

Introduction | Embodied Criticism of the Erotic Body

I was just starting my second semester of my first year of college. I had been out of the closet for five months, and I was feeling pretty good about myself, naively thinking that now I could express my sexuality freely instead of jamming it under the mattress like my secret stash of porn when I was a tween. One afternoon, like most other afternoons, I was huddled with a group of new theater friends, catching a smoke outside of Centennial East after one of our classes. A woman walked by. I gave the gaze, the up and down objectifying gaze that I had just learned about in Intro to Women's Studies. I commented on the woman in the short skirt with the long legs to my friends. One rolled her eyes and sighed. The other looked at me with a scowl and said, "God, Maggie! You're just as bad as a man!"

I recoiled.

I don't remember my response, although had I been older with a better education in radical sexual politics, I would have flipped the script and won this battle with an accusation of homophobia. What I do remember, what I remember with my whole body, is the shame I felt underneath whatever sarcastic remark I likely delivered. So much shame that I have spent a lifetime of academic work—as an undergrad, a grad student, a doctoral candidate, a job seeker, a new hire, and finally a tenured professor—explaining my looking. Defending my feminism. Justifying my (objectifying) sexual gaze.

Foundations and Excitations

When I was a young punk—well, actually, a middle-aged punk—in graduate school, I discovered both rhetorical criticism and rhetoric of the body while working on my PhD in rhetoric and composition. I had been studying and writing about queer sexuality and sex-radical feminism since I was an undergraduate, and I had also recently discovered an interest in topless dancing (viewing not performing)—a subject I will return to shortly. The combination of these interests led me to consider bodies as generators of rhetoric. Throughout graduate

school, as I increasingly heard the term *rhetoric of the body*, I noticed two things. First, the topic was largely absent from scholarship on rhetorical criticism, and second, the topic was not talked about with regard to sexual behavior or embodiment or action or movement. Rhetoric of the body, at least as I was encountering it, primarily dealt with rhetoric *about* the body, about the discursive structures and contexts that shape the body in language. This lacuna—partially a result of my positioning in a discipline that pairs rhetoric with writing studies—opened up space for me in which to bring together my longtime study of sexuality with my newfound interest in criticism.

When I first began thinking about sexuality critically—and by *sexuality* I mean sexual behaviors and identities of all orientations, not just those queer ones that *sexuality* is often code for—most research was limited to anthropology, psychology, and sociology. The rhetoric of sexuality didn't exist as a field of study. So I sought out spaces containing what Jack Selzer refers to as “material, nonliterate practices and realities”—spaces that foregrounded the material communication of sexed and sexualized bodies to begin figuring out what *sexual rhetoric* can mean.¹ Thus the central questions that have motivated my work for the past thirteen years and that are the central focus of this book are How does one criticize erotic body rhetoric? and How can we theorize embodied rhetoric capaciously to include both discourse about bodies and the body's material symbolic communication as well?

When I began this work as a graduate student, I was preoccupied with defining sexual rhetoric as a subfield of rhetoric of the body, one that centralizes the sexual body as a subject of study that has the potential to rewrite our field's assumptions about logocentric rhetoric, much like disability rhetoric has done. I found myself using the phrase *sexual rhetoric*, without really knowing what that meant. Sexual rhetoric seemed to only exist as a general topic area, rather than as a subfield.

But . . .

The past decade has been good to sexual rhetoric.

Sexing Rhetoric

One publication that has led the way in carving out sexual rhetoric as a subfield of rhetorical studies is Jonathan Alexander and Jacqueline Rhodes's 2015 edited collection *Sexual Rhetorics: Methods, Identities, Publics*. Alexander and

Rhodes—reflecting the theoretical sea change in the intervening years—situate their book specifically in queer studies, rhetorical studies, and gender and sexuality studies. This collection gives form and theory and coherence to a diverse set of multi- and interdisciplinary scholarship on sexuality.

Finally, sexual rhetorics is a thing.

Sexual Rhetorics focuses on discourses of sexuality and methods for interpreting them. The editors define sexual rhetorics as “self-conscious and critical engagement with discourses of sexuality that exposes both their naturalization and their queering, their torqueing to create different or counter-discourses.” This engagement “giv[es] voice and agency to multiple and complex sexual experiences.”² In addition, the authors pursue the related goal of offering ways to engage with these experiences, presenting a set of methods for analyzing sexual rhetorics that arises from rhetorical and communication studies—namely, “case studies, theoretical questioning, ethnographies, and close (and distant) readings of ‘texts’ that help us think through the rhetorical force of sexuality and the sexual force of rhetoric.”³ The critical work in the book underscores the authors’ claim that “any understanding of rhetorical action is necessarily hampered, if not indeed damaged, without robust attention to the sexual.”⁴ *Sexual Rhetorics* defines this subfield, giving it theoretical and methodological shape and making space for work like my own as both sexual rhetorics and rhetoric of the body continue to grow as vibrant areas of rhetorical studies.

While the body has always played some role in rhetoric, explicit discussions and theorizations of it became increasingly scattered as rhetorical theory split, with the embodied oral tradition going in one direction and rhetoric and writing theory going in another. For scholars in the nascent discipline of speech communication, the body was central. Debra Hawhee’s review of the place of “sensuous activity” in one hundred years of the *Quarterly Journal of Speech* finds that “sensation came pre-installed as a relevant area of inquiry” with “bodily processes and movements of expression” being listed as one of the knowledge domains for researchers.⁵ In the late twentieth century, however, “epistemic rhetoric and certain versions of postmodern rhetoric . . . shunted sensation to the side.”⁶

In addition to the importance of the body and movement to early speech researchers, some rhetoricians in the mid-twentieth century began analyzing the body rhetoric seen in the protest actions of the new social movements. However, the body as a knowledge domain or as a theory-making medium was absent in much of this work as many leading voices on body rhetoric characterized it as a

passionate persuasive action that operated differently from the logical argument of the new rhetoric, which concerned itself with linguistic activity.⁷

Outside of the waxing and waning interest of rhetoricians, the twentieth century saw the emergence of the interdisciplinary field of performance studies, which drew scholars from diverse fields in both the arts and social sciences in order to analyze the body as a primary transmitter of cultural knowledge, making not just entertainment but communication and theory as well. D. Soyini Madison and Judith Hamera argue that as a “critical dynamic within human behavior and social processes,” performance offers “ways of comprehending how human beings fundamentally make culture, affect power, and reinvent their ways of being in the world.”⁸ As a result, while the field of performance studies is interdisciplinary, scholarship of performance is largely transdisciplinary, exceeding the boundaries of disciplinary meaning making to engage human concerns.⁹ Thus performance studies is, as Dwight Conquergood names it, the “borderlands terrain,” transcendent of boundaries among social processes, actors, and contexts.¹⁰ In this way, performance studies and rhetorical studies share many of the same concerns, which Conquergood persuasively articulated in 1992 when he reinvigorated rhetorical attention to performance. One of the primary ways that performance studies can (and to my mind *should*) influence rhetorical studies is in analysis of embodied rhetoric, particularly erotic rhetoric, as “pleasure has always been the bedrock of performance studies.”¹¹

In the past two decades, as interest in performance has grown, rhetoricians and communication scholars have shown a renewed interest in rhetoric and embodiment, retheorizing rhetoric in order to make space for a whole range of cultural practices and sites.¹² This work has raised new sets of questions and methodological concerns for the critical study of rhetorical bodies. The scholarship on rhetoric of the body is wide ranging, drawing on theories of feminism, poststructuralism, and queer theory and enacted on various artifacts: the athletic body, the protesting body, the pregnant body, the disabled body, the diseased body.¹³ All of this work serves to broaden the province of rhetoric and of rhetorical criticism and also serves to add to the theoretical and methodological tools of performance.¹⁴ Yet while rhetorical scholars have made a place for the communicating body, studying it is still not without its disciplinary and methodological challenges.

Despite renewed attention to corporeality and performance, many rhetoricians who analyze the body focus primarily on discourse, and this has been reflected in two key ways in the literature: either by subordinating gestural communication to the linguistic or by focusing primarily on the ways that the body is constructed

(and variously enabled/disabled, accepted/rejected) via language. The first trend is represented by the study of protest rhetoric in the mid-twentieth century, which tended to treat body rhetoric as distinctly different from traditional rhetoric, and the second by studies of the body in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, which were primarily focused on difference and inequality in how language constructs the body. Both trends demonstrate rhetoric's tradition as a primarily logocentric discipline in which "material moments of rhetorical action . . . have largely remained beyond the reach of rhetoricians, who have traditionally (and understandably) been most attentive to oral and written discourses, narrowly conceived."¹⁵ If the body only concerns us as it is articulated through language, then critics can employ textual methods of criticism, which many studies of rhetoric of the body do. However, relying solely on textual methods can reinforce rhetoric's logocentricity by admitting nontraditional artifacts into the realm of rhetorical study, but analyzing them with methods designed for textual artifacts and neglecting the body's kinesthetic practices and material dimensions. Though widely variable in theoretical and methodological orientations, scholarship on rhetoric of the body tends to emphasize the relationship between the material body and discourse: linguistic practices shape material realities, and material realities exert forces on linguistic practices.¹⁶ Bodies come to "matter" (or not) through discourse; they are materialized, regulated, and controlled through language,¹⁷ yet analysis of linguistic practices isn't always capable of (or useful in) analyzing the ways that bodies communicate through movement, clothing, modification, and adornment—symbolic codes that are central to erotic performance and many other embodied rhetorics. Because analysis of the rhetorical body is often guided by an attention to the relationship between the material and the linguistic, methods of criticizing bodies need to engage in a similar "dialectical tacking," attending to both the discursive and material body, understanding that they are neither the same, nor separate.¹⁸ Thus if critics understand language to be only part of what gives the body rhetorical force, we are presented with both the "formidable challenge" and the "promise" of integrating primarily linguistic critical approaches with material ones.¹⁹

How *Does* One "Criticize" Bodies?

Current scholarship suggests that rhetoric of the body is produced by both linguistic and material practices, but most criticism has frontloaded the linguistic.

Many critics examine the ways that language constructs understanding of, possibilities for, and reactions to bodies. Such analyses highlight the ways that hegemonic discursive systems can constrain the material body's capabilities to forge arguments. Michael Butterworth demonstrates this with his analysis of Colorado University kicker Katie Hnida, whose presence on a university football team reinforced misogynistic reactions to women in spaces conceived as being for men only. The violent backlash to her playing for the CU team illustrates that "responses to Katie Hnida's transgression point to limitations for body rhetoric[:] . . . embodied arguments do not always or necessarily lead to progressive outcomes."²⁰ Using Hnida's experiences to illustrate the interconnection between discourse and the material body, Butterworth argues, "If we are to think of the body as a vehicle for rhetorical performance, then we must come to terms with the discursive constraints that constitute bodies in public life."²¹ Such constraints can be particularly limiting to the communicative potential of bodies, in particular, bodies of difference.²²

Such bodies are also ones in which the "interconnections of language and material practices" are especially evident,²³ and increasingly, critics are also focusing on the symbolic communication of the body itself. Here analysis moves from a focus on how discourse systems render bodies to reading the body itself—its parts, movements, contours, shades—and its styling—body modifications, clothes, accessories, make-up. For example, a critic focused on these types of material symbolic elements might study fashion runway shows of the past fifteen years in order to understand what makes the bodies of Rihanna's Savage X Fenty line so newsworthy. This line, famous for its inclusion of all body types, skin tones, and genders, showcases humans dressing and moving in ways that don't minimize presence, as runway models have typically done (in order to minimize humanity and maximize the attention to the garment) and has issued a decisive argument about what has long been (mistakenly) valued in the fashion industry. While material bodily communication is often misread, as Butterworth demonstrates, or is unable to dismantle hegemonic discourse systems, it retains symbolic importance. While Rihanna and Savage X Fenty are still constrained by hegemonic racist, sexist, and transphobic discourses, they have posed a significant symbolic (and financial) challenge to them. Thus criticism of the body can illustrate the ways that the material body is embedded in—but not entirely accounted for by—discourse. Concurrent with a growing interest in the material symbolic, scholars have increasingly questioned common assumptions of rhetoric and rhetorical criticism, including the stability of

text and context, upon which rhetorical criticism was built. In “cast[ing her] lot with the ‘disturbers’” to traditional rhetorical criticism—criticism that was standardized by adherence to particular methodologies and a concern with providing answers—Carole Blair writes:

From our vantage point in the early twenty-first century, rhetorical criticism of the 1970s and 1980s must appear now to have been rather staid, uniform, and predictable. . . . [C]ritical works varied little in terms of their general format, tone, and articulated goals. It was to be a brief period of relative uniformity and consensus. No matter which or how many labels one may prefer to describe the source(s) of critical disturbance in the late 1980s and 1990s—poststructuralism, deconstruction, critical theory, postmodernism, anti-racist theory, neo-Freudianism, post-Marxism, sexuality studies, postcolonialism, critical rhetoric, third wave feminism, ideological criticism, cultural studies, etc.—there was disruption in the ranks. . . . [C]riticism *has* changed noticeably in the last decade as a result of their presence and persistence.²⁴

The paradigmatic shift wrought by the discursive turn had the effect, somewhat ironically, of making space for the criticism of material and bodily symbolic communication, whose subjects of study “deman[d]” new “kinds of critical analysis.”²⁵ Thus the analysis of rhetorical artifacts has become more exploratory and inquisitive, demonstrating nuance, messiness, and even confusion, rather than arguments for a particular interpretation. Exploration is encouraged. Criticism is process, rather than product. While the criticism of bodies relies on a retheorizing of rhetorical analysis itself, it also suggests that bodies are always an integral part of rhetorical communication. Through analysis of Kenneth Burke’s health and body in relation to his critical work, Debra Hawhee argues that somatic experiences always shape how we think and write and act. Hawhee writes a “body biography” of Burke demonstrating the ways that his body—most obviously when it was ailing—was inseparable from his critical and theoretical work: “Burke’s letters show that he grappled with his own aging, ailing body just as much as he did with the body in theory. His letters help document an emerging theory of body-thinking, which later becomes manifest in his cloacal criticism, criticism that focuses on the otherwise repulsive underbelly of humanity: excrement, vomit, pollution.”²⁶ Hawhee’s thorough and incisive analysis of the body *in* Burke’s work—a transdisciplinary approach that

accounts for Burke's transdisciplinary thinking—does not rely on theories that “keep bodies tightly yoked to language.”²⁷

Building on the work of prior critics of the body, who have prompted retheorizing of the process of criticism, this book suggests that the theories and methods for criticizing the body that I present are productive because they take into account the complexities of embodied rhetoric, which always operates in multiple symbolic codes. Because the body in performance is “the primary site of information, transmission, and transformation,”²⁸ the book foregrounds specific material communication practices and proposes various complementary frameworks and theories for analyzing them. In particular, the book explores bodies, acts, and discourses of embodied erotic performance rhetoric. Each chapter takes up a different theoretical framework for approaching body criticism; the frameworks are neither distinct nor complete, and it is their partialness that I hope provides an invitation or provocation to scholars of the rhetorical body to work the spaces and contradictions presented by this partialness. In developing critical approaches, I draw on theories both of and adjacent to rhetoric. However, in theorizing them for the study of erotic bodies, I have taken an approach informed by performance studies, which is “sympathetic to the avant-garde, the marginal, the offbeat, the minoritarian, the subversive, the twisted, the queer, people of color, and the formerly colonized.”²⁹ Dustin Bradley Goltz argues that to “approach . . . criticism from a performative frame is to take a step away from essential understandings of what something or someone *is*, and look to how something or someone is *done*.”³⁰ This process-based approach is at the heart of performative methods, and it is vital for analyzing rhetorical bodies. Finally, a performance studies approach “centralizes the body in the heart of the analysis and study of communication.”³¹ Therefore, the theories and critical approaches presented in each chapter merge insights from performance and rhetorical studies to theorize possibilities for rhetorical criticism that places the corporeal body central in analysis.

The analyses that follow draw variously on rhetorical delivery, genre criticism, postmodern seduction theory, articulation theory, and alterity, in order to develop approaches for interpreting embodied erotic rhetoric and to explore some of the contested arenas of rhetorical action that construct women's sexual bodies such as neo-burlesque performance, commercial topless dancing, sex-worker activism, and feminist “sex wars.”³² These frameworks, while particularly useful to embodied rhetorical performances, are also broadly applicable to a whole range of constitutive rhetorics. I intend for the analyses to demonstrate

their generative rather than restrictive aspects, as I am aware that too much attention to method can lead to reductive analyses in which critics find precisely what they were looking for because the method itself suggests that one *will find* certain sets of meaningful symbols making certain sets of arguments.³³ Therefore, readers should understand the analyses here as providing openings to discuss the rhetorical aspects of erotic performance. The findings represent one interpretation by one critic. Less than attempting to make definitive statements about these acts and their contexts, I am interested in expanding the conversations usually had about erotic performance to see them as a particular kind of embodied performance rhetoric.

In addition to the different types of theories and methods used, the analyses in this book also draw on disciplines outside of rhetoric, in particular, sexuality studies, women and gender studies, dance studies, and performance studies. These disciplines and practices are particularly useful for my analyses because they view the body—not language—as primary. Because the body communicates in multiple symbolic realms—it is not merely a textual artifact—analysis of the rhetorical body can be assisted by drawing on the wealth of information on the body that has been done in other fields, in particular, fields that study bodies in action and not only bodies in text. In addition, as a way to be attentive to actual bodies, I also draw on ethnography. Because it is a methodology that is “radically contingent . . . open, flexible, adaptable, and sensitive to situation, circumstance, and nuance,”³⁴ ethnography enables a researcher to study the body in a way that is open ended and open to different ways of seeing and knowing. In each chapter, I pursue the act of rhetorical criticism—an act with its origin in language—with acts outside of language that are not always perceived as rhetorical, thus I seek to broaden what is included in the rhetorical. Thus my study of erotic bodies depends on perspectives that locate those bodies not only in language but also outside of the linguistic as well. In addition, I let the acts I analyze speak back to, challenge, and revise what counts as a rhetorical approach. That is, I do not just bring a rhetorical perspective to erotic bodies; I also bring the communication styles of those bodies back to rhetoric.

Embodied Erotic and Sexual Rhetorics

Because erotic performances depend on the movement, locations, and adornment of bodies alone and in conversation with other bodies, several of the analyses

in this book foreground those features as types of symbolic interaction. Thus I start from the assumptions that the material is part of the province of rhetoric and that the material has symbolic dimensions because rhetorical critics have been arguing for attention to materiality, including bodies, for more than two decades now. Carole Blair argued at the turn of the century, “It seems no longer necessary to argue for the rhetorical character of material objects”; that is even truer now.³⁵ Therefore, the purpose of the book is to engage with practices of rhetorical body criticism, rather than to defend that pursuit. This book also does not focus on the nonsymbolic materiality that influences rhetorical criticism and theory.³⁶ There has been compelling work in the past two decades in new materialisms that advances the importance of the material within rhetoric, particularly with regard to feminist new materialism. While I name and engage *the material*, the criticism here is not “materialist” per se, as that term references particular disciplinary subfields and theoretical approaches. Rather, my primary focus is on symbolic practices of the body that are constructed and deployed via codes beyond alphabetic text alone and that are consciously chosen by performers and activists (chapters 1, 2, 3) and on the ways those practices become particularly contentious when they are taken up and interpreted in new—particularly activist—contexts (chapters 4 and 5). Thus even while I focus on objects and bodies, I am specifically analyzing symbolic communication. Sometimes, as in the case of erotic dance, the conscious crafting of the performance rhetoric—choices in costuming, movement, makeup—are my central focus.³⁷ In the case of neo-burlesque and club stripping, these kinesthetic, sartorial, and cosmetic choices constitute a particular type of material symbolic rhetoric. In my analyses of erotic dance, both the material (which always influences symbolic meaning) and the material symbolic (those symbols chosen for specific communicative purposes) are rhetorically significant.

In addition to focusing on the particularly rhetorical features of the material symbolic codes in public erotic performances, chapters 4 and 5 also consider contexts in which those same material symbolic codes operate to forge identities, which are contested by virtue of being constructed by embodied erotic rhetoric. Thus the subjects under analysis in the book proceed from the highly performative comedic erotic performances of neo-burlesque to the work of club stripping, to the activism of sex workers, to the symbolically aligned SlutWalk protests. That is, the text proceeds from analyses of the erotic body in public performance (chapters 1, 2, 3) to analyses of the erotic body as a cultural symbol. Therefore, taken as a whole, the text engages both material and discursive

constructions of erotic bodies in performance. The cultural discourses about erotic performers in chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that the contexts in which the performances of erotic bodies are not confined to clubs and theaters. In this process, the erotic performer can be stripped of agency. By looking at the rhetoric of sex-work activists deployed through both material and linguistic codes (chapter 4) and feminists' debates about erotic bodies, in which the material symbolic constructs identities as either feminist or not (chapter 5), in addition to the performances themselves, I hope to complicate common (mis)understandings of the public erotic body and its communication practices.³⁸

“You Got a Lap Dance . . . That’s ‘Data?’”: Acts, Artifacts, and the Erotics of Data Collection

Because the chapters deal with various rhetorical acts and artifacts, not all data were collected in the same manner. The work on erotic dance is largely ethnographic, in particular, participant observer, while the chapters that deal with feminist debates about embodied sexual rhetoric represent the analysis of primary online sources of public media. Further, the artifacts were chosen to highlight those areas of embodied sexual rhetorics—cis and trans women’s public performances and activism—that are the focus of vigorous feminist debate. The first three chapters all analyze erotic dance, including both neo-burlesque and commercial stripping. Although these two practices have the same historical antecedent and share broad genre characteristics (in particular, the removal of clothing to music), they are distinctly different erotic arts, as chapter 2 will illustrate. Because some definitional work of the two genres is integral to the analysis in those chapters, here I will just offer some broad information about the types of erotic dance, with the understanding that these are generalizations and are not intended to represent all dancers or the genres in which they perform. I also want to further note that terminology is ever changing and also ever contested.

Erotic dancing encompasses a wide range of art forms. As sexuality and dance have long been linked, it is often difficult to pin down what exactly counts as erotic dance, when so many forms of dance operate via sexualized symbolic codes.³⁹ Dance scholar Judith Hanna explains, “Dance and sex both use the same instrument—namely, the human body—and both involve the language of the body’s orientation toward pleasure.”⁴⁰ Sexualized dance takes certain

material symbolic codes and enacts them in an “imaginatively stylize[d]” way on stage.⁴¹ Thus dance performatively communicates experiences of sex and sexuality for audiences, taking codes that are typically private and personal and making them public. Therefore, even in dance forms like ballet that are now considered to be high art, there are long and entrenched associations with taboo communication. However, theatrical dance retains very little of the damaging stigma that affects commercial erotic dancing. Neo-burlesque, which moves along a continuum between the two, avoids much of the stigma of club stripping because of its theatrical stylized nature and because it is removed from the customer-worker transaction that marks a practice as sex work. In the US, where I’ve done my research, the art of stripping breaks down roughly into the theatrical and the commercial, although these are fluid boundaries. Commercial erotic dancing includes topless and nude dancing in clubs on stages, tables, or in direct contact with a customer. These most often take place in a club, with many dancers performing one at a time to individuals or to groups. Generally, customers tip dancers directly and dancers tip out to clubs a percentage of their total earnings. The degree of contact between customers and dancers is highly variable, depending on municipal ordinances, local mores, and owner preferences. Dancers also have some say over the amount of contact they have with customers.⁴² In theatrical erotic dance, including neo-burlesque and cabaret, dancers perform on stages to audiences. Audiences pay for tickets to individual shows and performers typically don’t cultivate one-on-one relationships with the audience, although some neo-burlesque shows do allow tipping to individual dancers. Because my own research includes both topless and neo-burlesque, those will be my representatives of each genre (with the ever-present refrain that these boundaries are fluid). In chapter 2, I will spend more time analyzing the dominant symbolic codes—including linguistic, kinesthetic, sartorial, and cosmetic—in each genre.

Despite the fact that my research into stripping was frequently perceived by others as not serious, rigorous, or appropriate, it was with this work that I began to seriously consider a rhetoric of the body that was more than text. In February of 2005, while working on my PhD, I began conducting ethnographic research on topless dancers. The research consisted of participation in the exchange of dances, observation in several clubs, and interviews with dancers. I initially entered a topless club out of curiosity and became a regular customer and a researcher. During the study, these roles were complex, conflated, and confusing. Ethnography, however, is a research method that relies on role connotations if

the researcher is to successfully enter any environment as an outsider. Rather than interfere with the data gathering and analysis, I found that by becoming a regular at “the club,” that I gained access to information that casual customers generally do not get. Though it was complicated, maintaining the roles of customer, confidante, researcher, and friend proved to be valuable to my research. By being a good customer (*hands at my sides . . . unless otherwise directed*) and spending money (*a lot*) on dancers, I managed to give back something to the women who shared their stories with me. For two years, it was a stressful, confusing, and emotionally draining experience, and the “hyphenated space between participant-observer worked hard on me.”⁴³ I used the data I collected from interviews and my experiences as a customer in two graduate research classes. In one of the more boneheaded moves I made in graduate school, I never obtained official IRB clearance for the study. As long as the data were only used in my classes and not published, I didn’t need to get full approval. And I didn’t. And it languishes still on tiny cassette tapes next to a tiny cassette recorder that stopped working circa 2010. While I can’t quote from or directly refer to that data, I mention it now because it was a serious study. Insights that I have gained about club stripping come from that experience and from the wealth of published literature on the subject. Whenever possible, I choose scholarship written by dancers, and I bring my own experiences into the work in this book via narratives of times in the club when I wasn’t acting as a researcher.

While still in graduate school and exhausted from the emotional toils of strip-club (*and other kinds of*) addiction, I changed my focus and wrote a dissertation on LGBTQ (although to be honest, there was very little T and Q) social-movement rhetoric. I hated every minute of it but was concerned about the looming job market after being told by more than one member of the field that strippers would look bad to potential employers. Once I was hired and comfortably ensconced in my new academic home where they seemed to support whatever I wanted to do, I took a breath and thought about what I wanted. The research that had been most compelling to me had been on strippers. In an incredibly unlikely twist, one of my early friendships here was with a former peepshow dancer, who happened to be part of the early burlesque revival in Seattle. This friend also just so happens to be good friends with Indigo Blue, headmistress of Seattle’s Academy of Burlesque and the founder of both BurlyQ queer cabaret and BurlyCon. Talking to my friend about burlesque got me interested after an initial reluctance to take up this performative stripping. I didn’t really get the appeal of neo-burlesque and found the celebration of

vintage styles that seemed to me characteristic of the culture off-putting. Further, what I had found so compelling about strip clubs were the one-on-one interactions with dancers and neo-burlesque is a different animal. But with some research, it increasingly seemed like a good option for me. It presented many of the same opportunities to study embodied erotic rhetoric as club stripping, but without the emotional, physical, and financial costs. And so I became a neo-burlesque researcher, traveling as much as I could afford to, and attending as many shows as I could, publishing a couple of articles, presenting at Burly-Con and conferences in my discipline, and corresponding with performers. Thus my research on neo-burlesque has been a combination of live shows, performer interviews, online videos and pictures, and traditional textual sources. Initially, I attempted to only analyze performances I had seen. That proved to be too limiting, however, and so not all of the performers I reference or analyze in this book are ones I have seen. Performances that I have seen in person or that are available online can be found in my notes or bibliography. Live performance is ephemeral, however, and even acts that are performed repeatedly are never the same. What I find intriguing about strip clubs is the high degree of symbolic convergence among narratives of experiences both for customers and for dancers, revealing a “group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings.”⁴⁴ Customers and dancers participate in fantasies that are remarkable for their unremarkability. The fact that the same scripts are repeated *ad nauseum* does nothing to diminish the experience for customers. In fact, it forms part of the appeal. Neo-burlesque acts on the other hand—although the same ones can be performed for years—forge significant parts of their symbolic meanings in the moment, rather than in the repetition. Audience members influence each other, and most performers are highly attuned to those dynamics, which can shape everything from facial expressions to the degree of interaction between audiences and performers. Acts are planned, choreographed, and practiced, but for the most part neo-burlesque has an invisible and permeable fourth wall.

Although my research into neo-burlesque has been nowhere near as intense as my research into stripping—at one point I was regularly going to clubs three to four nights a week—it has completely changed the way I think about what rhetoric of the body can mean and made me rethink some basic ideas within rhetoric, in particular, delivery and audience. As a writer, a writing teacher, and a student of rhetoric and composition, these were concepts that I understood *in theory* but were in fact removed from my actual experiences with writing in

which I sat in a room and typed and then someone sat in a different room and read. This act of telepathy, as Stephen King calls it, of a writer transmitting to a reader removed in time and space, is powerful.⁴⁵ The metaphor of telepathy, situated in the brains of writers and readers is not applicable to communication with the body, however, because live performance collapses the space between writers and readers. Thus it ties both to rhetoric's history of orality and to rhetoric's present/future with new media texts that similarly revise traditional considerations of reader-writer-text configurations.

Drawing on my research of erotic dance over the past fifteen years, the first three chapters of this book analyze performance directly, and thus the writing is more explicitly personal than in the final two chapters. As a member of the audience and customer, my analyses necessarily engage my role as a participant in the exchange. To that end, particularly in chapter 2, I'm explicitly focused on audience roles in relation to and as themselves, performing bodies. This means that the body under discussion is sometimes my own. Thus my writing bumps up against (and sometimes explicitly enters into) autoethnography. Certainly, the ways that I have collected and processed data have drawn on ethnographic methods, and much of the literature that I have drawn on in my research of neo-burlesque and club stripping is ethnographic or autoethnographic. Observers of erotic performance are almost certainly included in the audience by the act of attending the club or performance and so placed into that role. Participation is a fundamental part of a performance studies' methodology because it is a field in which the "mode of inquiry demands physical sensuous involvement in a performance event. The methodology depends upon personal responsiveness, somatic engagement, and cognitive analysis. Performance studies mandates a methodology of participation."⁴⁶ Like sociologist and strip-club researchers Kassia Wosick-Corea and Lauren Joseph, my analysis of strip clubs depends on my "active participation as [a customer] in the club's activities."⁴⁷ Also like them, being a woman customer in particular shapes my findings in particular ways. Unlike Wosick-Corea and Joseph, I was never in a club masquerading as a "typical" woman customer. I openly discussed my research and also *was* a typical customer in that I went to strip clubs for many reasons that had nothing to do with scholarship. In this way, my work in chapter 2 has more in common with the autoethnographic scholarship written by dancers than with researchers who are only in the club for their own scholarship. Further, much of the work on stripping in the "post-deviance era" of sociology and anthropology is written by performers

themselves.⁴⁸ Thus autoethnography is often a fundamental part of the research on erotic performance.

Because of its refusal of objectivity, autoethnography has held a contested place in the social sciences, whose researchers have typically valued a distanced stance. In his frustrating and incredibly snarky critique of autoethnography, Donald Shields uses Ernest Bormann's symbolic convergence theory to demonstrate the ways that autoethnography forecloses on the possibility of critical authority by eschewing authority in the first place: "If one assumes there is no objective truth, then the presentation of the lived experience is only a fiction to be compared to other fictions."⁴⁹ Autoethnographers, then, create a symbolic reality in which new work adds to a shared vision of reality and reinforces genre characteristics (the confessional tone, the defensive posture, the generalizing based on one's experience in the name of social justice) thus "merely reflect[ing] the style specific rhetorical vision on which the story is based" and "masquerade[ing] fiction as fact."⁵⁰ Inspired by Shield's dismissal, but with a different set of concerns (the aesthetic, rather than epistemic value of autoethnography), Craig Gingrich-Philbrook argues that "however much one applauds autoethnography's artistic and social intentions, those intentions do not in themselves secure artistic results."⁵¹ Pointing out that the "signifier sine qua non of autoethnography is simply italics," Gingrich-Philbrook critiques the ways that autoethnographies often claim artistic value while neglecting artistic visions and desperately wanting "Daddy's approval" as a legitimate and appropriately rigorous method.⁵² I've tried to take a cue from Gingrich-Philbrook in this book and have attempted to avoid "justify[ing] the presence of the self in writing to the patriarchal council of self-satisfied social scientists."⁵³ I agree that it's not worth it. At the same time, I do want to acknowledge that researcher participation is a fundamental part of erotic dance scholarship.

Ethnography and autoethnography are by necessity primary methods of dancer research both in neo-burlesque and club stripping.⁵⁴ While one can use a variety of methods to analyze data, a researcher can't observe performance without being either performer or audience member. While my body finds itself in this text in a number of places, the work is not strictly autoethnography, as it isn't myself that I'm analyzing; the self (mostly) serves as illustration of the rhetorical processes that I am observing, rather than as the subject of a systematic analysis of my personal experience that is the aim of autoethnography.⁵⁵ What readers will find throughout this book standing in as artifacts of performance and as illustrations are what Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams, and Arthur Bochner,

drawing on Barbara Tedlock,⁵⁶ term “narrative ethnography[:] . . . stories that incorporate the ethnographer’s experiences into the ethnographic descriptions and analysis of others.”⁵⁷ In narrative ethnography, “the emphasis is on the ethnographic study of others, which is accomplished partly by attending to encounters between the narrator and members of the groups being studied.”⁵⁸ Because audience members are both observers to shows and participants in them—particularly in erotic performance that engages the audience in intimate and direct ways—there is very little space from which to write that is *not* an intersection of the personal with the analytical. Performance studies’ scholars Lynn Miller and Jacqueline Taylor argue that it is this intersection that grants the personal narrative authority, gaining “a measure of authenticity from its very subjectivity: writer/performers draw upon the particularity of their own lives.”⁵⁹ Therefore, in the chapters in which I analyze performance directly, such encounters both account for my participation and illustrate spaces for erotic performance with which many readers may not be familiar.

The approaches, both to my research and to my analysis, are often what Heather Lee Branstetter describes as “promiscuous,” in that they are often “performative, playful, and mischievous.”⁶⁰ Branstetter argues that analyses of sexual rhetorics benefit from embracing promiscuity by “being so slutty” and “sleeping around with all the other disciplines,”⁶¹ because it enables scholars to “challenge our complacent acceptance of what ‘proper’ scholarship *feels* like, looks like, acts like.” It is “not limited to higher education echo chambers for the purposes of reproduction.”⁶² Branstetter’s theory of promiscuous research is particularly necessary in understanding that the material symbolic codes in this book are often not just transdisciplinary but extradisciplinary as well. They make meaning and communicate outside of the confines of the academy. It is a central thrust of this book that the performers I study are teaching *me*, expanding *my* often-limited understandings of the body.

Things to Remember Not to Forget

Regardless of the theory and critical approach under consideration, regardless of the data sets, studying bodies requires that critics negotiate between the generalizing that criticism requires and the knowledge that people have profoundly different somatic experiences, which can and should unsettle any act of critical analysis. Bodily diversity—including diversity of experience, as well as

the discriminatory and often violent attitudes and actions that surround that diversity—makes talk of method almost moot. Thus even within a particular category of embodied rhetoric, generalizing can reinscribe hierarchies in ways that have serious material consequences for people. At the same time, rhetorical analysis of the body can be a powerful tool for social justice, often revealing the difference between debate and discrimination. For example, the analysis of feminist discourse surrounding sex work isn't important because it reveals disagreements about the embodied identities of sex workers. That disagreement is obvious. What is important is that it reveals a rhetoric of existential denial that is particularly brutal for sex workers and even more particularly brutal for trans women who perform sex work, who are erased both as women and as workers. When trans people's bodies are denied existence, we are not witnessing argument; we are witnessing elimination. By engaging in body criticism, we can insist on existence.

Feminism and the Erotic Body

It is an extended claim of this book that analyzing embodied sexual and erotic rhetorics is a feminist project because feminism foregrounds critical analyses of sex and gender in order to challenge inequality by making visible those matrices of patriarchal hegemony that structure humanity. This is not to say that all discussions of the body are *de facto* feminist. They aren't. But feminist analysis of the body also need not engage in the same set of arguments over and over again. Since the late 1970s, feminists have been engaging in "the sex wars," in which we vigorously clash over opposing ideologies about what are appropriate practices and attitudes about sexuality. In the '80s, these battles were commonly fought over S&M and pornography. Today, the same arguments are found regarding neo-burlesque, around social activism that promotes sexual liberation (à la Slut-Walk), and about sex work in particular—namely, whether sexual commerce *exists* as a job or whether it is slavery. In many cases, these opposing ideologies in the sex wars manifest as discourses of oppression versus discourses of liberation. These discourses are so ingrained and so pervasive that they can appear to be the only available conversations to have, yet they are not, and feminist scholars risk talking in circles if these are seen as the only available positions to take with regard to feminism and sexuality. Further, pro-con discourses such as those frequently found in public discourse about feminist sexuality are rarely useful analytical lenses as they restrict the critic's available classification options.

Therefore, it is my hope that analyses in this book disrupt oppressive/empowering as the sole (or even as an enlightening) critical standard for analyzing erotic performance. If critics are invested in the idea of criticism as conversation (vis-à-vis Ott and Dickinson), the oppressive/empowering dyad is practically useless, as it negates the possibility of conversation. Much like the pro-life/pro-choice dyad, *oppressive* and *empowering* are terms that are unanswerable to each other. The ideological disagreement between pro-life—a position resting on a claim of when life begins—and pro-choice—a position invested in the notion of women’s bodily autonomy—is one that is “not in stasis; its participants do not agree on the point about which they disagree, and hence two different and incompatible arguments are being mounted.”⁶³ Similarly, discourses that claim that certain sexual practices and attitudes are inherently oppressive make an argument about the connection between individual people’s actions and structural inequality, while those that focus on these same practices as empowering focus on the individual’s personal enrichment. When placed side by side, it is clear that both of these states can exist simultaneously. Jo Weldon argues, particularly with regard to neo-burlesque, that it is a moot point to try to make close-ended claims about whether burlesque is feminist or not. Some performances and performers are and some are not. Further, *empowering* is a personal emotional feeling. It is difficult to argue that something is *not* empowering, if one feels empowered.⁶⁴ Claire Nally explores this dynamic in depth, coming to the conclusion that “the very diversity of performances (straight, queer, ‘vintage,’ ‘fetish’) throughout the country, and indeed the world, as well as the complexity of audience demographics and responses, suggest that any simplistic readings of empowerment or patriarchal domination should be withheld.”⁶⁵ Although it doesn’t rely on the same oppressive/empowering dynamic, the conflict over sexual commerce—sex work / sex trafficking—has similar barriers that prevent disagreement from proceeding in a rational manner that leads to one position “winning.” Like most culture war arguments, these positions have tenacious bonds that resist reasoned argument, demonstrating Crowley’s claim that “ideology, fantasy, and emotion are primary motivators of belief and action.”⁶⁶ The embodied sexual and erotic rhetorics that are the focus of this book rely very little on reason and argument and very much on emotion and suggestion. As a feminist critic, I seek to uncover the ways that bodies act not only as generators of rhetorical belief but also as transmitters of it. Therefore, the question “Is _____ (*neo-burlesque* / *stripping* / *sex work* / *SlutWalk*) feminist?” is not one with which I will engage directly. Instead my focus will be

on those symbolic vectors that carry meaning about cis and trans women's sexual and erotic bodies, assuming that to listen to and understand the various ways that such meaning is transmitted is necessary to challenge the dominance of heterocis-patriarchal systems of violence.

Because I don't make arguments about whether or not the erotic rhetorics I study are feminist, I have gotten a lot of push back (*a lot*) when I haven't situated my work explicitly within a feminist conversation, so I am going to spend a little bit of time here to address my work's feminist attributes, in order to explicate my standpoint. I identify as a feminist, and I consider my work to be a feminist project because my primary concerns are with cis and trans women's erotic/eroticized/sexualized bodies. I make those bodies and experiences primary in my work because I want to broaden the conversations that rhetoricians have about all women's bodies. For me that means dealing with erotic and sexual bodies in ways that move beyond arguments about how feminist a job as a sex worker or an erotic performance is or can ever be, and that move beyond the impressive/empowering dyad that stymies conversations about women's sexuality. I want to be very clear (and I still expect push back) that these conversations are important and they *should* be had and they *are* being had and they *will* be examined in this book; however, I will often participate in conversations outside of feminism, too. Therefore, while theoretical debates about the relationship between discourse and materiality in relation to the body and about feminist responses to public and commercialized displays of women's sexual bodies inform the analytical work in this manuscript, it is not the intent of the project to take a position in those debates. Rather, I seek to show how rhetorical analysis of erotic performance can broaden the terms of these arguments by moving beyond matter/discourse and oppressive/empowering binaries.

I hope feminists will find much to value in looking at the sites that I analyze here, but the theoretical and critical framings—delivery, genre, seduction, articulation, and alterity—are not in and of themselves feminist, although I hope to be applying them in feminist ways. At the core of this work is the idea that cis and trans women's bodies, in particular, their *sexual* bodies, are simultaneously reviled and desired, exalted and annihilated, made subject and object. And while this statement generalizes about women's bodies, biases against gender, race, and class (among a host of other embodied differences) make it so these tensions affect women in different—often devastatingly different—ways.

Race, Racism, and the Erotic Body

As good feminist work points out, there is not a universal *women's* experience in relation to any issue and particularly with regard to sexual and erotic rhetoric. Neither is there a universal *woman-of-color* experience, except to say that white women's matrix of privileges often result in a centering of white, middle-class cis women as representative of all women's experiences. Therefore, critics of embodied erotic rhetorics should be mindful that race and gender can never be pulled out and set aside. It is always what you're dealing with. That is, conversations of sexual bodies are always also conversations about race and racism. Further, as E. Patrick Johnson argues with regard to blackness in particular, race is in itself a critical lens for analyzing performance, offering "a way to rethink performance theory by forcing it to ground itself in praxis, especially within the context of a white supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist, homophobic society."⁶⁷ With regard to the bodies covered in this book, this is especially salient, as "the body is a primary, if not *the* primary, carrier of racial meanings."⁶⁸ The twin problematics of whiteness and cultural appropriation have tainted burlesque as an erotic art form in both its classic and neo forms. And for sex workers of color, the dehumanizing effects of racism create an always-available rhetoric enacted in violence against women of color. For black women, the legacy of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, and persistent, unabating racism make the identity of *sex worker* even more precarious, more of an impossibility, than for white women. Asian / Asian American / Pan-Asian women face and fight stereotypes of sexual exoticism, and all women of color share a greater degree of the supposed sexual availability that marks all cis and trans women's bodies. In neo-burlesque, a primarily white performance art, white performers consistently engage in acts of cultural appropriation, despite the fact that this tendency and the damage it causes have been repeatedly discussed by performers of color. Thus for critics of the body, even while the material rhetorics of costuming, cosmetics, and movement do not explicitly signify race, they are always *racialized*.

Entwined with race is gender, and here I specifically mean *who* is included in the category *woman*. Trans women *are* women. This is a point on which I am unwilling to debate, because the idea of debating trans people's existence is repugnant and profoundly antifeminist. However, most of the bodies represented in this book are those of cis women. Although neo-burlesque theoretically welcomes bodily diversity, the genre is still mostly a cis woman's art form.

Most strip clubs are fairly restrictive in terms of bodily diversity, reinforcing a particularly narrow vision of cis-masculine desire. In this vision, women's bodies can and should be modified and sculpted into an exaggerated feminine form. That reshaping doesn't include trans women, however, because clubs also tend to be profoundly transphobic and homophobic spaces, where trans women are seen as threats to cis-male heterosexuality. Therefore, many trans women find themselves unwelcome in strip clubs in the US yet are widely represented in other forms of sex work. Trans women do strip, however, working as cam girls, in some clubs, or as part of other sex work; they are just underrepresented in the venues under analysis in this book.

Race and gender are thus inexorably intertwined within embodied rhetorics. Both are shaped by a combination of material and symbolic codes, and both are dependent on the other. Kelly Happe suggests that rhetorical critics of race benefit from a performative lens because performativity "reorients critical inquiry from the determination of the truth or falsity of claims . . . to an analysis of the effects of discursive practices" materialized in linguistic utterances.⁶⁹ Further Happe argues that critiques of race cannot be separated from critiques of sex: "A performative analysis of race benefits from—indeed it requires—an examination of an already-existing bodily attribute—sex—and how the interaction of the two enable race's seemingly endless reinvention and recuperation in the face of spirited and reasonable arguments that it has no place in scientific or political thought. To understand race, I argue, we must understand the somatic conditions of its emergence, conditions which include sexual difference."⁷⁰ To Happe's argument, I will add that the linguistic is only one of the symbolic realms through which race and gender are materialized, as the analyses in this book will demonstrate. However, the thrust of Happe's argument is necessary to the subject of embodied sexual and erotic rhetoric, which similarly reveal the interdependence of race and gender in identity performance.

Begin the Begin

Via analyses of various acts and artifacts of embodied sexual and erotic rhetoric, I argue that rhetorical approaches to embodiment would benefit from increased attention to the ways that bodies communicate in symbolic realms other than or alongside the linguistic. Each chapter foregrounds material communication practices of performing bodies and proposes various complementary frameworks

and theories for analyzing them. In particular, the analyses focus on the bodies, acts, and discourses of embodied erotic and sexual rhetorics. The sites of analysis include different contested sites of women's public sexuality including neo-burlesque performance, commercial topless dancing, sex-worker activism, and the feminist sex wars. The analyses draw variously on rhetorical delivery, genre criticism, seduction theory, articulation theory, and rhetorics of alterity in order to develop approaches for interpreting embodied rhetoric and to explore some of the cultural practices that construct cis and trans women's sexual bodies. As the analyses demonstrate, the purpose of criticism of the body is not to argue for fixed and closed answers to such questions by narrowing in on an argument for definitive meaning. Rather, criticism reveals the mechanisms through which meaning gets carried and the contexts that lead audiences to a variety of meanings for the communicating bodies they observe.

I start the book by arguing that the rhetorical canon of delivery (one of five traditional parts of the rhetorical art) offers critics of the body a method for analyzing bodily performance. Theorists of delivery, including the classical teachers who first formalized and popularized delivery as a rhetorical concern, have focused on different *topoi* of the canon, which can be used as focal points for critique of performances. The chapter, therefore, details a set of *topoi* particularly useful for systematically analyzing erotic performance: body, space, audience, and genre. I demonstrate the analytical dimensions of these *topoi* via analyses of neo-burlesque performances and artists. In subsequent chapters, I continue to explore the interrelations of these *topoi* through various lenses for analyzing embodied rhetoric. Chapter 2 focuses on the genre *topos* via generic criticism to illustrate the ways that a rhetorical approach to erotic performance reveals genre-specific social actions, and also illustrates the audience interaction *topos*, and the space *topos* as these are key distinctions between the genres of topless dancing and neo-burlesque. Chapter 3 also engages with the audience and genre *topoi* by using analyses of neo-burlesque to illustrate the qualities of seductive rhetoric as a process of symbolic exchange that centralizes pleasure and play and indeterminacy, common features of embodied erotic performance. Although Jean Baudrillard argues that the seductive is not the same as the sexual,⁷¹ seduction's focus on the relationships between speaker and audience and in the delays of gratification that are often the hallmark of embodied erotic rhetoric give it theoretical and methodological significance for performative rhetorics.

Then, moving to the erotic body as cultural symbol, chapters 4 and 5 focus on feminist debates about sex and sexuality and identity, expanding on the identity work embedded in the body *topos*. The analyses also engage the space *topos* because the chapter considers material symbols common to erotic rhetoric in political spaces. Chapter 4 uses the theory and method of articulation to examine the activism of sex workers, in particular, strippers. Sex-worker activists use embodied counter-stories, through their actions as protesters, to reframe their identities in contravention of entrenched understandings of them as victims and criminals. This chapter looks at these larger struggles around sex-worker identity through an analysis of stripper activism in New Orleans in early 2018. Chapter 5 focuses primarily on the audience and body *topoi* by analyzing debates about SlutWalk as an oppressive and demeaning rather than empowering event, one whose rhetoric of sexual freedom, which relies on the embodied and material symbols of erotic performance, is one for privileged white women only. Newer instantiations of SlutWalk, however, draw large numbers of women of color and queer people, challenging not only rape-culture logic but also the critiques of the original SlutWalk by their presence. The arguments and counter-arguments around the sexual/sexualized body are typical of the sex wars at large: ones that rely on insider/outsider (identity/alterity) strategies.

By exploring these sites of sexuality, of bodily rhetoric, of public arguments about what can and should be seen and by whom and to whose benefit, rhetoricians, particularly those invested in the material, can have access to communications that are often seen to be outside of the rhetorical. Similarly, not only can erotic performance complicate and enrich the study of rhetoric; a rhetorical approach to the study of erotic performance brings a perspective that requires attention to the interplay among people, practices, and contexts. When the private is made public and the body is the maker of messages, rhetoric's potential to decode a range of human symbolic actions, not just those residing in alphabetic text, can be expanded.