates in her glamorous attire as she sashays across the stage. Still wearing her giant teddy head, she saucily unpeels her gloves, while undulating her torso, and the audience whoops madly in encouragement. Enthused by this response, she whips off her dress to reveal tasselled bra and underpants, and madly shimmies buttocks and breasts in a dazzling display of flesh: generous thighs, ample hips, and soft rounded belly are fully exposed. In a flash, her bra flies off and again the crowd goes wild as she frenetically twirls her pasties (small discs elaborately decorated with sequins and tassels that shield the nipples). Finally, she removes her teddy head to exude a broad smile of pleasure.

The inclusion and celebration of female bodies that exist outside the narrowly conceived ideal of contemporary femininity also characterized classic burlesque performance. While the aesthetic at the time of the Civil War privileged a slim, asexual body, Lydia Thompson and her British Blondes were famed for their curvaceous physiques (Allen 1991; Willson 2008). Furthermore, in a study of post-World War II burlesque films, Schaefer (1997) identifies a similar sense of departure from the socially acceptable female body, in terms of an unruly excess, as burlesque bodies of the 1940s refused to be contained or domesticated according to gendered norms. He describes how female burlesque artists "strutted, pranced, swung their arms, bumped their hips, poured out of, and then stripped off their costumes" (Schaefer 1997, 53) as a challenge to feminine propriety. A multitude of physiques occupy the neo-burlesque stage, and while the overt display of "imperfections," such as sagging breasts and wobbly bellies, is embraced and applauded, the idealized and unattainable bodies of consumer capitalism are a rarity. The desire to re-choreograph normative representations of the female body is clearly articulated by performers:

> I'm like 160 lb., I'm 5'4", I'm actually that American average . . . I feel like I'm making a contribution to a new sort of idea of what beauty is, and I really hope that changes women. (Darlinda Just Darlinda, November 8, 2007)

> It's liberating in an era when everybody's airbrushed and you know people have their fat bits circled in *Heat* magazine, and you know people are held to this exacting standard of perfection. (Kitty Bang Bang, October 20, 2008)

> Who says you've got to be size 8 and have a perfect body to be a great performer? My body isn't perfect, it's what it is, and I think that's the freedom of it. (Amber Topaz, August 12, 2008)

What is perhaps most significant from these comments are the references to perceived notions of agency and change. Within the site of neo-burlesque striptease, performers acknowledge their capacity to destabilize the idealized body and to create an alternative paradigm for how the disrobed female body is valued and consumed through their performative advocation of a quotidian body.

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The second area where I identify opportunity for transgression within neo-burlesque performance is in relation to the female erotic. Before turning to some specific performance examples, however, it would be helpful to consider the relationship between neo-burlesque striptease and "exotic"/"erotic" dancing. To some extent, the two performance practices share common terrain, as the logic of the act centers on the revelation of the naked female body, and an associated exploration of female sexuality, for the purposes of adult entertainment. Yet this notional intersection proves ambiguous, as some commentators perceive little difference between the two forms, while others identify a clear demarcation (Baldwin 2004; Roach 2007; Von Teese 2006). In relation to movement content, Hanna describes erotic dancing as a "vocabulary of movements highlighting secondary sex characteristics, such as the breasts, buttocks, and hips, in addition to the genitals" (1998, 45). Neo-burlesque utilizes a similar movement repertoire, although the performers typically wear pasties and their genitalia are rarely displayed. Other danced components within neo-burlesque are the "bump and grind" (sharp pelvic isolations and sustained gyrations), bottom shimmies (a rapid shaking of the buttocks), tassel twirling (circular motions of both or one nipple tassel), and numerously inventive ways to remove gloves, stockings, corsets, and brassieres.

While I recognize that significant overlap occurs across neo-burlesque striptease and "exotic"/"erotic" dancing, and that both display a broad spectrum of style and content, two characteristics have come to typify neo-burlesque striptease: the arts of tease and wit (Roach 2007; Shteir 2004; Willson 2008). In neo-burlesque, the performance of undress tends to be gradual and playful as performers slowly remove articles of clothing, often employing clever means to mask the breasts with costumes and props until the last possible moment. Furthermore, neo-burlesque acts are invariably comedic, and representations of the erotic are articulated in a multitude of ways. For instance, Bambi enters dressed as a giant lobster, with red sparkly bodice, orange and red net tails, and enormous pincers. She uses these to self-pleasure her nipples, while pulling shocked facial expressions that send the crowd into a frenzy of encouragement (Mr. Choade's Upstairs/Downstairs, October 21, 2006). Fancy Chance emerges as a "plain Jane" bride in a white satin puffball dress, fake bouquet, and thick black glasses. Her husband-to-be fails to show, but moments later her distress dissipates as she strips off into a luscious marabou cape and then down to silver glittery pasties, which she twirls in triumph (Feminist Neo-Burlesque Symposium, October 26, 2007). Julie Atlas Muz appears tied from head to toe in thick coarse rope and, to the 1960s teen hit "You Don't Own Me," she fights her way out of the rope eventually to reveal her disrobed body. As a denouement to the act, she makes a "V for victory" sign and flexes her biceps, and the audience goes wild in celebration (Mr. Choade's Upstairs/Downstairs, October 15, 2005). The diversity of these acts and the attitudes that the performers inhabit within them signal diverse representations of the female body that can be maintained, negotiated, and destabilized.[7]

In reference to photographic images of late-nineteenth-century burlesque artists, Buszek (2006) describes Lydia Thompson's knowing production of her overt sexuality as an "awarishness." This conscious transgression is also adopted by Thompson's troupe, the British Blondes, who gazed back at the spectator with a "smirking expression" (Buszek 2006, 43). The same confrontation between sexuality and mockery characterizes neo-burlesque striptease, as performers employ a knowing sense of tease:

> You go to burlesque shows now and they make light of either our physicality, or of politics, or the act of disrobing. And there are serious acts as well, but even in those there's a wink and a nod. (Little Brooklyn, November 8, 2007)

> Sometimes I'm letting them in on something … give them a little knowing look, you know, letting them in on the joke is a big part of it. (Creamy Stevens, November 8, 2007)

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Thus although neo-burlesque artists operate within the codes and conventions of female sexual display, the performance of this is highly self-conscious. Humor acts as a means to parody, satirize, or ridicule traditions of female representation, while tease enables a self-reflexive mode of performance. As Little Brooklyn and Creamy Stevens suggest, a "wink" or "look" serves to undercut their erotic display, and I refer to this playful critique as a "choreography of facial commentary." As part of the "tease," performers adopt a performative stance toward the striptease act. For instance, while Amber Topaz tantalizingly unpeels a silk stocking, her face signals frustration and irritation with the time it takes to come off (Volupté, September 13, 2008), and as a 1950s housewife, Little Brooklyn wears bright yellow rubber cleaning gloves that locate her firmly in the mundane sphere of domesticity, but her face conveys immense sexual arousal as she slowly strips them away (Starshine Burlesque, November 8, 2007). This articulate facial commentary allows performers to reframe the erotic from a narrow conception of female sexuality into a critical performance strategy that evokes a multitude of expressions that range from boredom to stimulation, detachment to commitment, and anger to pleasure.

Yet in spite of neo-burlesque's capacity to critique and create alternative models of the female erotic, performers evidently embrace the glamorous and sexualized images that predated 1970s second wave feminism. The popular press has commented on neo-burlesque's fascination with the feathers, corsets, tassels, and glitter that signify a bygone era of female beauty and spectacle (Athorne 2005; Blanchard 2003; Shepard 2005), and this appropriation of traditional female imagery is clearly welcomed by performers:

> I think most ladies are kind of built like magpies in terms of sparkly things, so it looks fantastic. (Fancy Chance, December 16, 2008)

> I've met a lot of the 1950s, 1960s burlesque artists when I've been over to Vegas . . . they were extraordinarily glamorous and well groomed and I think there's not even so much of that now. (Amber Topaz, August 12, 2008)

> We don't really have a femininity in our daily lives any more. You know women used to wear corsets and pretty gloves and do their hair every day and wear make-up every day, and now it's not the norm . . . I think that like getting to be extra beautiful, extra feminine, hyper feminine, it's amazing, it's really good. (Darlinda Just Darlinda, November 8, 2007)

I therefore identify a reclaiming of nostalgic and normative images of the female body as the third area of transformation realized through neo-burlesque performance.

In one number, Little Brooklyn plays out the stereotype of the helpless horror movie star. In a pink satin dress, with spider's web wings, her face expresses alarm as she uses a spider glove puppet slowly to disrobe her (see Photo 3). Her arachnophobia is made comical through looks of utter horror at her spider's web bra and spider-themed pasties. Yet refusing to be contained as a damsel in distress, the audience cheers as she stamps her spider to the ground (Mr. Choade's Upstairs/Downstairs, October 15, 2005). Amber Ray plays the 1950s housewife figure in pink cardigan, head scarf, and full black skirt with pink netting underneath. Beside her is a picnic basket, but her wholesome image is disrupted as she also stands before a cauldron. She quickly removes her outer layers to reveal a lace corset and frilly knickers, but then puts on a sensible apron. Again, her representation of female domesticity is renegotiated as she pulls a carrot from her basket and mimes fellatio, takes out two severed arms and smooches with them, and finally produces a glowing heart. All go in the cauldron, at which point she whips off her corset, twirls pasties, and retrieves the severed arm to suck its finger (Starshine Burlesque, November 8, 2007).

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Photo 3. Little Brooklyn and her spider. Photography by Don Spiro. Used with permission.

These two examples are typical of neo-burlesque performance in which popular female images are destabilized through comedic and playful outcomes. In terms of understanding this complex relationship to a normative femininity, the concept of parody is commonly identified with neo-burlesque humor (Roach 2007; Willson 2008).[8] Described as an "imitation" or "transformation" of someone else's words (Dentith 2000), the position adopted toward the original referent is not always one of mockery, but can also express a respect or affection toward it (Hutcheon 2003; Ross 1998). Arguably, this allows performers access to a critical space whereby they can take pleasure in a nostalgic femininity, while playfully unsettling or subverting those images. Thus ironically, neo-burlesque performance seems to embrace stereotypical feminine representations, which potentially troubles those feminist discourses that have sought to "unburden" women from such normative gender constructions. To some extent, these arguments can be located within a number of theorizations that seek to expose the constructed nature of gender, which variously conceives femininity as a "masquerade"[9] (Doane 1992; Harris 1999), as "performative" (Butler 1999), or as an "impersonation" (Tyler 2003). Yet although the excessive feminine spectacle adopted in neo-burlesque imagery potentially reveals gender as an enactment or impersonation of femininity, as Tyler (2003) identifies, the intention to exaggerate this construction may not be read as an ironic gesture, but instead recuperated as a gendered norm.

A more fruitful approach might be found in Gere's (2001) work, which is located in dance studies and explores the performance of "effeminate gestures." In considering the limitations of drag

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performance, which he conceives as a "choreography of fashion" (Gere 2001, 375), he describes the corporeality of effeminacy as a much more troubling deconstruction of gender, as it is occurs at the level of embodiment rather than the temporary masquerade of dress. Thus while neo-burlesque artists frequently employ strategies of female impersonation or, as Schaefer (1997) observes, an excessive masquerade, they unsettle these through various choreographic devices. Whether it is through a "knowing wink" during the removal of a satin glove or the flexing of the biceps at the end of the strip, feminine spectacle is simultaneously staged and re-imagined corporeally.

From the Personal to the Political

From the discussion so far, I have argued that neo-burlesque striptease can be conceived as a transformative mode of performance: from dress to undress, from audience calm to spectator frenzy, through privileging corporeal diversity over a sanctioned ideal, through a playful critique of the serious striptease body, and through a conscious appropriation of a nostalgic female sexuality. Notably, performers also envision the neo-burlesque stage as a site of change. Darlinda Just Darlinda asserts "that whole idea of teasing in striptease is, you know, I look at it as a transformation" (November 8, 2007). Amber Topaz, meanwhile, sees its affective potential for audiences: "You're basically changing someone's day, it's like transforming someone's day . . . it just really inspires people" (August 12, 2008).

The concept of transformation has been applied to other areas of popular dance practice, notably in relation to screen and literary examples. In a chapter on heterosexuality in the Hollywood film musical, Dyer (1993) argues that for narrative and romantic closure to take place in "teen dance films," the dominant male characters must change their social and moral values, and the subordinate female characters must take on the males' dance styles. These transformations therefore allow character difference to be resolved. McRobbie (1991), meanwhile, seeks to demonstrate how fictional dance narratives, as evident in the children's book *Ballet Shoes* and the popular dance films *Fame* and *Flashdance*, employ "fantasies of achievement" in which dance engenders possibilities of social mobility. McRobbie suggests that these narratives offer the female protagonists opportunities for personal change in which their respective dance practices allow them to transcend limitations of gender, class, and race. In a study of the popular film documentary *Mad, Hot Ballroom*, in which New York schoolchildren participate in a ballroom dance training program, I also seek to demonstrate how, at a textual level, the film is organized around narratives of embodied and personal transformation (Dodds 2008).[10]

Yet while evidence suggests that transformation takes places within neo-burlesque striptease, it is important to consider whether change occurs beyond the act of performance. The need to explore this issue emerges from a number of critiques within the field of cultural studies that question whether a textual radicalism has the capacity to produce social or political change. This debate emerged in the 1990s in response to the trend toward "consumption studies" that employed textual analyzes over empirical research to produce counter-readings against dominant ideologies (Barker 2000).[11] Yet this approach was critiqued for its populist perspective that awarded the "reader" ultimate agency through the pleasures and meanings found in cultural texts and failed to attend to the political economy that shapes cultural production (Morris 1996). For instance, Ferguson and Golding (1997) comment on how the shift toward textual analysis in cultural studies perpetually overlooks the material contexts of production; thus questions of power struggle occur at the level of theory rather than within a social and historical reality. Similarly, Garnham (1997) identifies a distinction between textual resistance in the act of reading and actual social resistance that produces a change of material circumstances. In light of this, I seek to question whether neo-burlesque striptease opens up possibilities for transformation outside the "performance text."

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From my personal perspective, neo-burlesque performance proved to be a transformative experience. From my early teenage years through to my late thirties, I felt self-conscious about undressing in public spaces and in expressing my sexual self. Yet at the age of 37, I participated in my first neo-burlesque workshop, which unexpectedly tapped into a sense of liberation through the opportunity to choreograph my body as erotic display.[12] Inspired by this experience, I performed in my first neo-burlesque show in 2007, where I discovered the profound pleasure derived from an audience whooping in encouragement, the feeling of command that I hold over spectators as I remove clothes in a dialogue of tease, the liberation of appearing almost naked in an affirmative social space, and the thrill of dolling myself up in a theatricalized hyperfemininity. Neo-burlesque therefore offered a sense of pleasure, agency, validation, and esteem that brought about changes in how I experienced my body and my sexuality.

Notions of transformation also resonate with the performers to whom I spoke. For example, Little Brooklyn states: "I think it improves this whole confidence in how you treat yourself in life, you put yourself out there, you're on stage naked, you can do anything, you could jump off a cliff or fly, you're like what else can I do?" (November 8, 2007). Although neo-burlesque striptease occurs within a set of performance conventions, it ultimately leads to the naked body as display. Thus performers are reduced to a fleshy spectacle that reveals their individual quirks and foibles. Consequently, the body is potentially exposed, vulnerable and open to critique. In neo-burlesque performance, however, this attention to the body is not viewed within a constricted site of corporeal ideals, but instead is celebrated for its diversity and distinctiveness. Thus, as Little Brooklyn insists, in embracing public nudity, the exposure leads to affirmation, which then produces feelings of worth. Creamy Stevens also identifies a similar sense of agency which she locates in relation to choice and affect: "I suppose the fact that I'm doing this on my own terms, that it's 100% my choice to be there . . . that's a powerful thing when people are saying I think what you do is great . . . the most empowering thing about it is that it makes people laugh" (November 8, 2007). For her, that she chooses to disrobe in performance is key to her sense of control. While the act of undressing outside the site of performance is generally perfunctory in nature, the desire to produce laughter in response to disrobing the female body suggests both an element of intent regarding how the performance is received and a capacity for change in how the spectator views striptease performance; it can be mocked, ridiculed, and celebrated.

From the perspective of the audience, neo-burlesque spectators have a clear sense of how they wish to consume and validate striptease performance. At the Slipper Room, a heavily tattooed female commented, "You know, I don't like my stripping dirty . . . I don't wanna see spread legs and everything like at strip clubs," and a petite blonde woman reflected, "This gives me such confidence" (October 14, 2005). The performers meanwhile observed the capacity of neo-burlesque to reposition the audience in such a way that destabilizes the strict boundary between artist and spectator:

> Lots of these nights are themed, and so everybody will dress up, and they're a part of the performance then, and so when you're on stage they already feel like they're a part of it. (Fancy Chance, December 16, 2008)

> There is something about burlesque that gets audiences in a very different place. I mean there's almost a sense of wanting to rush on stage and do it themselves. (Amber Topaz, August 12, 2008)

The blurring of the performer/audience division is further evidenced by the multitude of classes, courses, and workshops available and through the relatively easy passage to becoming a performer through open floor spots and competitions.[13] Thus I would suggest that neo-burlesque facilitates opportunities for personal transformation that arise both from the performance and spectatorship experience.

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Economies of Transformation

Although neo-burlesque performers speak highly of the personal benefits it provides in terms of pleasure, confidence, and esteem, neo-burlesque striptease exists in a system of capital exchange, therefore I would like to consider the extent to which it brings economic mobility for performers. Within the United Kingdom, artists can expect fees of between £50–100 for one or two acts in small-scale cabaret clubs and up to several hundred pounds for corporate functions or private parties; in the United States, small-scale neo-burlesque venues typically award fees of $50–100.[14] From my interview data, it is apparent that neo-burlesque can offer some degree of financial stability, in that for two of the women I interviewed, neo-burlesque performance was their sole source of income, and for one, it constituted her primary income. Notably, for the two women whose income derived purely from neo-burlesque performance, both explained how it had allowed them to move out of contract-based commercial dance work that imposed limitations regarding the type of dancing and looks required, into neo-burlesque, which awarded them freelance status and full creative control. For the remaining three, neo-burlesque did not provide full economic independence, as all held other positions that constituted their primary income, but was an opportunity for additional remuneration. Therefore although neo-burlesque grants some avenues for personal transformation, it does not guarantee full economic mobility.

In reading the neo-burlesque body as a site of capital exchange, this also raises complex questions of class and power. While the six performers to whom I spoke bore varying economic relationships to neo-burlesque striptease, what appeared to unite all of them was the strong sense of esteem and creative agency they each enjoyed in relation to their practice. In view of this, Roach (2007) proposes an eloquent argument regarding the capacity for neo-burlesque performance to critique other paradigms of female striptease. She asserts that stripping within the context of "corporate gentleman's clubs" is primarily motivated through economic capitalism; consequently, there exists little opportunity for a performative radicalism within such acts. In contrast, as neo-burlesque is less bounded by commercial pressures, this opens up a critical space for performers to embrace, destabilize, and renegotiate normative representations of the female body (Roach 2007). Yet given that neo-burlesque performers are less driven by commercial imperatives, this suggests a privileged class position in that they have the necessary economic and social capital that enables them to critique the contemporary cultural landscape that they occupy.

Skeggs (2004) conceives class as a corporeal inscription that for some offers a mobile resource, while for others it remains fixed. Skeggs (2004) observes that, unlike the working class, the middle and upper classes have the opportunity to enact alternative class identities.[15] From my sample of performers, three of the women have the security of other incomes to support their neo-burlesque interests, and five out of the six were either qualified to degree level or had undergone a three-year vocational training.[16] I would therefore argue that this economic stability and intellectual capital constitutes a position of class privilege that, in Skeggs's (2004) terms, allows access to alternative subjectivities. Yet this is a complex terrain to negotiate in locating the extent to which neo-burlesque artists exercise political resistance. Although the "Christian Right" and liberal feminism have envisioned the striptease body as objectionable and immoral (Hanna 2011; Shteir 2004), McNair (2002) describes contemporary society as a "striptease culture." Thus while it could be argued that neo-burlesque performers inhabit a social status that gives them license to occupy a historically marginalized body, it could equally be posited that the rise of neo-burlesque performance is symptomatic of a sexually permissive society.

In light of this, I consider how my own positioning impacts on my critical and embodied understanding of neo-burlesque striptease. While I detail in the introduction the pleasures derived from my performance experiences, I acknowledge that this sense of reward occurred within a social and artistic framework over which I exercised considerable control (see Photo 4). I chose to perform neo-burlesque as a recreational activity, and, although almost all of my performances involved economic remuneration, I had a full-time university salary that subsidized this leisure pursuit.

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Furthermore, given the personal and professional demands of being a parent and scholar, time constraints inhibited the frequency with which I could rehearse and perform. Consequently, my occasional performance opportunities generated anticipation, investment, and excitement, and offered a welcome counterpoint to my quotidian existence. While all of the neo-burlesque performers to whom I spoke emphatically expressed the pleasure that they experienced through performance, this can also be offset by the monotonies of everyday work. As Fancy Chance says, "There's some corporate things where people just don't give a shit . . . sometimes I work a lot and I get really really tired, and I just think I wish I didn't have to go on the fucking stage and I just don't want to put on the make-up and like 'ugh'!" (December 16, 2008). It appears then that my economic stability significantly contributed to my positive experience of neo-burlesque as an opportunity to transcend the everyday, and I suggest also that my education and feminist values informed my desire to legitimate this form of female display.

This sense of legitimization is also voiced by some of the neo-burlesque artists I interviewed who were keen to distance their practice from the discursive critiques that surround "exotic" and "erotic" dancing. For instance, Amber Topaz comments that, "Some people think it is purely stripping off," but instead conceives neo-burlesque as an opportunity to "express yourself with your intelligence and your humor" (August 12, 2008). Similarly, Kitty Bang Bang insists, "Burlesque should have something more than just a girl on stage removing her clothes. There should be comedy or statement or some sort of mirroring of art" (October 20, 2008). I also recognize how I deploy my personal and intellectual knowledge of feminism as a strategy to reimagine striptease as a politically engaged critique of the female body as spectacle. Yet in spite of my commitment to validate my performance practice, I acknowledge the contentious place that striptease continues to occupy within the site of neo-burlesque performance.

While the above descriptions of audience reaction highlight my positive experiences of dancing and watching neo-burlesque striptease, there are instances in which the favorable whooping and applause are diminished. Although neo-burlesque shows are typically mixed-sex with female

Photo 4. "Scarlett" and "Emerald" Korova in their "Cyber Plum Fairies" number. Photography by Alan Tan. Used with permission.



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responses as audible as those of the males, during one of my shows, a small group of men was particularly vocal in their "wolf whistles" and cheers, which not only drew attention to them, but also reinstated a heteronormative framework of males gazing at female bodies.[17] Amber Topaz describes a female spectator who walked out of a show as "she thought it was degrading to women" (August 12, 2008), and I recall feelings of unease when one of my performers chose not to continue as part of the Korova Milk Bar due to her own reservations in relation to striptease. I therefore acknowledge that while this reading of neo-burlesque as positively transformative is shaped by my class privilege, social values, and intellectual capital, I am equally conscious that the politics of sexual agency and display are not easily reconciled.

My affirmative interpretation of neo-burlesque, however, is closely aligned with critical reviews. The popular press frequently reads neo-burlesque performance as a challenge to existing representations of the female body. It is conceived as a "resistance movement against porn" (Gumbel 2003, 18), a reclaiming of female sexuality (Dawson Scott, 2005), and a reframing of "dominant ideas about sex" (Diamante cited in Shepard 2005, 26). To return to McNair's (2002) description of a contemporary "striptease culture," in view of this spectacular fascination with female undress, neo-burlesque performers inhabit a powerful position as they exercise control over their display of the disrobed body. Normative paradigms are celebrated and critiqued, and neo-burlesque audiences literally applaud this co-existent paradox. For the neo-burlesque performers whom I interviewed, the contradiction of producing transformation within representations that have historically constrained the female body is never voiced as a concern. I would suggest that performers are knowing in their citation and contestation of these historical reference points, and through devices of humor and "facial commentary," they unsettle the serious heteronormative gaze that seeks to fix the female striptease body. For instance, Little Brooklyn recalls, "[I] watched classic fan dancing videos from that original time period … but I don't want to use fans, I want to use hub caps, I want to use dishes, I wanna use things that are more comedic" (November 8, 2007). Similarly, Creamy Stevens is equally cognizant of how she re-imagines the female body:

> I use a very classic kind of set-up for a striptease burlesque act where there's a voice that says, "Bye honey, I'll be home at six, have dinner ready," and I've got a fluffy nightie and a baby and smiling, and from out of the cooking pot I take a martini and a bottle of pills so at the end I bite the head off the bird in the bird cage and drown the baby in the pot, so you know, I think that's the tease. It's sort of like people might want you to be really pretty and do nice things and do exactly like they want you to do but I really relish in not doing what people want me to. (November 8, 2007)

Neo-burlesque striptease therefore operates as a complex site of performance that enables opportunities for transformation in the realization of female display, and these embodied experiences and performed knowledge can obviously extend beyond the theatricalized space into performers' and spectators' wider social existence.

Yet in sites of production and consumption outside the field of small-scale cabaret venues, it cannot be assumed that neo-burlesque striptease would offer the same discursive strategies for change. For instance, in the U.S. reality television show *America's Got Talent* (2006), in which members of the public perform as part of a knock-out competition, neo-burlesque artist Michelle L'Amour successfully auditioned with routines based on the fairy-tale character Snow White and the television program *Knight Rider*. Reconceived as a form of mass entertainment within a wider social milieu of "striptease culture," it is difficult to assess whether television audiences are fully conversant with the codes and conventions of neo-burlesque performance and the critiques of the striptease body that it stages. A further example relating to questions of transmission can be seen in the Lion's Den, a small lap-dancing club in my former hometown of Guildford, which promoted a regular "burlesque" night. Yet from the promotional publicity, it appeared that the term burlesque

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Photo 5. "Emmental" and "Baby Bel" La Bouche. Photography by Sheryl Tait. Used with permission.

was misappropriated to refer to the same form of lap-dancing that it featured every evening. Thus while I would argue that the capacity for social transformation is mobilized within the arts and cabaret venues of the neo-burlesque scene, the same claims cannot be made for "burlesque" performance within other sites of reception.

Contemporary neo-burlesque performance is clearly indebted to the early transgressions of gender and social convention marked out by burlesque performers of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century stage. The "awarishness" of early burlesque performers is adopted by neo-burlesque artists and, in particular, their use of wit and tease operates as a means to comment critically on the striptease body. As I demonstrate, neo-burlesque performance offers significant opportunities for personal change in relation to women's self-esteem and perceptions of the sexual self, and it can reproduce, negotiate, and destabilize social constructions of the feminine through diverse and paradoxical representations. Consequently, it facilitates a powerful site of politics and pleasure both for artists and audiences. Yet the concept of transformation as a universal tenet of neo-burlesque striptease is clearly untenable. The capacity for neo-burlesque to produce social change beyond the performance moment is circumscribed by its contexts of reception and is limited to those who have access to the necessary economic, social, and intellectual capital to critique their cultural landscape. Yet for a suburban middle-aged mother of two, it undoubtedly brought about a thrilling sense of change (see Photo 5).

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Notes

1. The Korova Milk Bar was a profit-share collective of burlesque artists, musicians, and novelty acts that produced events at different venues. This one took place in a ballroom at the Stoke Pub in Guildford, United Kingdom.

2. While there are also well-developed "boylesque" (male neo-burlesque), "queer," and transgender neo-burlesque scenes, this project centers entirely on the area of female performance and builds on an earlier research interest in representations of the female body in striptease (see Dodds 1997).

3. I situate the ethnographic approach that I apply to this study within a cultural studies tradition, which is markedly different from the large-scale qualitative methods typically undertaken in sociology and the sustained immersion into a field that characterizes anthropology. For further discussion of these disciplinary specificities, see Dodds (2011).

4. In London I visited Hip Hip and Burly Q at Bethnal Green Working Men's Club; Blues and Buns Burlesque at Volupté; Ska Burlesque at the Amersham Arms; the Wam Bam Club at the Soho Revue Bar; and performances at the Brickhouse, the Volstead Club, Koko, and the Feminist Neo-Burlesque Symposium at the Central School of Speech and Drama. In New York, I attended Hot Box Burlesque and Mr. Choade's Upstairs/Downstairs at the Slipper Room, Starshine Burlesque at Rififi's, This Is Burlesque at Corio's, and Le Scandal at The Cutting Room.

5. This body of work focuses on striptease performance that takes place in pubs, bars, and "gentleman's clubs" and includes stripping, pole dancing, table dancing, and lap-dancing.

6. Blair Murphy (2009) analyzes neo-burlesque striptease through the lens of subcultural theory, and Peluso (2010) examines gender and sexuality in neo-burlesque striptease and flat-track roller derby.

7. I acknowledge that a diversity of acts contributes to the neo-burlesque genre, and while some are radical and subversive in content, others are conservative and largely maintain gendered norms. In this article, I focus principally on those artists who seek to critique representations of the female body.

8. See Midgelow (2007) for a discussion of how choreographers employ parody to renegotiate gender roles within concert dance performance.

9. The concept of "masquerade" is developed by Joan Riviere as a way to conceive the feminine as an "exaggeration" that exposes its constructed nature (Harris 1999).

10. Within this study, I also provide a counter-argument to suggest that claims of transformation are troubled when viewed from a political economy perspective and through the lens of a socio-historical examination of the dance practices at the center of this documentary film (Dodds 2008).

11. While the "culturalist" tradition, which employed ethnographic methods and studies of "lived experience," characterized the early work of British cultural studies (Grossberg 1993), a tendency toward textual analysis dominated cultural studies throughout the 1980s (Barker 2000). This latter approach draws on linguistics (in particular semiotics and structuralism) to conduct a formal and technical analysis of textual forms; its strength is that it facilitates a systematic description and analysis of a text, although its limitations are that it neglects to read the text in relation to matters of material production, social organization, and consumption (Johnson 1996).

12. The workshop, titled "Six Ways to Remove A Glove," took place on November 5, 2005, as part of the International Workshop Festival in London, UK. It was led by Jo King from the London School of Striptease, and, in addition to teaching the participants how to remove an opera glove in the style of burlesque striptease, she also taught us how to work with feather boas and to execute other burlesque moves such as walks, turns, hip and bottom work, lip licking, and "bump and grind."

13. Across London and New York, there are numerous neo-burlesque training and performance opportunities aimed both at the general public and either amateur performers or novice professionals, such as the courses run at the London School of Striptease and the New York School of Burlesque, or neo-burlesque competitions, such as Tournament of Tease in London and the Miss Exotic World Pageant in Las Vegas.

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14. I have amassed information regarding fees from my own performance experience, through interview data and from audience discussions at the Feminist Neo-Burlesque Symposium at the Central School of Speech and Drama (October 26, 2007). It is also noteworthy that high-profile neo-burlesque artists such as Dita Von Teese and Immodesty Blaize, who perform at large-scale popular venues and private events, command much higher fees.

15. Although Skeggs offers some useful ideas regarding social class, a limitation of her thinking is the tendency to depict the working classes as an uncritical mass.

16. These ideas were duplicated during audience discussion at the Feminist Neo-Burlesque Symposium, which suggested that working class women were not represented in the neo-burlesque scene.

17. The concept of the "male gaze" was developed by Laura Mulvey (1989) in reference to film spectatorship and representations of the female body. Although her thesis was widely critiqued for its neglect of the female spectator and its appropriation of a psychoanalytic epistemology (see Caughie and Kuhn 1992), Mulvey (1989) uses the example of female striptease to illustrate how male audiences actively "look" and female strippers are "looked at."

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