I am a stripper.

It began, innocently enough, with an invitation from Angie Pontani to dress up as a cigarette girl at a World Famous Pontani Sister’s show at a swanky midtown Manhattan supper club. The club, now long gone, had lush red round banquets and gilded mirrors, and cigarette smoke swirled in the air. I recall getting into drag in my professor’s office—I was a teaching assistant in the drama department and a PhD student in performance studies at New York University at the time—and meticulously brushing glitter off his desk into a garbage can. I hoped he would not discover my indiscretion. This was the first of many attempts to cover up my dual identities: professor by day, burlesque performer by night.

Since the 1990s, I have been actively engaged in the neo-burlesque scene as a performer, producer, host, and teacher. (Most burlesquers wear many hats.) At the beginning, I performed a couple of nights a week in New York City nightclubs and theatres. Then I started touring, headlining festivals, producing shows, and teaching performance workshops. Later still I started studying and writing about burlesque. But before I turned my academic gaze to this performing art and participatory culture, I was onstage, backstage, and on the road with the performers I write about in this book.

*But isn’t burlesque different from stripping? Why not call yourself a performance artist? Or a dancer? Or, better yet, an actor? That likely would be an easier road. And of course I am being cheeky, intentionally provocative.*
(This book is about burlesque, after all.) But the truth remains that for two decades I have covered up what I study and what I do. Though these worlds intersected, I tried to keep them separate. I feared repercussion in academe, a place I once believed in as a utopian space dedicated to free thought and intellectual inquiry of any kind.

It turns out that my fears were not unfounded.

It is startling how many performers have been terminated from their jobs—including professors—simply because of their involvement in burlesque. Performers usually attempt to keep their stage identities separate from their day jobs, though occasionally those worlds collide. Aphrodite Rose was terminated from a start-up company for her involvement in burlesque. Rose’s manager informed her that a photograph she posted on her personal social media page “was in direct violation of [the company’s] social media policy” and that “those types of photos tarnish our company brand.”¹ The irony in this case is that the company had paid for Rose’s burlesque classes through a “personal growth program.”² After supporting her foray into burlesque, the company proceeded to terminate her for it. Rose describes the effects this had on her: “When you are told that your body image is tarnishing the company brand you will feel a sense of low self worth and low self esteem.”³

Sheila Addison lost her appointment as a professor at the John F. Kennedy University in California for performing with a burlesque troupe. Addison’s termination letter stated that she had brought “public disrespect, contempt and ridicule to the university.”⁴ What brings “disrespect, contempt and ridicule” is open for interpretation and largely decided by the institution. Employees have little recourse in these cases. Tenure-track status does provide some protection, yet many faculty members and administrators are still at-will employees who can be terminated for cause. Even a contract, as Addison’s case demonstrates, can be terminated at will. This creates a culture of fear that is compounded by the scarcity of and difficulty in acquiring full-time teaching positions.

There is a strong undercurrent of conservatism in academia—and society more broadly—about bodily expression, a puritan tendency to divorce
intellectual thought from physical pleasure. Cognition is valued over kines-
thetic knowledge. Feelings are largely suspect in intellectual pursuits, as they
may taint research and undermine academic integrity. Starting from the
body as a source of knowledge is particularly suspect. In the case of the bur-
lesque body, that embodied knowledge is also bound up in using striptease
to celebrate the unveiled and sexually cognizant body. Breaking numerous
taboo$s related to research and knowledge and how the body knows—and
what to do with that knowledge—may underlie the disavowal of and fears
surrounding burlesque.

Frankly, I am surprised by the disconnect between people’s imaginations
and what actually transpires at a prototypical neo-burlesque show. (Much
neo-burlesque transgresses politics more than it does decorum or morals per
se.) Yet the fact remains that participating in burlesque today may very well
get you terminated tomorrow. The material backlash against burlesque per-
formers is one practical reason why I have kept my performance identity
separate from my academic agenda. I convinced myself that I was protect-
ing my livelihood. I convinced myself that my burlesque performing was too
difficult to explain. I convinced myself that defending burlesque at all times
and in all contexts was not necessarily a battle I wanted to fight.

But I started to ask whether my silence served as a kind of disavowal that
darkened the very thing I hoped to illuminate. I could have approached this
project via a purely academic gaze. Yet to hide behind the purported shield
of scholarly objectivity would have erased my decades of experience with the
culture and performing art that I seek to illuminate here. Maggie Werner
similarly describes her struggles with writing “about a subject that is widely
perceived as frivolous.”5 Perhaps even more damagingly, it would give the
impression that there’s something shameful about burlesque, something that
needs to be hidden from public discourse. There isn’t.

And that’s why I want to start here—at the messy, controversial place that
the stripping body occupies and invokes in popular imaginings and aca-
demic discourse alike—as an act of disidentification. Disidentification is
defined by José Muñoz as the simultaneous “identifying with and rejecting
of a dominant form.”6 Stating that I am a stripper allows me to identify
with a disenfranchised subject position as well as to question the fixity of what that label signifies. I hope that this helps move the conversation beyond assumptions about a stripping body and the reductive virgin-whore dichotomy that undergirds that signifying process. Elevating burlesque over stripping creates a false hierarchy that valorizes one medium (burlesque) while vilifying the other (stripping). This false division, I believe, does more harm than good.

I seek to maintain the word “stripper” for several reasons. The word describes the relevant action—one that, despite its negative connotations, has a long and rich history. That history and the people who lived it are erased when more neutral terms like “dancer” are employed for the sake of decorum. As Dixie Evans, curator of the Exotic World Museum and creator of the Miss Exotic World competition, put it, “We were strippers. That’s what we did. We stripped.”

During Evans’s era, burlesque provided women with employment opportunities and increased levels of independence. Performing was not an easy road: there were repercussions—discrimination, bias, and even violence—for women who used their explicit bodies as their work. So for Evans and others to claim the word “stripper” and all it signifies can be read as a political act, one that represents the in-your-face boldness that characterizes performers of burlesque both past and present.

Understandably, many neo-burlesque performers prefer to distance themselves from the word (and the work of strippers). Self-identification is an individual choice, and I understand and respect those who choose distancing practices. The power of language to wound, silence, and police bodies is real. Like other language that has the power to enact, the word “stripper” is largely performative. What comes into being when the word is uttered is an instantaneous rejection of the stripping woman and her action: she cannot be trusted, cared about, or considered to be a valuable member of society. This is part of a larger social trend toward slut shaming and the disavowal of women who unapologetically seek pleasure or express their sexuality in public ways.

Of course there are material differences between burlesque striptease and commercial stripping. In her recent study, Stripped, Werner thoughtfully
uses rhetorical genre analysis to discuss the differences and similarities between neo-burlesque and strip clubs. Rather than rehearsing the differences that Werner outlines so well, instead I will offer here what performers have said about the matter. Jo Weldon jokes that the difference between strip clubs and burlesque is that no one goes to a strip club and asks what the difference between burlesque and stripping is. The World Famous *BOB*, the subject of chapter 6, quips that the difference between burlesque performers and strippers is that the latter make money and the former make costumes. Embedded within these answers to the proverbial “what’s the difference between stripping and burlesque” is humor—a burlesquing, if you will, that pokes fun at the question. The answers aren’t fully serious (though they may be partially true), and it is through that simultaneity that burlesquing takes shape as a hilarious (and poignant) dismantling of the question itself. Burlesque operates in this way, and poking fun is a marvelous tool to brandish onstage and in books.

My self-revelation here likely will have consequences. But I hope to “speak in a way that matters,” as Ruth Behar puts it, to open up my experiences to full scrutiny and present myself as a “vulnerable observer” and all that that signifies. I have decided that choking on fear is ultimately more harmful to me, and to a larger feminist agenda, than the vulnerability that comes with self-revelation. Furthermore, remaining silent does not guarantee safety. As Audre Lorde warns in *Sister Outside*, “your silence will not protect you.” Instead, silence can actually cause harm. “We have been socialized to respect fear more than our own needs for language and definition,” Lorde explains, “and while we wait in silence for that final luxury of fearlessness, the weight of that silence will choke us.” And as Kay Redfield Jamison, a professor of psychiatry who reveals her own struggles with mental illness, explains: “whatever the consequences, they are bound to be better than continuing to be silent. I am tired of hiding, tired of misspent and knotted energies, tired of the hypocrisy, and tired of acting as though I have something to hide.”

I, too, am tired of hiding and of my own hypocrisy. I hope to summon the same gumption that catapults a burlesque performer onto a stage to tell her story—one that ends with her unveiled body in the spotlight, her awarishness
unapologetic and bold. At that momentous reveal, her heart is pounding, the crowd is screaming, and the story has been told. That moment is significant, and it deserves attention, without all the negative repercussions that can arise from a woman screaming into the scene with unabashed fearlessness, agency, and the gumption to be herself.

I hope that this project helps remove some of the baggage associated with the explicit female body on stage. I further hope that my act of disidentification helps reduce the wielding of language to wound or police women and their bodies. Even further, I hope that this book invites divergent voices to discuss burlesque performance and culture without shame. There’s nothing to hide here: in fact, burlesque offers a place (and space) where all is laid bare. And what has happened on neo-burlesque stages around the globe has transformed performers and spectators alike, allowing for expressive performances of gender and sexuality that have radically reconfigured how women are expected to look and engage on- and offstage. This is a new kind of feminism, one that uses the stripping body as a performing art and political tool, and it has spurred what is nothing short of a new sexual revolution.
Neo-Burlesque