

Creating Personas, Performing Selves – Gazing Beyond the Masks of Drag and
Neo-Burlesque Performance

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Abstract

What if gender is not in the body, but happens to it through a combination of tangible and intangible means – through the coverings that mask, as well as the translations of and on the body? What if gender was malleable? If we cannot break gender, smash it to pieces, then, hopefully we might be able to bend it and fashion it into something that is more useful in the world, desirable, and something functional for an immediate need, or purpose.

This thesis introduces the reader to the performance of drag and neo-burlesque, as these take place in bars and nightclubs in Cape Town. I use the concepts of the gaze and the mask in this research to unpack and understand the feminine and hyper-feminine performances by drag and neo-burlesque performers. I argue that contemporary understandings of the “male” gaze, as posited by Laura Mulvey, have become inefficient in addressing the complexities of viewing gendered performances and audience interpretation thereof. I ask the reader to consider how audiences are set up to look at a performance and performing body and what they are meant to interpret about the person, or their character, by looking at the performance. I want to look beyond the stereotypical “male” gaze. I attempt to add to the conversation on objectification in performance, by arguing that the performances that take place on drag and neo-burlesque stages, possess the ability to challenge dominant ideals and social regulations regarding the ways in which gendered bodies *ought* to perform in public and private space through the prescriptions of a hetero-dominant society. In this thesis I discuss gendered performance, and expression, and the ways in which these performances and expressions work alongside prescribed perceptions of femininity and feminine performance. These prescriptions inform the ways in which individuals are allowed to perform a homogenous idea of gender, and work against gender variance, which in turn, informs the manner in which individuals are allowed to perform sexuality in relation to what is socially mandated and allowed in the heterodominant society. In this thesis, I also explore the creation of the staged performance, and discuss themes of stigma and shame as it is used to discipline those who attempt to perform potentially subversive content in publicly accessible spaces. Further, I explore understandings of beauty and performance, making

connections to race, class, and aspirational performance by those who perform drag and neo-burlesque in Cape Town. This leads to an exploration of the potential ways in which life outside of the performance might inform the life on stage, and vice versa – asking what is feminine performance, in what ways are feminine performances meant to be viewed, as well as questioning what kinds of feminine performances are socially acceptable?

Chapter 1 - Introduction and Context

The research presented in this thesis focuses on performers and performance of drag and neo-burlesque as it takes place in a number of bars and nightclubs in Cape Town. Drag and neo-burlesque performers, through the act of staged performance are to be looked at, and only *sometimes* speak on stage. These performances are theatricalised styles of performance that mostly take place outside of “traditional”, formal theatre spaces. Here, performance engages the politics of theatre, by means of an unspoken critique of the culturally coded understanding of what theatre is, as it is derived from the Greek word for seeing and sight. Thus, *theatre*, similar to *theory*, is a term that is limited to a specific sort of participation by the viewer in a specific sort of event (Roach 1995, 46). In this case I refer to the situation where a staged performance takes place for a viewing audience. Though, what do these specific sorts of events contain? This performance that lacks an audible voice creates a potential for objectification through the use of *the gaze*, as posited by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey, who focuses on the theory of the male gaze. These theatricalised performances, like all other live performances, are temporary, fleeting, and are made up of a sequence of performed sights, sounds, and impressions that invokes the theatre (Wilson 1976, 2) in a context where the performer, and their performance, is looked at, and appraised by the spectator. If the performance is fleeting, what does that spell for the practice of objectification? Would that too, be characterised as a necessary characteristic of the sequence of events – or does this bleed into the longer lasting experiences of everyday life for the everyday self?

Theatre is concerned with events, and is characterised by its communal experience, where “an exchange between actors and audience takes place” by means of “the creation of illusion” (Wilson 1976, 26). This illusion is created through bodily action, as the body is a type of *location* where psychological imaginings happen outwardly, due to the external presence, of it, the body can also carry an image in its own right (Belting 2001, 22). These images that are carried by the body prove to be heavy, and carry the weight of perception, not just on the characterised performance persona, but also on the performer themselves when they act ordinarily, outside of the theatrical space. Yet, what are these illusions that are being performed for the spectator?

What are these mental images that the performer puts forth for the viewer on the outside, and where do they come from? And in what ways may the performer put forth these fantastical illusions for the viewing spectator? Illusions exist to be looked at, and the desire to look can be understood as a primal urge – a potentially human urge – that is validated through *scopophilia* – the feeling of pleasure derived from looking. In this research I ask, what scopophilic pleasure is derived from watching hyper-feminine performance and expression? Perhaps the pleasure is found in othering those who are looked at during their gendered performance.

To discuss the image and illusion, the concept of the *mask* must be understood. I make use of the term *mask* in this research as a means to indicate the *persona* that Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst, Carl Gustav Jung, founder of analytical psychology wrote about. Jung considers *persona* to be an affective term to use as it refers to “the mask worn by actors to indicate the role they played” (Jung 1966, 216). The *persona* is important to this research, as a concept separate to the inner-self. The *persona* functions as an identity that is projected to others – one of an idealised image, or the *mask* of a character or of a performer. The *persona/mask* is thus the performing self. Throughout this research I will make evident that the *mask* is not just a physical mask, like those made use of in Greek theater traditions, nor is the *mask* only the make-up that is applied to the performer’s face prior to setting foot on stage – the *mask may* be these things in specific circumstances. Though, in this research, the *mask* is also psychic, akin to Jung’s *persona*, where the wearer takes on certain characteristics that are outside of, and somewhat different to their everyday, usually less performative self. Jung is known for theorising about how personality types shape human behaviour. I make use of the *mask/persona* to challenge the ways in which performers, and their groups may be interpreted. In terms of drag and neo-burlesque performance, as is discussed in this research, the *mask* is not just a physical item that the performer can put on or take off as they wish. Though this intangible, psychic *mask* functions in similar ways. Where the performance of drag and neo-burlesque is concerned, the illusion of the image that is performed through bodily action functions by working as “a medium for its own images and as a medium that carries a picture” (Belting 2001, 22). Thus, the drag and neo-burlesque performer takes hold of the attention of the audience for the time in which the performance is to take place, in order to communicate a specific illusory act. Yet, what is this

illusory act anyway? What is its purpose? If we consider the performance of drag and neo-burlesque to be a transformatory performance, a performance that demonstrates the possibility of *becoming*, where an individual is *transformed* into, or physically refers to a character/persona for the time in which it takes to perform the act, it is the process and meaning of masking that should be interrogated. This research also brings an understanding of the ways in which individuals perform for an audience. An audience who looks upon their performance through the lens of a suggestively controlled, directional gaze, where the performer may attempt to control the gaze, and tailor the experience of the audience through the implementation of the performance mask as a system of signification for the performance. The mask of performance is read by the audience, and leads to an acknowledgement and understanding that a performance is underway. Yet, who takes ownership of the performance? Does the viewer come to possess the performance, and by extension, the perceived image of the performer, or is the masked performer able to possess their own image? I argue that the mask only gives the *illusion* that they (the performer) are something object, able to be passed on, and around. The mask also protects the performer from audience projection through the use of what the mask is meant to project into the audience, ultimately challenging their ideas of what exactly it is that they are looking at.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This research explores drag and neo-burlesque performance as a form of public performance. I explore performance using sociologist and social psychologist Erving Goffman's view of performance as a tacit agreement between the performer and the spectator, whereby the performer invites the audience to view the performance, and recognise that a performance is taking place through the act of viewing (Goffman 1956, 10). The performance will not exist without this relationship between the actor and the viewer. The performance is hinged upon the act, as well as the act of recognition that an act is indeed taking place. Yet it is also possible that the performer can become so immersed in their own act, that they can interpret the impression that they are staging a becoming of their "real reality" (Goffman 1956, 10). The impression that is staged becomes part of the real reality of the performer, based on what they may absorb through the act of performance, and in their interaction with the audience – but what exactly is it

that is being absorbed? The performances that are discussed here are hinged upon a consciously created “front,” invoking Goffman’s term, that becomes a “collective representation” of a form of (mostly) feminine performance. In this research I disagree with Goffman’s view that a “front” is only selected, rather than created. By creating a “front,” performers select pieces, and build upon the “things” (social facts) around them, creating a performing character/persona. Goffman’s understanding of the “front,” leads to an invocation of a mask, a mask that is applied for the performance by the individual who attempts the act of performance. Yet what is this mask, and how does it function on stage and off? Goffman states that, “behind many masks and many characters, each performer tends to wear a single look, a naked unsocialised look, a look of concentration, a look of one who is privately engaged in a difficult, treacherous task” (Goffman 1956, 159-151). The individual behind the mask/persona is not entirely lost to the performance, then. Though they portray their character, and apply the mask of performance, there is still a distance, or rather a *barrier*, between them, the *persona*, and the *audience*. As much as they are looked at during their performance, so do they look outward too, in an attempt to understand their role, considering the presence of both spectator and performer. What is this look then? And why the mask? I make use of the mask as it functions as a means of signification. The mask is, on the one hand, used as a form of concealment, presented to the spectator by the performer that allows the performer license to push against social regulation in ways that they may not be able to, during their day-to-day social interactions. The mask protects the performer, and provides them with access to a new interior world, of fantasy and imagination. Fantasy, and the use of the mask as an element thereof, assists in the interrogation of the ways in which a perceived reality is made tangible and useful for those who employ the fantasy mask when communicating with a viewer. Judith Butler, feminist philosopher and gender theorist, suggests that women stand outside of matter – if we are to consider matter as an integral part of what makes us human - and do not form part of that which makes matter, matter (Butler 1993, 47). Reading matter and gender through Plato’s lens, Butler points out that Plato does not permit the female body as part of the human form. Though, if gender, as well as the mask of the gendered performance, were to make us part of the human form - the matter - then the playfulness and malleability of gender in performance – to be human – is not just one thing, but functions as a process of *translation*, of *transformation*, and of *becoming*. The mask, on the other hand, is also that which is interpreted and recognised by the spectator. It is the mask that is up for surveillance during the performance,

allowing the individual performer certain protections when pushing against the boundaries of social regulation. The mask as a projected persona pushes to create a boundary between the audience and the performer, as Jung states that the persona could be used as a barricade (Jung 1966, 240). This barricade creates a distance between the performer and the audience. While the audience may think that they are interacting quite intimately with performers in some instances, they are always kept at a comfortable distance – and learn to understand that what is shared is an experience, but not a real-life experience with no boundaries. The mask in this sense keeps parties in their designated places during the performance. The mask, and what it symbolises in the act and understanding of performance allows the spectator to say to themselves, “it is okay, it is a performance that I am looking upon – not my reality” – in effect *showing themselves* that there is a barrier between them and the performance, and providing an indication that they are witnessing fantasy. Yet during this act of communication and transference the spectator may learn new information about a possible social reality that a world outside of strict social regulation may be possible.

This research also focuses on the concept of “social facts,” first introduced by Emile Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of sociology, and later broadened by John Searle. These social facts, for Durkheim refer to the ways in which individuals interact with “ways of acting, thinking, and feeling” (Durkheim 1982, 51), which exist outside of the direct consciousness of the individual. Social facts function as the learned elements, or “things” that regulate normative behaviour in societal contexts, and should be treated as tangible “things” due to having an impact on the individual who acts in society. These “things” that constitute social facts promote social cohesion through the promotion of normative behaviours that provide context and some form of control to the social group. Social fact thus have an influence over the ways in which the gaze is interpreted and enacted. In what ways do social facts, and dominant social pressure inform on stage performance, as well as off stage performance alike, and how do these affect the performing individual? Are performers subverting conformity to social regulation, or are they creating their own social regulations and social worlds, that are to be used in a particular setting entirely? What are the penalties for their social subversion in dominant societal settings, as well as in their group settings? Social facts for Durkheim consist of “manners of acting, thinking, and feeling external

to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him” (Durkheim 1982, 52), and that “they come to each one of us from outside and can sweep us along in spite of ourselves” (Durkheim 1982, 53). In Durkheim’s understanding, there is a coercive power that is tied to social regulation that is imposed upon all those who exist within the bounds of a society. These social regulations become social facts, and thus, social phenomena, and regulation is transferred among groups (Durkheim 1982, 56). This coercive power functions in such a way that individuals who exist within a society come to feel pressure to conform to the dominant ideals, and appropriate social regulations. These social regulations inform the ways in which certain people are “allowed” to behave, with regards to their sex, gender presentation, social class, race, order within the family, etc. Failure to conform to these social rules come with the added anxiety of social sanctions being placed upon the individual who acts outside of these boundaries. What happens when the individual refuses to be swept away by what *ought* to be? The pressure comes from outside, from external sources – what is the effect that this has on the interior life?

Choosing a field site

Drag, neo-burlesque, and me: Queer like *that*

I was seventeen years old the first time I ever saw someone in drag who was not a character on my television screen. I had just started university at the University of Stellenbosch, and after joining the Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual-Transgender-and-Queer (LGBTQ) student society I joined a van full of other young students to attend the 2005 Cape Town Pride Parade in Greenpoint/De Waterkant. The sun beat down on us as we walked away from the university vehicle that we parked quite far from the Greenpoint traffic department. Hundreds of LGBTQ people from the areas surrounding Cape Town descended upon Greenpoint to participate in the annual Cape Town Pride Parade. The leaders of the student organisation had not booked a spot for us to join the procession in any official capacity related to the university, and after some time, they flagged our group to the side of a topless white party bus that had pink pigs painted on the side. We were told that instead of walking for the duration of the parade, we could hop aboard this party bus to join the procession. An honours student who I met in the university van got on the bus first, and

took his shirt off, revealing his toned, muscular torso, and started dancing to the mid-2000s pop hits that blared from the bus's crackling, aging speakers. We were encouraged to consume some of the beers, ciders, and alcopops that were placed in ice buckets in each corner of the bus.

During the course of the parade, I avoided the sides of the bus where I could be filmed or photographed. The night before, I excitedly told my mother what I would be doing the next day, and she sternly requested that I stay away from cameras, as she did not want to see me on the nightly news, nor have our extended family members potentially see me in the reported events. While on the bus, we passed by hundreds of revellers and other vehicles, whose drivers hoot and wave at us as we pass them by. The parade participants who walked alongside the bus are varied, though many men had their shirts off, exposing sweaty, toned chests, while others wore hyper-feminine attire, layers of makeup, and heels that made me wonder how they were able to still walk in considering the distance we had travelled across the city at this point. The parade winded down as we circle back the Greenpoint traffic department. As I stepped off the bus, I noticed a few people relieving themselves against the trees that surround the parking lot of the traffic department. One of the individuals relieving themselves against the trees, was one of the fabulously dressed, hyper-femininely appearing individuals who participated in the Parade. She had her dress hiked up above her hips, as she urinated against the tree in front of her. In this moment I realised how sheltered I had been, as I had not considered anything like the image in front of me before, apart from viewing horrific representations of trans women in 1990s films, such as *Ace Ventura Pet Detective*, and jokes about *The Crying Game*. Even growing up around neighbourhoods where the idea of the "effeminate coloured hairdresser" became normalised, I had not considered hyperfeminine presentation outside of the realm of womanhood, and I certainly did not consider it as a form of queer performance. The internalised shame of internalised homophobia was far more pervasive in the interior life of my seventeen-year-old self. I did not consider these queer performances as part of my reality as, at this time, I did not want to be associated with *queers like that*. I did not want to be *queer like that*. By this I mean, at this time I did not want to be associated with those who were most obviously and outwardly queer. At the time I still subscribed to the hetero-dominant norms of my upbringing in the conservative Afrikaans church environment that I spent much of my youth being very involved in. The social roles that were prescribed in this environment provided very clear distinctions regarding what it meant to be a *good* Christian man or woman, and that anything outside of these

norms were deemed *deviant*, and worthy of shame. I internalised much of these ideas, and much of that shame, because in fact, I was *queer like that*. The closet I lived in was made of glass, and it had always been very apparent that I was somehow different to my peers – yet, I did not want to be *too different*, so I carried the shame of my difference by rejecting those who appeared more outwardly queer than I was. When I was seventeen years old, I wanted nothing to do with drag, or drag queens. Three years later, I walked into an event in full drag, as a drag king, experimenting with the boundaries of who is allowed to perform masculinity and/or femininity in public, and how they are allowed to do so.

The Gay Capital?

Cape Town has long been heralded as a “Pink City,” or as “The Gay Capital” of South Africa, and the continent of Africa. The rights of those who live within the borders of South Africa are protected by legislature against discrimination on the basis of gender, sexual orientation as well as freedom of expression. Post-apartheid South Africa became the first nation on the African continent to protect the rights of LGBTQ identified individuals, with its perceived liberal constitution. Article 16 in Chapter 2 of the South African Constitution’s Bill of Rights reads that “Everyone has the right to freedom of expression, which includes (1.b) the freedom to receive or to impart information and ideas, as well as (1.c) the freedom of artistic creativity”¹. With that said, there are many shortcomings considering the implementation of South African Constitutional laws regarding the protection of rights for those who find themselves within the borders of South Africa. Many in South Africa still find themselves at the hands of violence, discrimination and inequality – this includes LGBTQ identified individuals, and, in particular, those who perform gender in non-conforming ways, women, and so many more. South Africans are seemingly protected by well-worded legislature, though the reality faced by many who live here is not as pleasant or ordered. Even though Cape Town is considered a “Pink City,” and even the “Gay Capital of South Africa,” this does not mean that all those who reside in the city or visit, are free from discrimination, prejudice, and in far too many instances, violence, when they subvert the common, conformist norms of a hetero-dominant society. In post-1994 South Africa,

¹ <https://www.gov.za/documents/constitution/chapter-2-bill-rights#16>

with the amendments made to Article 16 of the South African constitution, legislature sought to not only protect citizens' rights to freedom of expression, but also protect the rights of LGBTQ citizens. Forms of performance and expression that were previously at risk of discrimination and prejudice are now able to flourish.

South African legislature has long been preoccupied with the sexual habits of its citizens. In 1957, the Immorality Act was put into practice in order to legally prohibit marriage and sexual contact between members of differing racial groups. The Immorality Act was later retitled as the Sexual Offenses Act in 1969. In section 20A of the act, the Apartheid-era South African government would go on to criminalise “any act which is calculated to stimulate sexual passion or give sexual gratification”². The manner in which the act is written left the legislation open to interpretation, prejudice, and prosecution through its ambiguous definition (Cage 2003, 13). I argue that the language of this act was written to be intentionally ambiguous. In doing so, South African lawmakers made it possible to fine or arrest people based on arbitrary suspicions for acts that may or may not be illegal or criminally prosecutable at this time. This followed the application of the “men-at-a-party” clause after the arrest of 300 men who were discovered to have been dancing, kissing, and engaging in what were reported as sexual acts at a party in Forest Town in Johannesburg during the 1960s. This clause prohibited the meeting of groups of more than two men from meeting in public or private settings, eliciting a “gay panic” about the potential for homosexual or otherwise “immoral” activity taking place (Cage 2003, 14). This law, though intentionally ambiguous, was also applied inconsistently. Most notably the history of gay parties and performances of drag at pageants and balls in District Six in 1950s and 1960s Cape Town³ indicates a prevailing history of visibility regarding gender and sexual variance in this part of the country.

Moving closer to our present timeline, in 1994 amendments were put in place in the South African Constitution that condemned discrimination based on race, gender, religion, and social

² https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/201505/act-57-1969.pdf

³ <https://gala.co.za/projects-and-programmes/a-daughter-of-district-six/>

class. With these amendments, the opportunity for the creation of LGBTQ spaces, without the threat and fear of police intervention. Thus, public space for the performance of drag is able to flourish in venues such as Zer021 and a handful of nightclubs and venues in Cape Town without the threat of violence and other forms of social rejection that may be attached to the viewing and performing of what could be perceived to be potentially “undesirable” forms of performance. It is not only the performance of drag that was previously under the threat of public and legislative scrutiny. The Publications Act 42 of 1974 imposed conditions on public entertainment if it be deemed “undesirable” or indecent under the law⁴. The Publications Act 42 commences with the statement that:

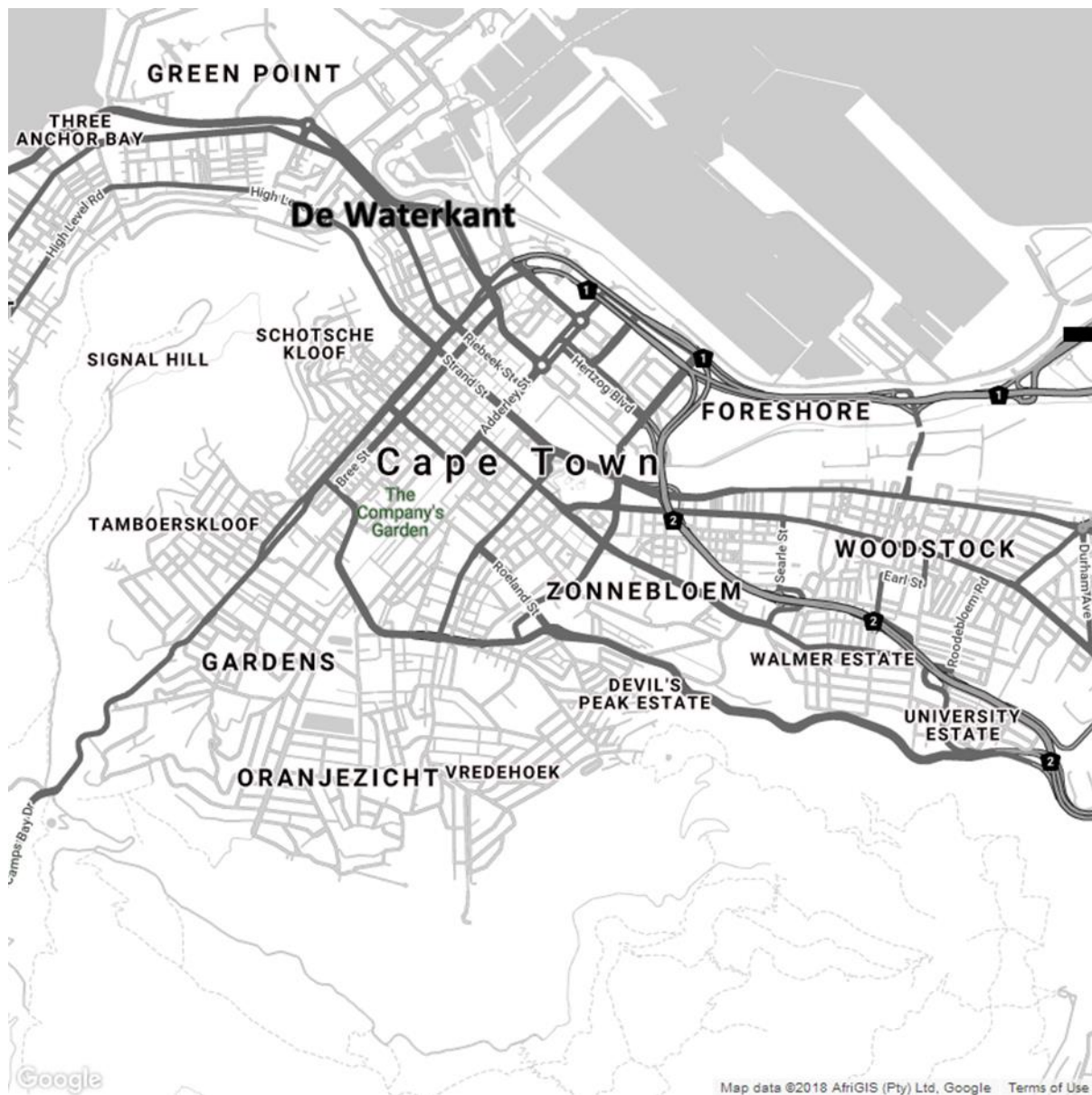
“In the application of this Act the constant endeavour of the population of the Republic of South Africa to uphold a Christian view of life shall be recognized.”

What could be deemed as “undesirable,” or obscene under this act, and the so-called “Christian view of life,” is thus open to interpretation. Striptease and erotic performance would likely be deemed as undesirable under these interpretations, and thus would be subject to regulatory control, in particular, over women’s bodies and their bodily performance. The mask of performance then only allows for certain protections in relation to social regulation. While the mask can provide the individual the gall to go out and perform, there are still social regulations regarding the ways in which it is acceptable to perform. According to Durkheim, there are consequences for the act of violating the social rules. For him, whether the consequences are of a legal or social matter, the results are much the same, and inducing of shame to the individual who oversteps these boundaries (Durkheim 1982, 51). For neo-burlesque performers, attempts to circumvent the ideas surrounding shame for erotic performance and their potential bodily exposure and surveillance, comes in the form of an application of the characterised mask, and for those who participated in this research, attempts at connecting some sort of story to the performance. This will be discussed further, later in the research.

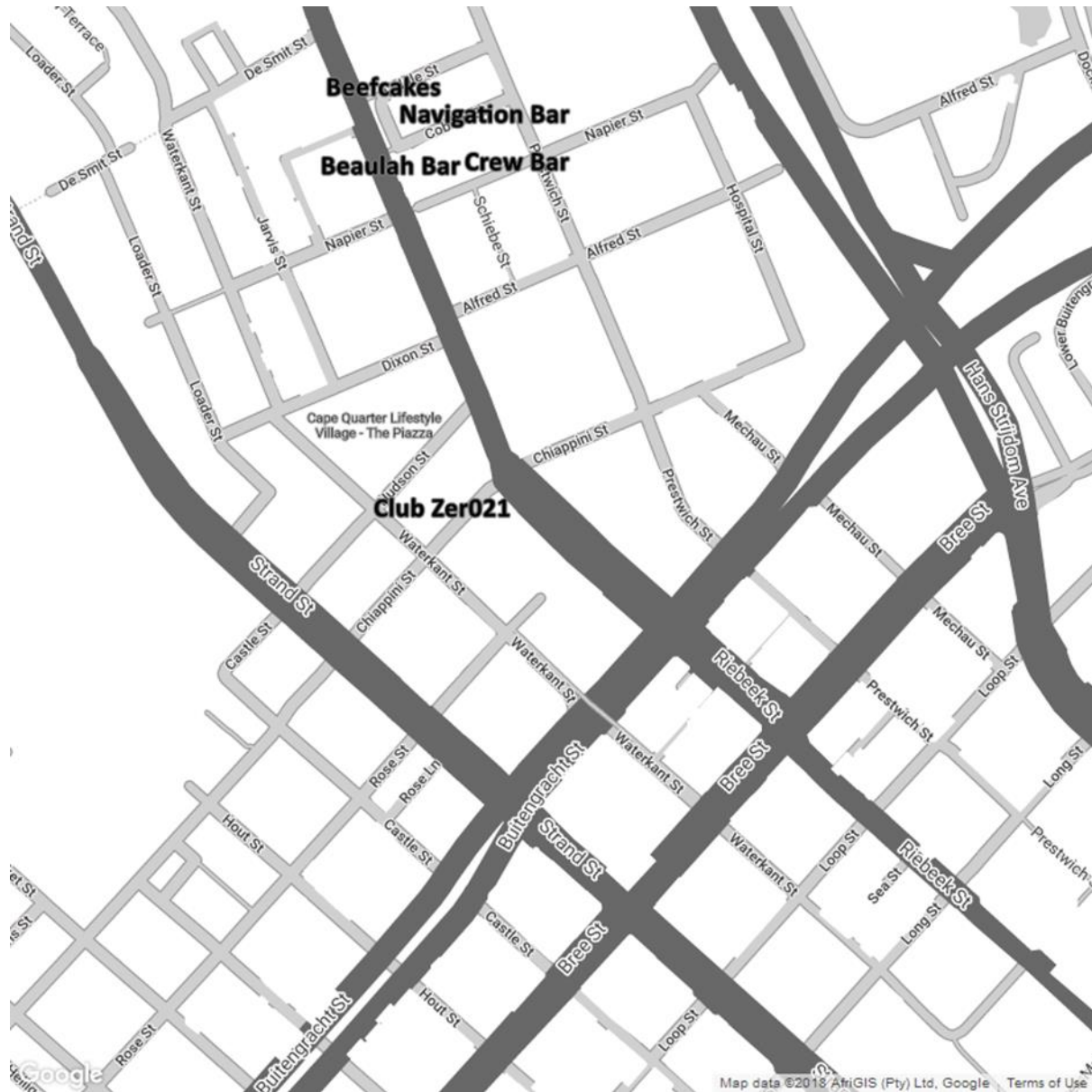
⁴ <http://www.lac.org.na/laws/annoSTAT/Publications%20Act%2042%20of%201974.pdf>

Map of the area

This research takes place in the City of Cape Town and its outlying areas. While there are areas outside of Cape Town that are briefly discussed in this research, the maps that are provided below illustrate the areas in which the bars and clubs where drag and neo-burlesque performances take place. The first map that is available, is that of the City of Cape Town, mainly the central business district. The most important sections of this area in this research are those of De Waterkant, and Zonnebloem, where much of the drag and neo-burlesque performances take place respectively.



The second map that is illustrated here, is a close up image of the De Waterkant area. In this area, stretching from Riebeeck street which becomes Somerset road, are the bars and clubs that make up what some consider to be the “gay village” in Cape Town. Furthest from Somerset road, and also furthest from the cluster of restaurants, bars and clubs, made up by Beefcakes, Navigation Bar, Beulah Bar, and Crew Bar is Club Zer021. In this research, I explore drag performance as it takes place in Club Zer021, Crew Bar, and Beefcakes.



The next area where drag and neo-burlesque performance takes place in Cape Town is in Zonnebloem, which was previously known as District Six, which was the sixth named municipal district in Cape Town in 1867⁵, a previously racially and culturally diverse area in Cape Town. During 1966, the area was declared an area for white people under the Group Areas Act of 1950, and much of the residents were forcibly moved out of the area to the outlying surrounding areas of Cape Town that were designated for coloured and black people. The public display of drag and gender non conformity was not uncommon or foreign to those who lived in District 6, as there is a rich history of balls and pageants where drag queens and gender non conforming individuals would appear as part of the public night life displays. Currently, drag performance still takes place in the area after Club Zer021 moved into a new venue in the area, after they were forced to move out of De Waterkant due to economic reasons related to gentrification and rising rent costs. Nearby, is Truth Coffee shop, an expensive coffee shop that is decorated in a “steampunk” theme. Here, much of the performances of neo-burlesque by the troupe, The Rouge Revue, take place.



⁵ <http://www.districtsix.co.za/>

The areas discussed on the previous pages are all in and around the city center of Cape Town. This, however does not demonstrate the true scope of all the outlying areas. Many residents live quite far away from the city center without access to reliable transport at all hours of the day, as South Africa's public transport system does not run late into the night. Thus, many of these venues are inaccessible to those who live in the suburbs that are further away. Those who are more affluent, and most often are white, have greater access to these venues in the city center. Further, nightclubs like Crew Bar and Beulah Bar carry hefty entrance fees that further limit who is able to access these spaces, while Beefcakes charges patrons to view the drag show while also serving high priced drinks and food. The city of Cape Town's nightlife, and in this research, the city of Cape Town's queer nightlife is only really accessible to the "lucky" (read white and affluent) few who possess the funds to access it. To be able to access entertainment in the city center, one not only needs the access of proximity, but also access to surplus funds in order to get one's foot in the door. Later in this chapter I also discuss the accessibility of Cape Town Pride to those who live in the outlying suburbs of Cape Town.

Drag and Neo-Burlesque – a brief history and overview

Drag performance has gained renewed interest and popularity in recent years as a popular performance style in the media, through entertaining depictions in international film and television shows. During the 1990s and the 2000s, images of drag permeated popular culture through films such as *Priscilla Queen of the Desert*; *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything, Julie Newmar*; and *The BirdCage*. More recently, television shows such as *RuPaul's Drag Race* (2009-present); *RuPaul's DragU* (2012); and, *The Drag Queens of London* (2014) have gained the attention of those who enjoy and/or are intrigued by drag performance, as well as those who enjoy reality television and/or competition shows.

The term "drag" has roots in the now-out-of-date British slang, Polari, which describes drag as "dressing in clothing of the opposite sex" or as "a party or dance, attended by men wearing feminine attire" (Baker 2002, 173; Cage 2003, 67). Drag is also a style of performance related to

an “ostentatiously exaggerated transvestism, ironically playing up imitations of the opposite sex,” that “in LGBTQ culture, drag is often associated with performance and parody by drag queens, who are usually – but not always – gay men...bewigged and dressed weirdly and wonderfully, often they imitate female stars of the world of entertainment, performing in drag shows, clubs or in Gay Pride events and parades” (Gerstner 2011, 191). Jennifer Drouin, in her work relating to the history and contextualising of cross-dressing in Shakespearean comedy, the performance of drag is related to the practice of “cross-gender [cross-dressed?] casting in Shakespearean theatre, where a younger man/boy would assume the feminine role in the theatre production” (Drouin 2008, 24-25). Furthermore, when the act of cross-dressing takes place in the context of the Shakespearean comedy, the audience is aware of this theatrical convention, where the male actor performs a feminine role (Drouin 2008, 23). Throughout history, where there is formalised theater, this convention occurs, as it would have been socially “unsavoury” for those who society considered to be women, to appear on stage in front of an audience. This implies that women as women were not up for public consumption, yet the act of femininity could be. The social control of women during these periods also extended to displays of public art by women. In the next section I will also discuss the perceived artistry that is connected to portraying the feminine character by male actors.

Cross-dressed casting is not unique to Shakespearean theatre. In Japanese Kabuki theatre, the *onnagata*⁶ cannot be portrayed by a woman, as this subverts tradition. Furthermore, the *onnagata* cannot be portrayed by a woman because it is believed that a woman is physically a woman in her body and movement. Where Kabuki⁷ theatre is concerned, a woman cannot act as a woman – *that is not theatre; that is not an illusion* – as she is herself a woman (Senelick 2000, 100). The feminine role must then be played by a man in order to suggest femininity through the performance of the actor. Japanese Kabuki theatre thus suggests that there is nothing extraordinary about a woman portraying woman – and the theatre has to suggest something extraordinary (Prince 2013, 51). Similarly, Chinese opera/theatre also employed cross-dressed

⁶ The male Kabuki performer who assumes the feminine role.

⁷ Kabuki can be broken down etymologically as such: ka-bu, which is explained as ‘song’ and ‘dance’; while ki is described as being skilled in, or a skilled person. The word, kabuki, has its origins in the word ‘kabuku’, which means ‘to slant’ or ‘to tilt’.

casting during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Unique to this circumstance is that while male-identified performers would perform the feminine roles, female-identified performers would perform the masculine roles. During the Qing period (1644 – 1911), cross-dressed casting maintained its status as a feature of Chinese opera. During this dynasty period, singers in the theatre would also be employed as sex workers. It has been reported that the crossed-dressed performer was often the most popular sex worker of the group, which touches on the fetishistic nature tied to ideas of fantasy. During the 18th Century, the Emperor Qianlong banned performances by women in the Beijing opera. This form of social control of women once again indicates a desire to control the movements of women, as well as their reputations, by keeping them away from “unsavoury” tasks as they relate to the presentation of women, and women’s bodies for public consumption. Consequently, the feminine roles would have to be portrayed by men (Senelick 2000, 110-111).

Yet, drag performance is not solely a type of performance in which masculine identified individuals perform as feminine characters, or in a feminine manner. Related to the drag queen performer, there also exists the drag king. The performance of the drag king indicates that there are those who are not men in their social world, who perform masculinity for an audience on stage, that bring forth, and make obvious that which is malleable about masculine performance (Gerstner 2011, 192). This is done through the performance of “manliness” as a theatrical act. In drag, it is not only masculinity that is malleable – able to be bent and shaped into a persona/type to be performed. There are also various femininities that are toyed with in the creation and performance of the drag queen character, as well as the neo-burlesque. The performance of drag also possesses the ability to expose the performance of gender as an *act* in itself, “rather than representing a ‘poor copy’ of the signs that denote gender and so reinforcing the naturalness of the ‘original’” (Harris 1999, 58). Should drag be strictly viewed as a performance of gender? Or is it a performance that refers to the *act* of putting on a type of gendered performance? Or, is it strictly a performance of drag, as a performance category of its own?

In this research I refer to “neo-burlesque” as a category relating to the comeback of burlesque performance, taking place initially in the 1990s as well as the later burlesque revival in the early 2000s following the popularity and appeal of performer, Dita von Teese who appeared on television and in music videos for her former partner, Marilyn Manson. The 1990s neo-burlesque revival takes place in New York’s party scene that “fostered adult performance art with fetish, drag, camp and humour” (Weldon 2010, 12). During this revival neo-burlesque performance was performed alongside drag performance – further indicating that these feminine performance styles possess enough similarity to be studied alongside one another.

Neo-burlesque has roots in the burlesque performances that were staged in Britain and the United States from the 1840s, that were related to the music hall tradition, mime, dance, cabaret performance, and traditional theatre (Commone 2010, 51). In its classical form, neo-burlesque also has roots in the 19th Century “bourgeois entertainment of the *tableau vivant*,” that is related to the fetishisation of the female body, as it is “seen from a distance – the body as spectacularisingly surveilled fetish – an inflection of the idea of the painter’s *tableau*, the posed scene, discussed as an aesthetic concept by Diderot” (Stratton 1996, 98). Fetish in this instance is related to the fetishisation of the female body in the Lacanian understanding that focused on the construction of the “female body as a site of fear, as well as desire,” where “this fear, the projection of men’s repressed fear of their own phallic lack, was displaced on women themselves, and especially on to ‘active’ and therefore phallic women” (Stratton 1996, 37). Here, this fetish and desire is focused upon the body, on stage, participating in the *tableau*, the posed scene, and made spectacle – to be viewed/gazed upon. *Tableau vivant* brought forth the performance of striptease, which can be defined as “a gradual revelation of traditionally, the female body for a male audience...reflecting the new fetishisation of the female body”, as “the female body is eroticised as a spectacle in the male gaze” (Stratton 1996, 99). Thus, stereotypically the act of striptease is one that is primarily viewed as an act of objectification through a male gaze. In discussing neo-burlesque performance with individuals who do not enjoy viewing neo-burlesque performance, there has been an assertion that they are uncomfortable with the possibility of objectifying the individual performer and reducing them to their sexualised physical form, by employing the idea of the stereotypical “male gaze”. However, as the

composition of the audience that attends neo-burlesque performances and events has drawn larger amounts of women and LGBTIQ-identified individuals as spectators, how does this affect the ways in which the performance is viewed and understood? Those who expressed anxiety at potentially looking at neo-burlesque performance through the lens of the “male gaze,” felt tension at the potential in which they might dehumanize the performer and reduce them purely to their bodily form through the act of objectification. It is no coincidence that the individuals who expressed their discomfort to me, are women and assigned-female-at-birth gender-non-conforming individuals. It is more likely than not, that these individuals have been exposed to the subtle, and less subtle forms of harrasment, misogyny, and discrimination that nearly every woman (and individuals who have been read as women at any given point in time) has experienced throughout their lives. It is a logical progression that they would try to not be associated with these forms of behaviour. Yet, is it innappropriate for queer women and gender-non-conforming individuals to find the performance of neo-burlesque attractive and arousing in some ways, while also feeling some form of desire for the individuals who are performing on stage? I would argue that it is *not necessarily* inappropriate, as these individuals are aware of the potential harm of the male gaze, and inappropriate behaviour associated with objectification. Thus, they are aware that the individuals on stage, while performing a persona, are still living, breathing, human beings and are not just body parts and pretty painted faces. Of course performers of neo-burlesque are aware that there is the potential to be objectified any time they step on stage. Yet, the awareness of the act of performance, when it comes to the spectator, allows individuals who view the performance the opportunity to consider their own behaviour, and avoid dehumanizing those who perform on stage.

Neo-burlesque is defined as a performance of “striptease, with the emphasis on *tease* as the nipples and genitals are generally covered with nipple tassles, pasties, and pants⁸”, while the performances may include “comedy, parodies of identities or known figures, singing, mime, freak show, circus and dance” (Commone 2010, 53). In burlesque performance, individuals are provided with an, “arena for representing themselves as both sexualised body *and* politicized

⁸ Or, on occasion, merkins/pubic wigs. One such performance is by a local burlesque performer who performs an “is she/isn’t she nude” performance to The Troggs’ 1966 hit, “Wild Thing”.

voice; in burlesque, women are able to be both sexual *and* funny, spectacular *and* socially aware” (Mansbridge 2009, 471). Thus, the neo-burlesque performance is not simply one that is necessarily defined solely by the act of strip-tease. The content of the performance may hold a deeper significance that the performer wishes to communicate with the audience through the performative act of storytelling on stage. This may be performed in a variety of ways, ranging from an act of speech to bodily performance. These ‘acts’ or ‘movements’ take place within camp, where the “theatrical frame, is already marked *as* double, already in quotation marks” (Harris 1999, 76). The performance of camp within neo-burlesque performance indicates to the audience that the performance itself is not a depiction of reality, the quotation marks referred to in the quote by Harris indicates that the performance is a reference. That the performer is referring to an ever-changing real life, exaggerated life or fictional life/fantasy, instead of depicting a raw, real life experience on stage.

The performance of drag, and neo-burlesque operates in the mode of “camp”, in the sense that it celebrates “artifice and exaggeration” (Sontag 1964, 275). For Esther Newton, “camp” is not so clear-cut, as “camp taste is always changing” (Newton 2000, 23). Thus, it is difficult to designate specific actions and items as necessarily “camp”. “Camp” possesses different meanings for different individuals, as “incongruity is the subject matter of camp, theatricality its style, and humour its strategy” (Newton 2000, 24). Unlike Sontag’s assertion that the “camp sensibility is disengaged, depoliticized – or at least apolitical” (Sontag 1964, 277), I posit that camp, while operating in drag and neo-burlesque through parody, brings forth its engagement with the social and political spheres of life, with which each individual engages in some capacity, as performance does not take place removed from an understanding of daily life in a society. Parody, in this sense, “involves the articulation of a critique by expressing a meaning different to the stated or ostensible meaning through a repetition or doubling” (Kleinhans 1994, 196). Drag and neo-burlesque performance takes place in this parodic realm, as it possesses the ability to make strange, or exaggerate what might be considered to be norms prescribed to the ways in which gendered individuals are allowed to perform, dress, move, and even be, within a given societal context.

Bodies and Performance

The performances of drag and neo-burlesque are intrinsically tied to the body, as much of the performance is hinged upon the physical stylisation and the physical movement as a tool for communication between audience and performer. Those who perform drag and neo-burlesque rely on their bodies to do the communicating instead of using their words and their voices. “The sense that biology need no longer be destiny is gaining ground and so it follows that where there is a (perceived) body problem, a body solution can be found” (Orbach 2009, 2). Accordingly, the physical body does not have to place limitations upon the variety of ways in which the body necessarily has to perform. Yet, when individuals perform for an other, or are presented for an other, an other who has been socialised to specific codes and gendered norms in a society, there is a sense that the “body is judged as our individual production.” But, “we can fashion it through artifice, through naturalistic routes of bio-organic products or through a combination of these, but whatever the means, our body is our calling card, rested with showing the results of our hard work and watchfulness or, alternatively, our failure and sloth” (Orbach 2009, 5). Taking the example of the drag performer, we are confronted with bodily fashioning and transformation that has reached a more extreme mode of fashioning, or production, through the putting on of a gendered performance. Susie Orbach asserts that “our bodily codes and behaviours constitute who we are” (Orbach 2009, 7), Joseph Roach on the other hand asserts that, “*performance* may be more precisely delineated as what Richard Schechner calls the ‘restoration of behaviour’” (Roach 1995, 46). Here, bodily performance is related to the ways in which bodies *ought* to perform in a given society, yet these performances do not necessarily have to perform in its designated manner. Gendered performance is related to the idea of restored behaviour, “or ‘twice-behaved behaviour’” as a means of performing that can be repeated, rehearsed, “and above all *recreated*” (Roach 1995, 46), further highlighting the malleability of gender taking place on the body, as an ‘act’ or something that individuals ‘do’ to the body, rather than something that is inherently in the body, or essential based on biology. There is an emphasis here on the idea that gender is something that individuals ‘do,’ rather than gender being something that is done to people, or should necessarily be decided for them, as a biological destiny of sorts.

Cross-dressing is often used as an overarching term as, a means for indicating various states of gender performativity and dress. This overarching, “umbrella” terminology is not an adequate mode of describing the complex range of theatrical and real-world practices to which it is often applied. The performance of drag alludes to socially constructed ideas of gender, in which we find the “binary division of people into male and female, a categorization which becomes fundamental to people’s sense of their identity and carries with it associated expectations of patterns of behaviour” (Alsop, Fitzsimons and Lennon. 2002, 13-14). To perform gender in a conforming way, in a congruently sexed body would become the only acceptable way to perform. This implies that those with masculinely sexed bodies and those with femininely sexed bodies – to invoke binary definitions around sex and gender – are socially expected to perform and present as manly in the former case, and womanly in the case of the latter. Sex role socialisation dictates perceived gender role expectations.

This does not mean that the concept of the binary is a necessarily universal category. Throughout world history there have been examples of functional societies that do not stick to a strict script of binary genders. We can look to the example of the Hijra in India, or the Fa'afafine in Samoa, where there are expanded understandings of gender(s). In the South African context there are also a number of official languages that do not make use of gendered terms, though there often are a strict set of ideas of the ways in which those who are designated the roles of men and women in society *ought* to perform, in relation to binary understandings of sex and gender. The performance of drag possesses the potential to subvert the fundamentalist ways in which gender is meant to correlate to sex in a broadly heteronormative context.

Bruno Latour asserts that constructivism could be one of the few ways in which *fundamentalism* could be combatted. Fundamentalism for Latour is defined as “the tendency to deny the constructed and mediated characters of the entities whose public existence have to be discussed” (Latour 2003, 28), and he continues that, “the house of science, it will be argued, is made of solid walls of facts and not of a fragile scaffold of social ties” (Latour 2003, 28). Fundamentalism in this context, as it is tied to rigidity in Latour’s “house of science,” prevents the potential

deviation from a binary understanding of sex and gender, where the masculine/male is in direct opposition to the feminine/female that read through an anatomical relation between sex and gender. When we think of the dualism between sex and gender in terms of the social construction, “sex is thus assumed to be a constant, an unchanging biological fact; it is natural...” while, “gender, by comparison, is conceived of as neither constant nor natural” (Lloyd 2007, 28). According to Oakely, the concept of gender gained its contemporary usage in the early 1970s, as a means of “differentiating between biological sex and more culturally variable forms of femininity and masculinity” (Oakley 2000, 295). This shift in understanding sex and gender aids in the challenging of the normative, “regulatory ideal” of sex, that pathologises the potential deviation from the normative ideal of sex and gender (Lloyd 2007, 32). The performance of drag, and the more rare performance of *boylesque* – where a masculine identified individual performs neo-burlesque – allows for the ability to challenge the regulatory ideals surrounding gendered performance, through bodily action and performance. Still, the performance of drag is not a concrete illustration or an exact imitation of the “masculine”/male, “feminine”/female binary rules that are socially thrust upon the sexed and gendered body (Butler 1993, 312). Considering the performance of neo-burlesque, these socially constructed ideas of gender may be played with, and made overt by the performers who *over*-perform ideas of sensuality and sexuality ascribed to a given gender in such a way that can be read as parodic⁹ and subvert the dominant norms of a given societal context. An alluring aspect to these types of performances is their ability to entertain, and be engaging, so as to hold the attention of the spectator, as part of the communicative performance.

⁹ Examples of this include Dita von Teese’s popular Martini Glass Dance, where she starts her performance dressed similarly to Marlene Dietrich’s character in the film *Morocco* (tuxedo and top-hat), and concludes the performance by swirling and soaping herself in a giant Martini Glass; Louis(e) de Ville’s “I’m a Man” drag/burlesque performance, which concludes with the performer inserting a sparkler into the end of a rubber phallus, setting it alight, and aiming it at the crowd; and the “Valentine” performance by a local burlesque performer, in which she repeatedly “stabs” herself with a kitchen knife, releasing the contents of fake blood packets onto a white dress that resembles a wedding dress.

Carnival Drag, Dragging Pride – A South African History

Drag in its inception in the Western Cape is closely related to the annual Minstrel Carnival in Cape Town that is largely created and enacted by the people of mixed race heritage, who were designated as “Coloured people” during apartheid era South Africa. Later, in contemporary understanding, drag becomes associated with other forms of “carnival” action in the presence of drag queens at Pride Parade events. The Cape Minstrel Carnival, while attended by a variety of onlookers, is mostly participated in by “Coloured” men who join troupes that are situated in areas outside of the city centre, in the Cape Flats, and in other working-class communities in the surrounding areas that were previously deemed “Coloured” residential areas after the Group Areas Act of 1950 was put into practice. Traditionally, “women’s bodies were not on show – unlike the annual Rio Carnival” in Brazil (Meltzer 2010). Until the 1970s, women were rare participants in the carnival procession. The perception held was that, “the Carnival is a largely male domain” (Pacey 2014, 8). The oral history project undertaken in 1995, by Lisa Baxter, also provided conflicting accounts of the participation of women in the Cape Minstrel Carnival, where some informants stated that, “...it was only women not ‘reared in the proper manner...not polished enough’” or “‘especially the more lesbian women’, who took part” (Baxter 1996, 121). Based on the above information it is inferred that the social class and perceptions of men do not come into question – rather it is women who are looked down upon for active participation in troupe activities in public space. As the quote above suggests, these women were not “reared in the proper manner”. There is thus a correlation between women’s bodies and public action, where there is an element of social control on the bodies and movements of women. This speaks to the notion of the “good girl” trope, where “good girls,” or well-behaved women do not participate in activities that are viewed as “improper” or deemed too masculine or “rough”. There were social implications for those who might deviate from the perceived norms of the day. Deviation from social norms allow individuals to run the risk of being socially dismissed by the dominant group. On the occasion that women would appear in the Minstrel Carnival procession, they would participate as a beauty queen, on top of floats, or participate as “secret participants in

troupes, with their feminine figures disguised by donning the basic male troupe attire¹⁰ of trousers, jacket, hat, and make-up; in a sense then, a female-to-male transformation (as drag, or even concealment?)” (Pacey 2014, 8). At a more heightened level of visibility, individuals who were assigned male at birth would join the troupe’s procession, in feminine attire. However, what would now be considered drag, and cross-dressing in public was at the time, a prosecutable offence - in post-1948 South African Apartheid era law, an “amendment on cross-dressing was introduced” in the form of the Prohibition of Disguises Act of 1969. Hence it was illegal at that time to disguise oneself as anything other than the sex ascribed to an individual at birth or what is stated on the individual’s identity documents, or to “pass oneself off as a woman” (Pacey 2014, 12). Nonetheless, cross-dressing, and an apparent inclination towards drag became a convention of the Cape Minstrel Carnival since the officially recognised organisation thereof in 1906/1907. The exact dates of the inception of the Cape Minstrel Carnival are inconclusive, as there are various historical accounts that suggest that what was previously known as the annual “Coon Carnival” originated around the late 1800s, when the festivities were organised to celebrate the return of slaves. “The festivities, held around New Year, were subsequently carried on annually. In 1906 the first...Carnival was organised by the Argus” (Weichel 1977, 19). Other accounts suggest that the carnival officially dates back to 1907 and had been heavily influenced by American “blackface” Minstrels, such as The Celebrated Ethiopians, and others, who first arrived and performed in Cape Town in 1848¹¹.

Carnival time was the time that was publicly designated for these perceived subversive (and at the time, illegal) acts to be publicly performed. “It can be argued that female impersonation is central to many carnivals all over the world, and has indeed been a part of carnival tradition since the Middle Ages” (Pacey 2014, 9), thus the Cape Minstrel Carnival may have followed the

¹⁰ Since the inclusion of women in the Carnival processions however, “women and girls in Cape Town’s Carnival dress modestly, usually wearing the same uniforms as men and boys,” which differs significantly from Brazil’s carnival in Rio de Janeiro, and the Mardi Gras in New Orleans in the United States (Mason 2010, 40).

¹¹ Their influence led to the performance of local minstrel troupes, such as the Amateur Darkie Serenaders and the Darkie Minstrels, during the 1860s. These performances took the form of 3 types: Klopse (Cape Minstrel Clubs), Nagtroepe, and Malay Choirs, as well as Christmas Bands – who performed only instrumental renditions of popular and traditional songs (Meltzer 2010).

model of the carnival that called for the temporary overturning of authority and convention for a designated period of time. Although the Cape Minstrel Carnival differs from other pre-Lentian carnivals¹², such as the Rio Carnival in Brazil, and Mardi Gras, that is popular in New Orleans, in the United States, the Cape Minstrel Carnival too possesses the temporary/time-bound “mix[ing], and marry[ing] [of] the sacred with the profane, the high with the low, the great with the small, the wise with the foolish” (Veit-Wild 1997). Similar to the carnivals in Brazil and New Orleans, the Cape Minstrel Carnival originated and gained popularity in the post-colonial context among apparent creolised communities that were brought together through a history of slavery. The parallels that are drawn from Bakhtin’s notion of *carnivalesque* provides an interesting illustration of the apparent period of license and subversion, where those who made up marginalised communities whose freedom of movement were usually policed, were provided a liminal space in which they could celebrate. These events, during this time, possessed the ability for those involved to be given the potential to destabilise the general social conventions and limitations that were enforced by those who held power over them.

In the context of the Cape Minstrel Carnival, the *moffie voorloper*¹³ performed a form of endorsed drag performance in heading minstrel troupes – a performance that was in direct violation of the discriminatory “anti-cross-dressing” laws. It was perceived that these laws were not being enforced in other parts of the country – even when being applied to the extremely public spectacle that is the Cape Minstrel Carnival (Pacey 2014, 117). Thus, the *moffie voorloper* of the Cape Minstrel Carnival could be seen as emblematic of the subversive nature of the carnival, where for the duration of the carnival, social conventions may be turned on its head (but only to a certain degree/within limits). The carnival troupe leader, who participates while cross-dressing, could be thought to be the *most subversive* character who participates in the carnival (Jeppie 1990, 82). This *subversive* character is emblematic of the liminal nature of the carnival,

¹² Derived from the Latin, ‘Carnem lavare’ or ‘Carne Vale’, which is defined as the pre-Lentian festival where Christian individuals bid farewell to meat. This festival is also related to the festival of Saturnalia, which was a ‘period of licence and excess’; the performance of the inversion of social rank was encouraged during this time, where slaves were ‘set free’ and given licence to mock their ‘masters’, the election of a ‘mock-King’, etc. (Hyman and Malbert 2000, 9).

¹³ Leading the Carnival troupes, these participants are sometimes referred to as “comically outrageous transvestites/crossdressers” (Mason 2010, 18,42)

through the use and presentation of their bodies and its decoration as a demonstration of their liminality in the space of the city in terms of their race (as the existence of coloured people in South Africa challenge the biological and cultural essentialism associated with binary definitions of race), class categorisation, gender presentation, as well as their demonstrations of their sexuality. For Victor Turner, “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions aligned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1966, 95). Those who participate in the Cape Minstrel Carnival, by virtue of their race and class categorisation already occupy a liminal space, while their involvement in the carnival expands the limits of what people of colour have the freedom to do in the public space of the city centre. The *moffie voorlooper* takes this liminal experience and expands it, by playing with the ways in which certain bodies are allowed to be displayed in public, as well as the implications that this has upon sexuality in a hetero-dominant society. While these individuals are operating within a particular set of ideals of who is allowed to participate in the carnival, with regards to women not being allowed to occupy public space as part of a carnival troupe, they also subvert the ways in which particular bodies are allowed to perform in public space through performing a form of cross-dressing in public. Such public displays of potentially queer sexuality and gender presentation are otherwise frowned upon, and illegal, until section 3 of the of the Prohibition of Disguises Act of 1969 was amended by Act 49 in 1996. This would indicate that in public space any sort of dress or display of the body that did not comply to conservative heteronormative gendered norms would be subject to scrutiny, and potential threat of law.

Carnival is a site of social celebration, but it also possesses elements of protest, as it “has the capacity to lay claim to city spaces, and can therefore be seen as a mechanism for certain subcultures and individuals to affirm their rights to the city and define it as their own territory” (van der Waal 2008, 23), albeit temporarily. The Cape Minstrel Carnival invokes the Bakhtinian idea of the carnival/*carnivalesque*, through a temporary overturning of ideas of authority, or of subverting authority. Historically, Gay Pride Parades and marches that now take place in cities around the country also carry elements of social celebration and protest that are an integral part to carnival. Pride Marches has roots in the overturning of other forms of oppressive social pressure and policing. Justice Edwin Cameron writes about the first Pride March in

Johannesburg in 1990, “we were asserting our civic entitlements, claiming the run of the city and rightfully invoking the protection of the law in doing so” (de Waal and Manion 2006, 4). Following this, in 1993, an organisation in Cape Town, called ABIGALE (Association of Bisexuals, Gays and Lesbians), organised their own Pride march, to take place in Cape Town (de Waal and Manion 2006, 64). A participant in this research, drag performer, Lola Fine, who claims to previously have joined the Cape Minstrel Carnival as a *moffie voorlooper* as well as having attended the early Pride marches in South Africa, states that: “I was at those first two Prides. The first in Johannesburg, and the other one in Cape Town. *Of course, I was in drag*, but there were others who showed up with bags on their heads because they did not want to show their faces, but us drag queens, we would *never* hide our faces, we’ve put far too much work into it.” Though, some would argue that the use of drag here, as a mask, also functions as the bag does - to shield the identity of those who participate in the event. She further recounts how at later Pride marches other gay men would ask why the drag queens were there and would spew hateful and derogatory remarks at them, in an attempt to ask them why they were even there, as drag queens and those who display cross-dressing in public and in private spaces are shameful in their appearances, as they subvert the hetero-dominant regulatory ideal with their feminine appearance. “These ‘straight acting’ muscle boys in their matching outfits always had something to say about us being there, because they wanted to show the world how ‘normal’ they were, how they were just like straight people...” meaning that even in public displays at LGBTIQ events such as Pride marches, there is still scrutiny and threat placed upon those who present their bodies in drag in public spaces, such as the street, during Pride marches. In the early 1990s this was particularly tension inducing, as sodomy laws as well as laws against concealment related to the Prohibition of Disguises Act were still in place at the time.

In its initial phase, Pride was a protest march, calling for equal rights and treatment for those who may identify as LGBTIQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex, Queer). Since at least the early 2000s, it has taken the form of a week-long festival that reaches its peak with the culmination of a now commercialised “march” and party, that includes the presence of many shirtless young men, and drag queens who participate in the march/parade, not by marching, but who are elevated above the crowds of walkers, on floats, flatbed trucks, and fancy topless cars.

Thus, the public and emblematic face of LGBTIQ people becomes that of those who do not adequately represent the majority of LGBTIQ people in Cape Town, as there is only a finite amount of young, well-off, fit, mostly white gay men, in the city. The presence of drag queens at Pride events are not an indication of an all-accepting queer “community,” as there is still a stigma attached to the presentation of gender variance, and a desire to subscribe to homonormative social behaviour. Drag performance is part of the history and culture of LGBTIQ representation, yet there are still those who do not want to be associated with *that kind* of queer representation, that stands outside of what is perceived as “normal” gender presentation for heteronormative and homonormative understandings of gender roles, that exists within a binary. Regarding the Pride March/Parade, an interview respondent from de Waal and Manion’s 2006 collection on the history of Pride in South Africa states that “since 2002 Pride has changed from being run by community organisations and community groups, to being run by a couple of private individuals who see it as a profit-making exercise” (de Waal and Manion 2006, 140). Thus, the larger Pride Parades and marches that take place in South African cities are viewed by many who critique it as a commercial endeavour. This commercialisation of Pride as a party that costs money to attend, rather than a march, further excluding LGBTIQ people who are already on the margins due to economic exclusion. Nevertheless, this does not mean that all Pride Parades and Marches that take place in the country are commercial events. There are a handful of Pride Marches and events that are rallied through community-based organisations and groups, such as the Khumbulani Pride, hosting events in the townships outside of Cape Town’s city centre, as well as the Soweto Pride march that takes place in Soweto, a township outside of the main centre of Johannesburg. These are just 2 examples of community-run Pride initiatives in South Africa that focus on social issues and wider acceptance, highlighting the needs of black, coloured, and other LGBTIQ people of colour in South Africa. These initiatives highlight the need for political intervention through a focus on equal rights, while also placing a spotlight on the violations that still plague a disproportionate number of LGBTIQ identified and gender-non-conforming individuals in South Africa.

Individuals who were assigned male at birth, who appear and perform in drag are often more prone to stigma related to perceived deviant behaviour, as being “womanly was to be more

definitively queer” (Howard 2001, 213). Nonetheless, since the late 1990s and early 2000s, individuals in drag have become a staple of the Pride Parade and march, differing from earlier incarnations of drag at Pride festivities, where “drag queens are often seen as the unacceptably freakish face of Pride, focused on by the media while ‘ordinary’ gay and lesbian people are ignored” (de Waal and Manion 2006, 9). Some individuals who participated in the earlier Pride Parades and marches felt a need to focus on the “normality” of LGBTIQ identified individuals, that “we are just like everybody else” (de Waal and Manion 2006, 9). This move toward heteronormative assimilation made no space for any sort of gender or performative and expressive variance – thus positioning those who chose to appear in drag as necessarily deviant, and worthy of stigma and shame.

What is it about individuals in drag, that might bring forth these responses in others, regardless of whether or not the presence of individuals in drag have almost always been a feature of the Pride festival? The two forms of public procession that I have discussed may differ significantly in the content thereof. The Cape Minstrel Carnival survives as a largely working-class affair mostly attended by and presented by people of colour, that has seen a great deal of disruption to tradition through a spate of funding difficulties and control of movement by the City of Cape Town that has plagued the procession from taking place. The insecurity regarding the status of the Cape Minstrel Carnival is derived from the numerous occasions that the City of Cape Town has threatened to prevent the Carnival from taking place, or through an apparent lack of funding as well as the issuing of relevant permits that allow the Carnival to take place in the public space of the city. These actions by the City of Cape Town effectively prevents the historic public display of celebration by working class people of colour, by pushing them out of the city, and adds to the uncertainty about whether or not their presence is welcome in the city center for recreation and celebratory purposes. Are working class people of colour allowed in the city only to work, and not for recreative purposes? In 2005, lack of funding from local government once more threatened the livelihood of the Carnival (Maposa 2005). The following year, no Carnival took place.

The different Pride Parades and marches have also faced economic and institutional scrutiny. The Cape Town Pride Festival and Parade was forced to change its route, which in previous years had taken the Parade through the city center, in 2010, to a different route that led the procession through Greenpoint (referred as the ‘gay village’ by some, due to the cluster of ‘gay bars and clubs’, as well as ‘gay owned’ businesses that are found in the area) and Seapoint. In 2011, the route was changed once again. Thus, the Parade would commence at the Cape Town stadium in Greenpoint, and never leave Greenpoint, as the parade would be turned around before reaching Seapoint. The space of Greenpoint, as an idealised “gay village” is dominated by a white gay male culture that is far removed from the violent and marginalised reality faced by LGBTQ identified individuals who are unable to access the perceived space of freedom and protection of rights that the idea of the “gay village” purports. That the Pride parade and after party takes place within the space of Greenpoint that is adjacent to the businesses and nightclubs in the area is no coincidence, as the event is a lucrative business opportunity for those involved in the organisation thereof. Thus, the “celebration” of Pride in Cape Town is politically removed from the needs of much of LGBTQ people in Cape Town, as there has been very little effort to address the experiences of LGBTQ people of colour, economically strained LGBTQ people, as well as women, gender non conforming, and femme people of colour who face the most violence and stigma in and around the surrounding areas of Cape Town. The Cape Town Pride parade has also had its share of insecurity due to lack of funds, as well as the resigning of a number of their committee members in 2011 and 2012. The other Pride Parades, marches and events that take place in and around Cape Town are often distanced from the more popular and profitable Cape Town Pride, as there is a perception that Cape Town Pride, while fun, is devoid of any political awareness, and focussed on commercial gain. These events, apart from being a site where drag/cross-dressing takes place, possess the ability to destabilise the norms of the dominant public who is able to consume media through newspapers and television. Even if it is just for the period of time in which the procession takes place. During the last Cape Town Pride I attended, in 2014 – one that included topless neo-burlesque performers in the procession on their “mermaid float,” and after-party performances - I followed my friends into the fenced off after party area between Beulah Bar and Beefcakes restaurant in De Waterkant, I faced one of the performance stages in the cordoned off area. The back of the stage faced the street, preventing those outside the fence from seeing what is happening on the stage. As I watched the drag

performer on the stage, I surveyed the surrounding area. There were crowds of people who were unable to enter the after party, as they charged each person who wanted to enter R50, and checked their bags to prevent them from bringing anything to eat or drink into the area. The people outside the fence were mostly people of colour. A security guard for the event approached one of the groups of people who have set up camp outside the fence, guarding a cooler box, on the pavement, while they leaned forward to see what was happening on the stage. I saw the security guard exchange words with the group who appeared distressed and visibly upset. They picked up their cooler box, and moved along. In that moment, I decided to no longer attend Cape Town Pride after parties in the future. As Pride seemingly only functions for those who are accepted into the space on the basis of race, perceived wealth, and social class. The Pride afterparties can be expensive for those who have traveled far to get to the city from the extended Cape Town area, such as Delft, Gugulethu, Belhar, and Eersterivier, to name a few. There are many people who end up being priced out of Pride after parties, and as the example above demonstrates, might be hurried along if they want to be close to the festivities. Who is Pride for really, if it most prominently takes place in an upper-class, gentrified area, that keeps many working class people of colour outside, due to structural inequality?

Barroom theater: Moving inside

I posit drag performance, as well as neo-burlesque performance, as a form of public performance that largely takes place indoors. The emergence of drag as a performance in popular culture in the contemporary South African context can be traced as far back as the newspaper and tabloid coverage of Cape Town's drag/*moffie*¹⁴ house parties¹⁵ in 1950s and 1960s District Six. Additionally, drag competitions, "fancy dress" parties and concerts that took place in the concert halls and bars situated in and around District Six at the time were also reported on by the local press. A famed event of this time was the 18th Century-themed ball that was held at the Ambassador Club in 1967 (Chetty 1994, 120-121; Lewis 2000), attended by well-known queens

¹⁴ Derogatory Afrikaans term for a gay man – more specifically, an effeminate gay man.

¹⁵ Documented in D. R. Chetty's contribution to *Defiant Desire*, titled "A Drag at Madame Costello's: Cape Moffie Life and the popular press in the 1950s and 1960s" (Chetty 1995).

from District Six, such as Kewpie – a famed hairdresser and queer icon from District Six – who arrived at the ball in a horse-drawn carriage, dressed in the theme of Marie Antoinette. Nevertheless, these events eventually fell out of favour and regular occurrence with the implementation of the Separate Amenities Act¹⁶ and the Group Areas Act of 1950, where residents of particular racial categories were designated and allocated to specific parts of the city and the surrounding areas (Weichel 1977, 17). This manner in which the performance of drag took place in the early urban environment of 1950s and 1960s Cape Town can be compared to the “underground”, perceived “low culture” tradition of performance that originated in the “Molly Houses” of London in the 1700s, as well as the “drag balls” that were held in Europe and the United States at the end of the 19th Century (Schact and Underwood 2004, 5). Traditionally, burlesque is also considered to be a form of perceived “low-culture” or “bawdy” style of performance. Its influences could be found by cabaret, variety performance, and review theatre (Staszak 2014, 1). Both *camp* and burlesque are “distinguished along cultural boundaries of high and low taste” (Mansbridge 2009, 457), which may influence the assertion to make use of parody and camp in certain performance styles, such as drag and burlesque performance.

Judith Butler, philosopher, gender theorist, and influential third-wave feminist, queer and literary theorist argues that drag parodies and challenges that which is heteronormative through the use of comedy¹⁷ (Butler 1993, 126). Thus, pointing the viewer in the direction that alludes to gender as an illusion, or as fictive/created by the imagination (Surkan 2003, 163-164). Making use of the example of veteran South African drag performer/drag character of *Tannie Evita Bezuidenhout*, there is an illustration of the fictional and parodic ways in which the understanding and interpretation of gender is manifested, as the audience accepts the character to be a real person. Because Tannie Evita is well-known across the country, she does not require a direct interaction with her audience. The collective understanding surrounding the character as a woman indicates

¹⁶ The Separate Amenities Act stipulated the separate use of public premises, such as buildings, halls, rooms, offices, conveniences, as well as public transport. It stated that ‘any person who is in charge of and has control of any public premises or public vehicles may, if he thinks it expedient, set aside such premises or vehicle, or any portion thereof, for the exclusive use of a particular race group’ (Section 2 of Act 49 of 1953). Any person who uses a premises or vehicle which has been set apart for the use of another race group will be guilty of an offence.

¹⁷ Evident in the performances by Dame Edna, as well as the South African drag personality, Tannie Evita – “the suburban housewife with ‘ideas above her station’”. Her humorous performance is based on political material, most recognisable during 1980s and 1990s Apartheid South Africa.

that the performative mask can also function through the inscription of a collective understanding upon the phenomena of performance. Tannie Evita appears to the viewing public, to fully possess the essential attributes, and the performative character is understood as she appears to be (Goffman 1956, 10). This characterisation, and the belief in the character's authenticity provided room for subversion and critique on society at particular moments in South African history, through the use of the characterised mask that was created by the actor, Pieter-Dirk Uys.

The character that Pieter-Dirk Uys created and performed was performed indoors, on stage and on the television screen, and also between the covers of numerous books. Camp as a convention plays with what is subversive, but subversion becomes potentially dangerous to flaunt when taken to the streets. Even the use of *gayle*¹⁸ as well as the historic language of *Polari* as *gay slang*, as coded language that indicates to those who speak it that the one whom they are communicating with is queer, is a mask for subversion when the speakers use commonly used words in a coded way to indicate to one another that each speaker is queer without letting those who are not queer - and not in the know - know what is taking place, and who they may be around. The barroom then also becomes a mask, a protective layer for cabaret style performances of camp, that include drag and neo-burlesque performance. The barroom as theatre space provides an added layer of protection to the viewer as well as the performer, as the performances and forms of expression taking place within the confines of the barroom may be perceived as subversive and deviant to those who harbour more conservative and potentially dangerous opinions regarding those who participate in these performances.

“Gay bars are therapy for people who can't afford therapy; temples for people who lost their religion, or whose religion lost them; vacations for people who can't go on vacation; homes for folk without families; sanctuaries against aggression. They take sound and fabric and flesh from the ordinary world, and under cover of darkness and

¹⁸ “gay language,” or “gay slang” that is popularly spoken among gay men in South Africa – gayle can also be regional, though it is usually most popular among Afrikaans speaking men.

*the influence of alcohol or drugs, transform it all into something that scrapes up
against utopia.”*

(Kim 2016)

While it can be contested that gay/queer bars and nightclubs are safe spaces/sanctuaries for all (they are not - at least not for all people at all times), as a space for queer and camp performance, it what? holds relevance. Underground gay/queer bars and nightclubs existed at a time when LGBTIQ people needed a space to socialise in secret, to avoid the social and legal implications of being an LGBTIQ identified person in times when it was still illegal to be openly queer in South Africa. Even though it is no longer illegal to be an LGBTIQ identified person, there are still social and physical threats that are often tied to identifying as an LGBTIQ person in South Africa. Gay/queer bars, while they have the capacity to hide the people inside, also provide a sense of freedom that is often now only felt outside, on days such as Pride event days. Just as LGBTIQ identified people move indoors, inside the gay/queer bars and nightclubs, so does queer performance, most notably, drag performance – what is a performance without an audience?

The Chapters

The chapters of this thesis are used to assist the reader in understanding the gendered performance of drag and neo-burlesque performance through their respective histories in Cape Town, and in South Africa. The histories of these two forms of performance are not of equal length, but through their performative conventions and their acts of hyper-feminine performance, they are tied together. These performances are also drawn together in this research as a way of demonstrating to the reader that there is an aspiration toward the destabilisation of socially regulated ideals regarding the ways in which the participants of this research *ought* to be performing in their experiences on stage and off. Yet, there is a conversation between everyday performance, and the performance of fantasy to be found in the staged performance of neo-burlesque and the performance of drag – this research to explores that conversation.

In the first chapter, I introduce drag and neo-burlesque performance as it takes place in Cape Town through the participants in this research who engage in either style of performance. In this chapter, I engage with feminine performance and feminine forms of expression and unpack how they are done through the lens of individual embodiment that includes the performer/actor's social reading by way of their experience as raced/sexed/economically defined situations. In this chapter I also introduce hyper-feminine performance as a form of gender expression and reflect on the ways in which this type of embodiment may influence the persona that is adopted. As the chapter starts, I introduce relevant research participants, who, through the gender expression of their personas, demonstrate the casual ways in which gendered performance may be practiced and accepted as malleable. Through the research participant, Lola I am able to introduce the mask as a practical application of the persona, basing my understanding of the mask on the work of Carl Jung, on the topic.

By working through the concept of the gaze I turn to Marcia Ochoa's concept of felicitious spectacle. Hyper-feminine performance in this chapter is theorised as a response to the male gaze. In this chapter, I start to address the ways in which performers may make use of this as a means to combat objectification; and to assert their agency, as they look back at their audiences as much as they are looked at. This challenges the assumption that the performance exists solely for the viewing pleasure of the audience.

In chapter 2 I am preoccupied with providing context and content to the ways in which the gaze, and in particular the male gaze is understood through the definitions provided by scholars such as Laura Mulvey and E Anne Kaplan. In this chapter, the gaze is used as a means to understand a variety of performances – the perfected, and the intentionally failed. The gaze is discussed in this chapter as a way to understand what both the performer and the spectator expect to achieve or receive through an engagement with the performance. By focusing on the gaze in relation to what the body does, can do, might look like, and the ways in which it is presented, I attempt to further a conversation that questions the ways in which the gaze may affect the form that the mask takes in performance, and how this affects the ways in which the performance will be understood.

Chapter 3 touches on a number of themes, that of feminine performance, hyperfeminine expression, liminality, embodiment, and stigma. These themes are used to demonstrate the effect that the gaze, and ensuing judgments based on this gaze may have when enacted upon the drag performer. Early on in this chapter I interrogate the concepts of shame and stigma as they present in relation to the performance and presence of drag, using Lola's experience regarding ridicule, and how her aspiration toward perfection in her feminine performance informs the way in which she combats feelings of shame and vulnerability as someone who is femininely identified and performing in Cape Town. I argue that the stigma attached to these kinds of feminine performance affect the ability of certain audience members to enjoy the performances on stage and the audience interaction – masculine prescriptions interrupt the ability to be completely taken in by the performance. The performance of drag occupies a liminal space, in this chapter, I attempt to walk the reader through the worlds of fantasy and reality as occupied by the performer. Lastly, in this chapter I unpack the idea of beauty, related to drag performance, and in particular during the performance of pageantry. I demonstrate that the type of drag that is performed on stage for an audience seeking entertainment, and the type of drag performed at pageants are markedly different. The former relies on a mask that requires recognition of a performance, while the latter gains authentication through success and recognition for being able to adequately perform beauty ideals. Beauty ideals are not essential to the performance of drag, as drag does not necessarily refer to ideas of womanhood – instead the performance of drag is an allusion toward the performance of excess in some way – and this excess can get the performer into trouble in some situations as the gaze becomes public, though who does the looking in public gazing may not always react in the desired way.

In chapter 4, I attempt to understand the meaning and purpose of the mask, when working through feminine and hyper-feminine means. Here, I dive into the collective psyche as it may work in among a group of women as a way to create a mask that, in Jung's terms, feigns individuality. This is used to understand the feminine mask as a response to neo-burlesque performance, and also its role in group ideas around femininity. In this chapter, I hope to bring to light that the supposed mask of the inner-self, of individual intent has no true place in these

performances, and that rather it is up to the values coming from within or outside the group that dictates what the feminine mask may look like and how it may function.

The final chapter of the thesis brings drag and neo-burlesque performance in a much clearer way than before, indicating the ways in which these forms of performance are connected as sister performances by working through intentionally failed performance in drag, as well as boylesque performance. Through an analysis of these performances, I interrogate the concept of the gaze further, questioning what exactly is it that the audience is looking at, and whether there is a sense of awareness of the gaze, and the content toward which it is directed.

Methods

The period of data collection for this research project takes place during late 2013, until the beginning of 2015, in Cape Town, South Africa, and consists of 8 drag performers, and 8 neo-burlesque performers. At face value, this may appear to be a small sample size. However as both performance groups are quite small and “tight knit,” I approached key performers stretching from seasoned performers, and those who are new to their particular performance world.

This research makes use of the ethnographic research practices, in order to acquire a picture of the performance of both drag and neo-burlesque, as it exists between 2013 and 2015, with an emphasis on the creative aspects relating to the production of a stage character/persona by an individual performer. “Ethnography focuses on understanding what people believe and think, and how they live their daily lives” (Brennen 2013, 159). The research focuses on the production/creation and performance of the persona of those who perform in drag and neo-burlesque.

Through the use of interviews and research participant biography as a means for constructing a life history/narrative, I gained insight into the ways in which the character/persona is produced by the individual who performs, as well as the manner in which this is portrayed externally. “Albert Camus suggested that the actor is like an acrobat or sportsman...she or he uses the body to convey the character...” (Okely 2012, 108). Okely’s assertion indicates that there is something about the performance that is intrinsically tied to the body, and the way in which it performs to adequately perform a character/persona. The ways in which the body performs and appears is thus highly important to the performance of an act, as “our bodies...bring together the personal (gender, age, biography) with the collective (environment, historical time, education, and upbringing)” (Belting 2001, 39). The body is able to be transformed, and is the site where the act and illusion is communicated through the external images that are projected through the body’s performance. The performance of drag and neo-burlesque is temporary, and takes place

in the context of the performance space. I explore the ways in which individuals who perform are able to adequately do so.

At the practical level, each research participant participated in interviews that ranged from one to two hours each time an interview was scheduled. These interviews had their audio digitally recorded, and were transcribed for the purpose of this research. Not every interview is made use of explicitly in the research, however, the interviews provide an underlying basis for much of what has been highlighted throughout this thesis. Outside of the interview, I visited drag performances on a weekly basis, neo-burlesque performance during the scheduled events throughout the year, and participated, as a stage manager, in a neo-burlesque tour of the Garden Route. During the performances of drag and neo-burlesque throughout the year, I would take photographs, with the permission of the performers, as well as record field notes on my smartphone. Recording field notes on my smart phone offered me a greater sense of anonymity with regards to my position as a spectator. I entered the field as a spectator, and sometimes as a performer, however when viewing the performance, it was my wish to immerse myself in the act of viewing, to understand the role of the gaze, and how performers may seek to direct and control the gaze as they performed their acts on stage. This made me appear inconspicuous, as it would appear that I was just making general use of my phone, or checking social media. Yet, the presence of my camera also made me appear as less conspicuous, as I started to gain a reputation for attending performances with my camera in tow. This would in some ways allow me access to the front of the stage, as it would appear to other audience members that I had a particular purpose for being at the performance, but also in some ways would draw the attention of other drag performers who did not participate in this research because they too wanted their picture taken. I also performed as a drag king at various drag and neo-burlesque events in order to gain a greater understanding of what it is like to perform on both the neo-burlesque and drag stage.

Ethical Considerations

This research stems from my Masters research titled: “*Above Gender: Doing Drag, Performing Authentically, and Defying the Norms of Gender through Performance in Cape Town*”. This previous research provided me with a number of contacts in the drag performance world, thus I had been acquainted with some of the participants in this research prior to undertaking the fieldwork portion of this research. While there are drag and neo-burlesque performers who I do consider friends, I avoided approaching those who I have close relationships with to participate, and instead built up rapport with those whom I was less familiar with. However, because I have performed with both drag performers as well as neo-burlesque performers prior to, and during the course of this research, I was not a complete stranger to some of those who participated in this research. Cultivating a level of familiarity with potential research participants proved useful to this research as it allowed potential participants to not view me as a stranger, or an outsider. Further, my familiarity with both drag performance and neo-burlesque performance assured participants that I would treat their performance style with respect in my research. As such, it could be said that I have conducted this research among my peers – though only to a certain extent. There are those who conduct ethnographic research that have warned, and argued against “a confusion of the roles of friend and informant” (Driessen 1998, 44). However, when conducting research among those who may consider one a peer to a certain extent, extending a hand of friendship becomes a useful methodological approach that allows for greater reflexivity in research and writing. In this research, getting close to research participants – though *not too close* – allowed both the participant and myself as the researcher to do away with the perceived formality of research and interviews. Thus, this closeness allows us to do away with the perceived hierarchical separation between the expectations of researcher and participant (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014, 285), and opens up a dialogue between the researcher and the participant that requires both mutual recognition, as well as mutual participation (Owton and Allen-Collinson 2014, 286). Thus, this dialogue, much like friendship, is built on mutual understanding and trust – in this research it was important that the participants felt some level of trust in me as a researcher, in order to write their experiences in the most accurate and respectful manner possible.

In practice, each participant was provided with a consent form to participate in the research, and in one instance (during the boylesque interview), verbal consent was provided on the recorded interview. Throughout the interview process, I made sure to check in if participants were still comfortable with recorded interviews and informed each participant that consent was rolling, that they possessed the ability to rescind their consent at any time during the research. Fortunately there were no participants who declined their participation. The images that were collected and included in this research were taken by me, with the consent of the participants as well as the managers of various venues – while I have avoided photographing audience members without their permission, at times these private/public spaces became too crowded and participant-only images were not possible, however whenever approached to avoid photographing someone, I have complied throughout the research. Further, there have also been occasions where I have interacted with research participants while they have been intoxicated – an occurrence that is not so strange, since much of this research was conducted in bars and nightclubs. During these instances I avoided collecting data. Only when there was seemingly important information shared did I consider making use of the data, and would inquire from participants whether or not they would consent to the information being used. Lastly, it is important to note that while I make use of participants’ stage names throughout the research, I make use of pseudonyms throughout when referring to participants outside of their performing selves. With their permission, their public self remains public, while their private self remains private. Thus, I believe I have made every possible effort to ensure that the research was conducted in an ethical manner.

The Image of Performance



Manila von Teez, Zer021, 2013



Coco Cain, Crew Bar, 2014



Zer021, 2013

Images are an important aspect of neo-burlesque and drag performance. While at neo-burlesque performances, audiences are discouraged from taking pictures of performances, at drag performances, the audience is deeply involved in the production of the image of the performer. Both of these forms of performance are deeply entrenched in the production of the image, so it is essential that this research contain information regarding the image, as well as the images themselves. Much of the data collected in this research is visual. All photographs included in this research are my own, and were taken with explicit permission from the specific performers, as well as the managers and owners of the performance spaces. The photographs function as an essential companion to the performance, as it would be impossible for me to describe every detail of a highly visual field, only through words. The images that are applied here attempt to illustrate what the experience of being witness to and being a participant in neo-burlesque and drag performance is. According to the research in visual anthropology by Sarah Pink, “social

research about pictures involve 3 sets of questions: 1) what is the image of/what is its content?; 2) Who took it, or made it, when and why?; 3) How do other people come to have it? How do they read it? What do they want to do with it?” (Pink 2006, 29). The images in this research document neo-burlesque and drag performance, as it takes place in bars and nightclubs in Cape Town. These images illustrate the different types of performance that can take place in relation to masculine and feminine gendered ideals through mostly feminine performance. The images are also used in such a way so that the reader can feel familiar with the individuals who participated in this research. My aim is to allow the reader to feel as familiar with the participants as I am through the viewing of the images in accompaniment with the writing in this research. Sarah Pink further describes the potential content of images as an “internal narrative – the story...” (Pink 2006, 30). The images that are included in this research, in combination to the writing, are thus used as a means to provide a further layer to the narrative of performance as it is experienced and understood in the research field. A picture can only provide so much description, just as my words can only provide a certain layer of description of the field and the performances that take place in this research. The images, alongside the data that is analysed and described in this research function as complementary layers that allow the reader to immerse themselves in this research field. Many of the images that are available in this research were collected through an act of transaction. Because I have a camera in hand, because I am known in some way, I am allowed access to spaces and interactions with performers that other regular audience members are not. My presence has been taken notice of and interpreted by those who I have been seeking to observe. The process of acting as a researcher becomes a form of performance, and certain expectations have been placed upon me. The camera I hold in my hand at performances provides me with some forms of access that a regular audience member would not normally have, but it also means that I am expected to act in a particular manner. The camera becomes a tool of curiosity. My act of gazing through the lens leaves me open to be gazed upon, and I have meaning asserted upon me too. I am allowed access to these spaces because there is a role I have to play that could in some ways serve the research participants.

The image of performance becomes another form of performance, an act. Considering the work of Henri Lefebvre, he states that: “the image is an act. In so far as it is a social act, the image is

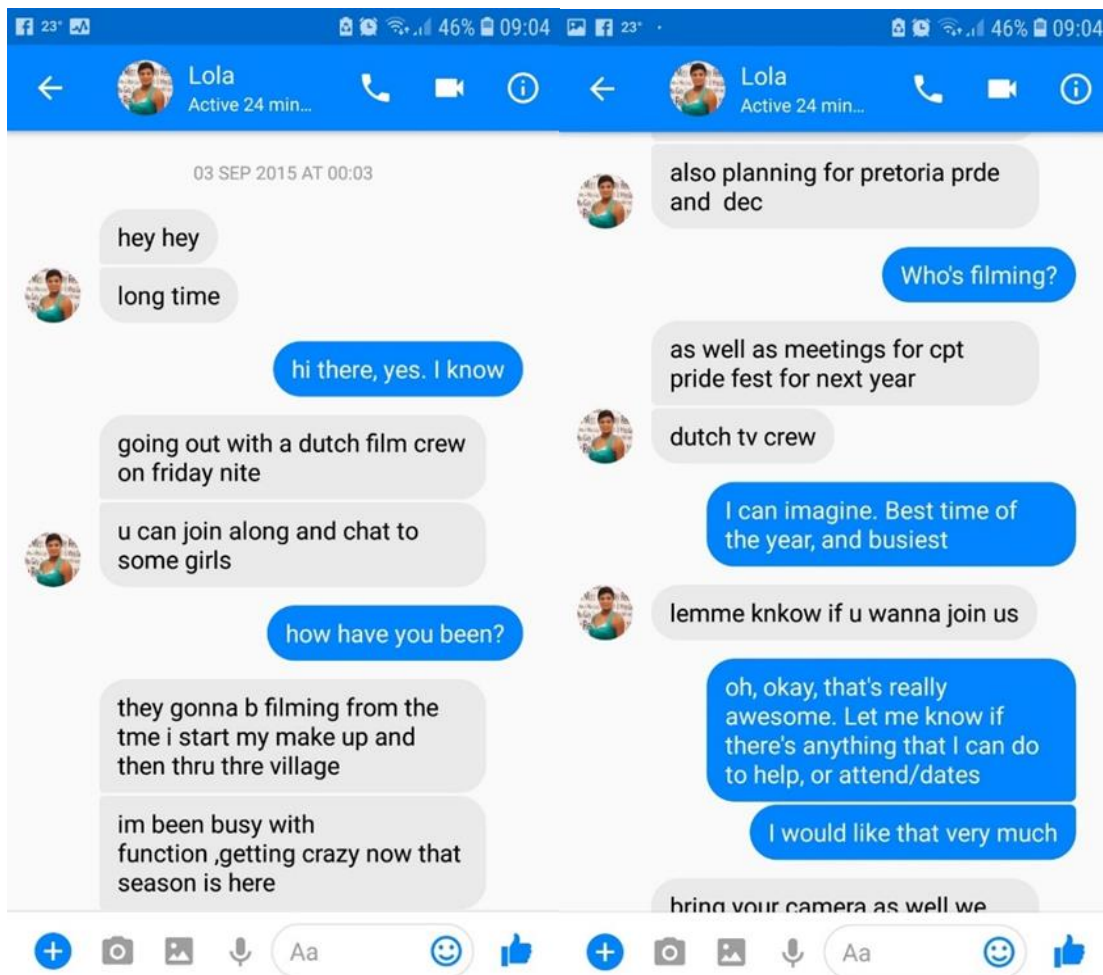
an image of an action which it deliberately projects towards the subject – the human being it is addressing and whom it wants to influence. Touched and moved, this person responds to the effects of the image and projects it back towards its initiator” (Lefebvre 2002, 288). The images that are used here are thus used not only to communicate to the reader what I as the researcher experienced through viewing the act of performance, and attempt to interpret the content through the gaze of my lens – these images are also used as a means to demonstrate and document the content of the performance, as the performer aspires it to be interpreted and remembered. Lefebvre continues: “the image is only active when it is ‘expressive’. It arouses what it expresses and provokes it. The image has an inherently provocative character. Where we use an image to provoke an emotion, we ourselves do not need to be moved” (Lefebvre 2002, 289). The images here become expressive through their consumption and understanding by the viewer and the reader. The images used here are my best effort and attempt to genuinely document the content of the performance as it is portrayed by the performing individual.

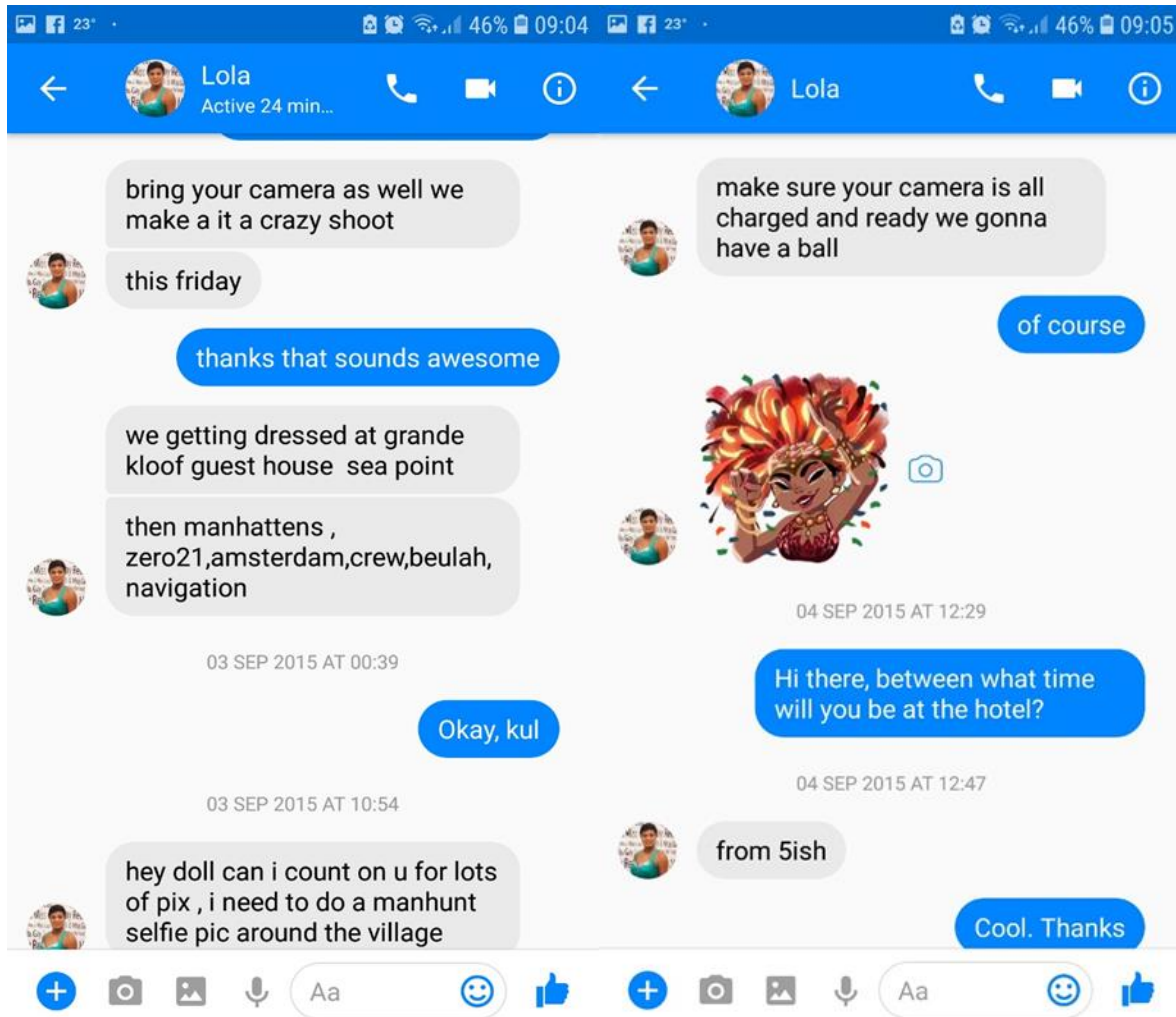
A Note on Pronouns in this Research

Where possible, I make use of each participant in this research’s correct pronoun. Usually this is confirmed by asking what the participant’s pronoun is or inferring from interview data where the participant refers to themselves. Generally, in drag, I refer to participants by the gendered pronoun of the character and do the same for neo-burlesque characters. Thus, you may see me refer to the character as “she” in one instance, and to the participant as “he” in the next.

Chapter 2 – “To the Gay Village, My Dear”

In this first chapter I situate the performance of drag and neo-burlesque in the time in which the research data was collected, and additionally situate these performances in the place in which this research takes place. In this chapter I start to unpack the performance of femininity as it relates to everyday life performances, though the main focus is that of the staged feminine performance. The concepts of the mask and the gaze are introduced, unravelled, and start taking theoretical shape, as a tool for performance, and attempt to piece together the ways in which these concepts – the mask, and the gaze – work in conjunction to one another in the life of the performer and the performance.





It's after midnight, and a block at the bottom of my computer screen pops up as I half-heartedly scroll through my Facebook feed. It is early Thursday morning, and Lola, one of Cape Town's longest performing drag queens, sends me a message, telling me that there is a Dutch television crew coming to Cape Town to do an insert on the "gay village" and drag queens in Cape Town. "We ('re) gonna have a ball," she tells me, "make sure your camera is charged" she makes sure to tell me before we both sign off for the night. While I am in Lola's company for the purpose of performing research, the last message she sends me indicates the transactional nature of our interaction for the evening to come – I am allowed to join their group, as long as I have my camera in hand. Over the course of some months I have come to be perceived as a drag photographer, as my camera is more often than not, in hand whenever I attend a drag event

where a research participant has provided consent for me to photograph them. It is apparent then that even though I have been doing the observing at these performances, my presence has also been noted and interpreted by those who participate in this research, or who may be on the periphery of this research – as a member of one of the “cliques” of drag performers in Cape Town who socialize together, and may perform together. The process of acting as a researcher then becomes a form of performance, and certain expectations have been placed upon me. The way in which I am observed, and read, thus leads to perceived expectations regarding the way in which I ought to behave. In order to achieve my goal, I must adopt a mask that allows me to functionally interact with the world around me. The camera I hold in my hand at performances provides me with forms of access that ordinary audience members would not normally have. This also means that I am expected to act in a particular manner. The camera becomes a tool of curiosity. My act of gazing through the lens leaves me open to be perceptively gazed upon, and I have meaning asserted upon me too. I am allowed easy access to these spaces, on the one hand because I am queer, and also perform drag on occasion, and on the other hand, because there is a role I have to play that could in some ways serve the research participants.

Friday night draws closer, and somehow, I am already late. I send Lola a text message telling her this, and she responds that she too is running late.

I drive up to the hotel where I’m meant to meet them, The Grand Kloof Boutique Hotel, in Sea Point, although it looks to be further away, in a neighbouring area. There is a significant amount of construction work going on in the street and along the pavement, and I cannot see the entrance to the hotel. I park my car up a side street, and get out, trying to look for the hotel. I call Lola, as I cannot tell where I am meant to enter the property. “It’s the one with all the flags outside,” she shouts at me over the phone, voices buzzing in the background. I look around, and there are two hotels with flags at the entrance, I walk up and down the street, Lola says “I’m standing on the balcony, can’t you see us?” I cannot. A few minutes pass, and eventually I am able to see the entrance. The buzzer is on the other side of the roadworks along the pavement however, and there is a large ditch that is marked by tape and poles. I can’t reach it. There are a few people

smoking and chatting near the entrance fortunately, and a man calls the desk clerk who opens the gate and lets me in.

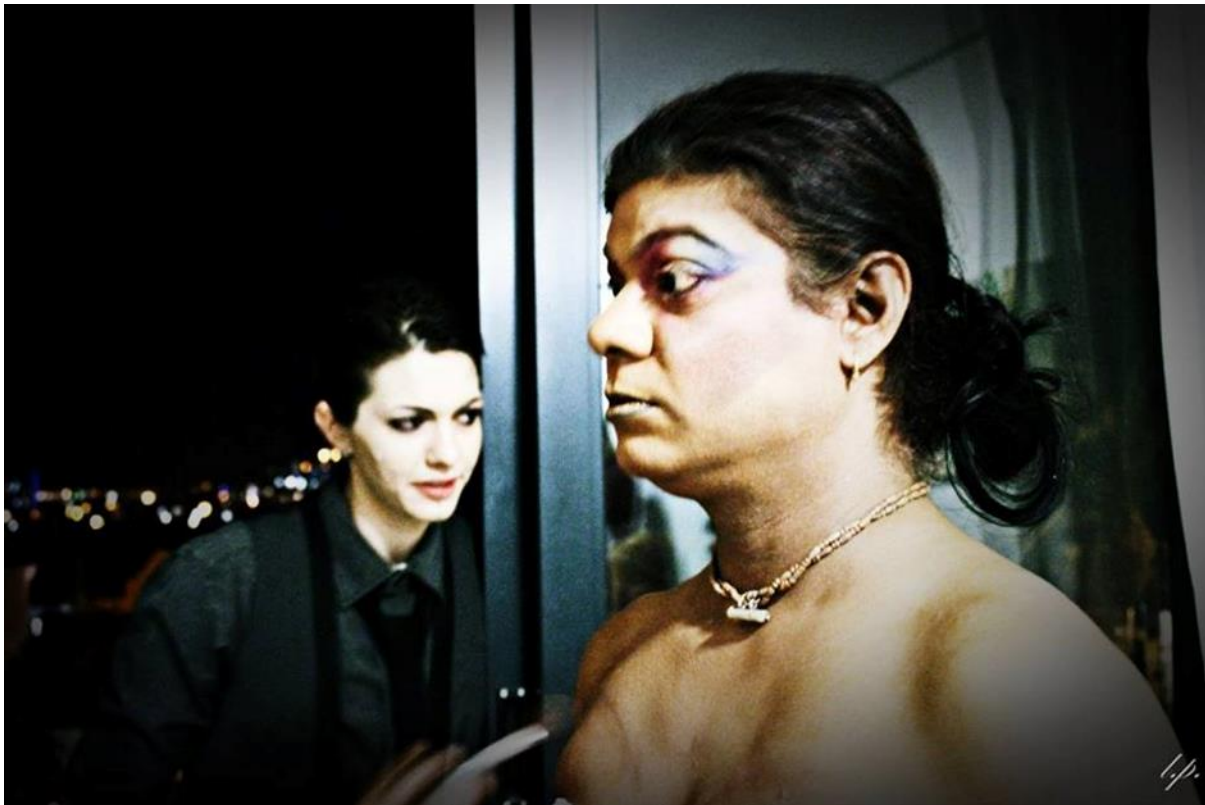
I reach the reception area of the hotel, and I notice that the desk clerk looks familiar. He's the partner of one of the drag performers at the Late Night Drag Show at Crew Bar, "*Dame L'amouree*" I ask him which room Lola is in, and he directs me up the stairs. I knock on the door, and there are 5 people who I can see inside the room. Lola exclaims my name in greeting, and announces who I am, to everyone else. Coco Caine, a frequent drag performer at Crew Bar pops her head out from the bathroom door to say hi. Lola tells me that the pictures that I'm meant to be taking will be uploaded to the "Manhunt" page, and that they will be handing out vouchers for subscriptions to "Manhunt" along the way as the night progresses. "Manhunt" is an online dating application that is used by men who are interested in the company of other men. While Lola mostly appears in gay bars and nightclubs in drag and insists that people use "she/her" pronouns in reference to her, it is interesting that she is the representative for a dating app that is used mostly by cisgender gay and bisexual men to meet other gay and bisexual men. Even though Lola presents femininely, and dresses in drag to go out to gay bars and nightclubs, she identifies as a gay man, regardless of the fact that she most often makes use of she/her pronouns. On one occasion I asked her what she thought of the term "queer" as an identity, and she strongly disagreed with its use, saying, "all these youngsters calling themselves queer, you know, I just don't get it. For me, the way that word was used when I was younger, it was just insulting. It was used to call us freaks...I just can't use it, and I will rather just say that I am gay." With that, while Lola presents femininely while we are out for the night, she still benefits from specific privileges that are afforded to men. During the course of the evening Lola leads the way to various venues in the "gay village." There are however particular venues and areas that 3 members of our group, including me are barred from entering, as we are not read as, nor identified to be men. This highlights the assertion of Cape Town being the "gay capital of the continent of Africa" - many of the establishments in this area serve the desires of middle class, white, gay men. Establishments such as this, that bar the entry of anyone who is not considered to be a man, employ binary understandings of gender in order to police who may or may not enter the establishment. While Lola appears femininely, and is dressed in hyper-feminine attire

and makeup, because she identifies as a gay man, and regardless of the outer coverings of her body, she is allowed to enter. As such, because she identifies as a gay man, she is also allowed to be the public face, and a local representative for “Manhunt”. In this instance, the essentialist ideas with regards to her physical body, as well as her sexual identity provide her with the means to traverse a variety of spaces. The fluidity of gendered performance in a rigid system is alluded to here. Even though Lola’s access to these “men-only” spaces is hinged upon her identity as a gay man, and essentialist assumptions surrounding her body as perceived and understood by others, she does not perform the role of “masculine/man” in order to access this space. She arrives as who she is, and even though who she is might fly in the face of the gendered expectations of who is allowed in these spaces, she is able to gain access by virtue of the way she plays with the gender that is illustrated on her body in correlation to the anatomy that allows her the privilege of access here. There may be a perceived rigid idea surrounding who is and is not allowed to access these spaces, though individuals such as Lola illustrate that these ideas are in fact, not so rigid, and are quite bendable, when used in the hands of those who know how to do the bending. Of course, there are contradictions evident here. Transgender and cisgender women, as well as gender non-conforming people of all kinds of gender expressions may not be welcome in these “men-only” spaces, yet Lola somehow maintains access. She is able to bend the perceived rules of such spaces, not because of her gender presentation, but because of the perceptions of what her body means within the confines of this space – yet her gender presentation is always on display. The staff and patrons thus have made a decision regarding what/who they see when Lola visits these venues. Here, Lola is stripped down to what her body implies, and the mask of her gender expression is tossed aside.

The room is full, and busy, as drag performers, Lola, Coco, and *Melissa*¹⁹ who is doing “boy drag” ready themselves for the evening. Melissa, the *drag king* for the evening, has not provided me with a character name, and corrects me to use she/her pronouns when I attempt to use masculine pronouns in reference to her. She slicks her hair back, after applying a thick layer of makeup that makes her look pan-cakey and very white. I speak to her about her experiences and desire to do drag, and she tells me that this is her first time trying drag, and that she’s only doing

¹⁹ Pseudonym

it after Lola urged her to do so, as Lola felt they needed some drag king representation for the television show. Later that evening she tells me that she is not experienced in drag and asks me for advice regarding how to bind her chest. She pulls her shirt forward to reveal that she has bound with plastic cling-wrap. She tells me that it feels quite uncomfortable wearing it, but she continues to wear it while we are at the hotel.



Above: Lola, in the foreground, focuses on her makeup, and contouring her chest to appear more feminine. Melissa enters the room after smoking a cigarette now that she feels sufficiently prepared, and costumed for the evening (2015).

Below: Lola powders her face, before applying setting spray to ensure that her makeup stays on all night for the adventure with the television crew (2015).



I return to the room and take a seat on one of the twin beds that are pushed up against the wall. *Paul*²⁰, a tall, slim, bearded young man, dressed in tight jeans, a striped shirt, and a scarf, introduces himself to me. We chat briefly, and I start taking pictures of Lola as she gets ready. She is dressed in a towel that covers her nipples, olive chinos and flip flops, her hair is tied up into a low ponytail. She takes her time - applying her makeup, contouring her face, neck and chest.

There is a loud knock on the door, and the camera crew enters the room. Lola introduces herself, and tells the crew, “this is everyone”. The cameras and lights are turned on, without skipping a beat, Lola switches into the more performative “Lola mode” that is a hyper-representation of Lola off stage and away from an audience. Her voice goes up an octave, she speaks even louder, while gesticulating widely with her hands, taking up physical space as she is recorded on film.

²⁰ Pseudonym

Even Lola's physical stance has changed. Though she is wearing flip flops, she adopts her "showgirl" stance – one leg slightly in front of the other, arching the front foot. I take pictures from behind those inside the room, staying out of the view of the camera. The interviewer from the crew has brought a bottle of sparkling wine from the hotel bar downstairs, and they start pouring glasses for everyone in the room. During the interview segment, the interviewer asks Lola where we will be going, she says "to the gay village, my dear! And I hope you're buying me drinks"; "of course!" exclaims the interviewer with a wide, perfectly aligned, toothy grin. Alcohol plays the role of a form of currency in drag circles in Cape Town. In other countries, there is a convention of tipping drag queens in cash when they are performing. There is no such convention in Cape Town. However, many drag performers urge patrons to buy them drinks or shots in return, or as thanks, for being entertained. This results in some venues not paying their performers, but supplying them with a certain amount of alcohol to keep the performance going, and to keep the performer well lubricated enough to do so. This exchange is no different. Those who appear in the television excerpt do not receive financial remuneration for doing so. The payment appears to be exposure, access to a nice hotel room for a few hours, and enough drinks to keep them going, and entertaining enough for the camera.



Lola being interviewed. She leans into the conversation with the television host, half dressed, half made-up, yet fully in character (2015).

During the course of the interview, and the subsequent night out, Lola performs spectacularly, bringing forth French Marxist theorist and philosopher Guy Debord's concept of the spectacle, as she performs as the *star* of the show that evening, where she becomes a "spectacular representation of a living human being, (embodying) the banality by embodying the image of a possible role" (Debord 2010, 60), that of the theatrical, hyper-feminine drag queen. Lola performs spectacularly, and theatrically, in this instance. The performances of drag (as well as neo-burlesque) in Cape Town largely takes place outside of traditional theatre spaces, in places such as bars, nightclubs, restaurants, and coffee shops. Yet, these are still theatrical performances. Lola demonstrates this in the hotel room. Wherever Lola is, is her stage. Her theatre where she performs the character of Lola, is wherever she appears as Lola – the drag character. She performs the role of "Lola, the drag queen," as soon as the TV crew enters the room. She is half dressed, and half made up, but still attempting to maintain the illusion of the

character of Lola, by making use of the characters' distinguishing features, such as her voice, and physical gesturing and posturing. Lola in drag, and Lola out of drag are both housed in the same body, so she employs certain distinguishing features to indicate that "Lola the drag queen" has entered the conversation. The mask of the performance character is not as easy to put on and take off as a physical mask made of plastic or other material would be. Like many of her fellow drag performers (as well as neo-burlesque performers) in this instance Lola employs a type of controlled directional gaze, confirming that, "our gaze must always and only be directed at what she wants us to see" (hooks 2006, 17). It is then understood that performers such as Lola will only allow the audience to see what they want them to see, if they are doing their jobs as drag and neo-burlesque performers adequately. There are many ways in which we can look, or gaze upon another. These instances where performers make use of an intentional directional gaze works toward a sense of momentary empowerment, where the one who performs attempts to make the spectator view the performing body through the lens of the character as a focus, rather than merely inspecting, surveying, peering, glancing, peeking, scouring – instead, we as spectators have our focus directed (or at the very least an attempt towards such direction) by the characterised performance (Carr 2013, 2), which informs the spectator that what they are viewing is a performance of drag – in this instance – or a performance of neo-burlesque in other instances that will be discussed in this research. In "Queen for a Day," anthropologist and feminist scholar Marcia Ochoa writes about the production of a national femininity in Venezuela, focusing on beauty pageants as well as transgender women. Ochoa introduces the idea of *felicitious spectacle*. This *felicitious spectacle* can also be applied in attempts to understand the forms of performance related to both drag and neo-burlesque performance. *Felicitious spectacle*, as understood by Ochoa, is "a spectacle that does what it sets out to do – a spectacle where one feels in command, and where one receives the kind of attention one desires. *Felicitious spectacle* requires some kind of display, and an audience – real or imaginary that can provide the kind of recognition one seeks" (Ochoa 2014, 222). The performer thus attempts to convince the audience that a performance of drag or neo-burlesque is taking place, where they attempt to garner a desired response through a performance where they attempt to coerce the audience into looking at them, and the performance in a particular way. A way that fulfils both the fantasy of the performer and the audience alike. This is done with varying levels of success. This *felicitious spectacle* challenges the way the audience sees, and questions the ways that an

audience is perceived to look at the performing body as a “thing”. What is the effect that this has on the expectation of bodies that are gendered in a particular way? The performer, through their persona and the use of their mask challenges the audience to see differently than what they merely observe. The use of this mask in performance challenges both parties to experience the performance in ways that go *beyond the gaze*.

Lola is performing for both a real, and imagined audience, where those of us in the room, including the TV crew and host become an instant audience, whose responses she can gather immediate gratification from, while her imagined audience will only arrive later in the form of those who will view the television program. She has no control, regarding the response or attention this appearance will garner, thus the *felicicious spectacle* of this performance will have to make do, in terms of recognition – though she still does her best to perform for those who are unseen by her.

Lola appears not fully in drag yet is still able to convince those who view her performing as Lola to understand and accept the switch from her day-to-day self, to the fantasy image of the performance persona. How does she achieve this? This moment becomes significant as she does not appear to fully require the mask of her make-up and costumes in order to achieve the performing identity of the character. She is able to convince the viewer of her character merely by having us look upon her, listen to her speak, and engage with and interpret her gestures, in order to understand the inferences to her character. Henri Lefebvre refers to the significance of gestures by stating that “every gesture relates to something ‘fundamental,’ a need, a possession, an object, a presence, or an absence” (Lefebvre 2002, 308). Considering Lefebvre’s understanding of gesture, Lola’s gestural performance indicates the presence of her hyper-feminine drag persona, and the absence of masculinised behaviour associated with the ways in which men are socialised to take up space in the world. Lola demonstrates the ways in which she is able to don the mask of the characterised version of Lola without completing her makeup and costuming elements, but rather through her use of gesture, and inference. The viewer is able to accept Lola’s hyper-feminine performance, and the absence of perceived masculinity through her

use of gesture that alludes to the character of Lola. She creates a theatre out of a hotel room by portraying the character physically and gesturally, all while in the process of physical preparation for the main act. While much of this research focuses on the staged act of performance, Lola's interactions demonstrate that the stage is not the only space where one is able to perform for an *other*. She is fully immersed in the world she has created for her persona, and is able to "flick the switch," so to speak, to quickly place herself in her shoes – even though she is wearing flip flops. The mask that Lola has created allows the viewer to see what they want to see – Lola as a drag performer – even when she is not fully dressed in the desired costume or make-up. Yet, how is she able to achieve this situational switching of identity and persona without interrupting her performance of everyday self in such a way that disrupts the audience, and force them to suspend their disbelief?

The puzzle of personas

When I first started interviewing participants from the field who would eventually come to participate in this research, I wanted to understand what it was that they understood as *their* performance. I wanted to understand whether they viewed their performance as something innate, as something they just did without thinking, or whether there was some form of deeper meaning laced into the performance, something essential that was unseen to the naked viewing eye. I asked each participant what it is they thought that they were doing on stage and in performances - if the person who they would become in this space was some form of outward, performative *persona*, or *character*. This would prove an accurate description, as each participant responded with some variation of the same answer – yes, the performance on stage and in performance spaces are that of a stylised character or persona who was created and put together by the person who performs the respective character/persona. Even for those who reveal that the performance persona is not far removed from the individual who performs the persona, there is still the assertion that the persona is not who they are or present themselves as on a day-to-day basis. Lola, whom I introduced in the vignette above asserts that "I do drag 24/7. I am Lola 24/7." However, the Lola whom I meet in interviews, and the "Lola" whom I meet in front

of the camera, are different from one another. They are two sides of the same face. They are similar, but not identical - not symmetrical. These two sides communicate differently and provide different information when they do communicate. Often the make-up and the dress prepare you for the presence of the persona that you should be expecting. The Lola whom one meets in drag, and the Lola whom one encounters out of drag, are not vastly different from one another, yet the Lola in drag, performs in a noticeably louder, more exaggerated, and overtly confident manner. “Lola” in some ways comes off as an exaggerated hyper-performance of Lola, who is dressed in makeup and heels. Before the parts that make “Lola” are applied, there is Lola too, but a far more thoughtful, and gentle version. If exaggerated, hyper-performance emerges as a result of the gaze being directed toward her, then perhaps Lola’s cue for adopting these exaggerations is the knowledge that she is being looked at. I pose the idea that these hyper-performances function as a means of working toward combating objectification and asserting agency in a performance where both parties look back at one another.

In this research, I make use of the term “mask” to indicate the effects that the persona possesses in practice. The Latin roots of the term “persona” refers to both person/personality, as well as the mask/projected personality²¹. In this research, I focus on the latter definition provided by Jung. I assert that the persona is important as an idea that is separate from the inner self of the individual who performs. Jung theorises the *persona* as alluding to “the mask worn by actors to indicate the role they played” (Jung 1966, 216). The performers of drag and neo-burlesque do not make use of physical masks, such as the masks used in classical Greek theatre traditions -made from wood, linen, or leather - masks that can be easily touched and physically taken off and tossed aside. The persona adopts functions that are like the ways in which the mask does in other theatrical traditions would, though it takes a different sort of preparation to apply and remove this kind of mask. Jung goes on to say that, “through the persona, a man tries to appear as this or that, or he hides behind a mask, or he may even build up a definite persona as a barricade” (Jung 1966, 240). Invoking Jung, the mask/projected personality functions as an artifice that keeps the performer and the audience at a distance from one another, and from ever truly getting to know one another outside of the appearance. The mask builds a barrier between the person behind the

²¹ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/person>

performance and the persona who acts out the performance – though this barrier is not assumed to be so big and so wide that the performer is unable to get to the other side. There is a process of creation that each performer goes through in order to gain access to the persona, this process acts as a tool for transformation that unlocks the persona/mask for those who will perform. Lola has performed her character for over two decades, so the persona has become part of her in such a way that context and expectation can affect whether or not she might transform from non-performing Lola, to performing Lola.

This way of creating a performance persona is not unique to drag performance and performers like Lola Fine. While drag and neo-burlesque performers are connected by their ability to hyper-extend what feminine performance is, and can be, the performances are also connected by the ways in which individuals may formulate their characters for performance. Lady Magnolia, a neo-burlesque performer and teacher too has created her own performance persona. She describes her character as possessing a number of similarities to her day-to-day self, while also not being her day-to-day performance of self, stating that, “Lady Magnolia definitely is me...but she [is] the dressed up, made up, high heels, corseted me. But it’s definitely still me, you know?” For Lady Magnolia, the character is not far removed from her day-to-day self. She feels that she carries her character with her always, but the context of the performance space provides the secret ingredient that allows her the ability to transform in such a way that the performance persona becomes present. Even when she is dressed up in other settings, she may not always be Lady Magnolia. However, when there is an audience to perform for, we are able to look upon the character of Lady Magnolia, who through the use of her mask, makes her presence known. Much like Lola, the artifice of exaggerated performance spurs the transformation, and comes into full bloom once the make-up and costuming elements are applied to the individual. Her hyper-feminine performance as Lady Magnolia comes as a response to the male gaze that renders the looked at as object, and lacking control of their circumstance, and agency in the ways that they may be seen. The on-stage persona responds by looking back at those who gaze – asking who is in control during the performance? Who is being satisfied? Lady Magnolia also became the source of internalised confidence for the person who performs her. This correlates with one of the key tenets of burlesque performance, related to the performance of confidence, “confidence

is key in burlesque. Your showmanship depends on conveying, if not actually feeling confidence. The beauty of it all is that burlesque can actually give you confidence, whether you're watching or performing" (Weldon 2010, 221). Would Lady Magnolia be able to successfully "sell" her performance if she were lacking in self-assuredness? How would the audience respond to someone not taken in by their own performance? What is conveyed on stage, is both for the spectator, and the one who performs. Confidence is sold to those who view the performance in much the same way that their elegant dress, and aspirational lifestyle is sold to those who gaze upon their performing body, as that indicates to the viewer that the dressed up, performing body, is one that acts in leisure, and does not busy itself with any sort of "productive labour" (Veblen 1912, 170). The life on stage becomes both fantasy, and aspiration. This fantasy is enacted by using the mask in performance. The fantasy is separated from the daily tasks of a mundane life. The fantasy separates the performer and the viewer from the potential pain that they may experience, living a life where social pressures and regulations are asserted upon them. In the experience of an ordinary life, one is not really allowed to walk the streets wearing fantastical make-up, dressed up in fabulous costumes, nor with one's breasts or buttocks exposed, up for display without moral judgements and social pressure at the fore. On stage, and in the performance arena, this is possible. On stage, and by use of the elements that make up the mask, the performer gains a sense of authority. In Lady Magnolia's case, the heels change the way she stands and takes her strides, this forces her to perform these actions with an air of confidence, while her corset forces her spine upwards and chest forward, leading her to present an authoritative figure. While these items may seem to hinder some, physically, in the right hands, such as Lady Magnolia's hands, these items are used to create a presence of authority.

What exactly is it about performing, or constructing a character for performance, that promotes confidence within the one who performs?

For Roxy – a drag performer, and the host of the Late Night Drag Show, at Crew Bar - the character she has created was formed during a time when she needed strength and confidence outside of herself. Roxy often speaks publicly and openly about her HIV positive status, and it was in the wake of her diagnosis that she created Roxy. She attempts to make use of the

character of Roxy as a voice to fight against stigma against HIV, and ultimately, the character of Roxy helps the man behind her mask push back, against shame in his life, and against shame in the lives of others. I ask her to tell me about the character of Roxy, and how she came to be:

“...I wanted to create something that, that people fell in love with. That they, that they, that they...that they wouldn't judge just based on a health condition, you know? So I think I did the most perfect thing. I created a character that was sort of loveable, endearing, funny, and charming, and flirtatious, and sexy even. You know? (laughs) And then they would fall in love with that, and if they could, relate to the character, then whatever issues or burdens or whatever the character has, doesn't matter, that falls away, because they've already established that connection. And that's exactly what happens with Roxy Le Roux, people started falling in love with the character. And everything else just...didn't matter. And that's sort of the point, as well. About this whole thing, and about any other disease, or poverty, or anything, race, whatever! If you take the time to get to know the character - the person's character, none of that matters! Ja, so that was pretty much the exercise, and it worked! (laughs). Ja, I mean, I didn't know all of that at the time. At the time it was sort of a survival thing. I needed to sort of heal myself and do my own sort of healing.”

(Roxy, interview segment, 2014)

The character of Roxy was created in the wake of what was, at the time, a deeply traumatic experience. Roxy describes herself as being unmotivated and depressed during that time. For *Thomas*,²² who performs as Roxy Le Roux, Roxy would come to embody that which he aspired to be. For *Thomas*, the character of Roxy provides him with an outlet, an escape from his day-to-day life, as a coloured gay man from a small town, outside of the big city dreams of Cape Town. The heels, the blond hair, the sequins, the racial ambiguity, they are not part of *Thomas*' life - but they *are* part of Roxy's. Yet the qualities of confidence, and feeling loveable, those qualities became part of *Thomas*' life eventually, he tells me. The performance character in this case, is viewed as an external source of confidence and self-esteem, through an assertion of aspirational performance, that in some instances, such as *Thomas*'/Roxy's can provide the individual with qualities that they feel they might lack, as part of their daily interactions. Sara Ahmed writes that

²² pseudonym

“the singular body becomes an object of shared feeling, a way that the natural body can cohere in recognition of the longevity of a history it can call its own” (Ahmed 2014, 27). Thomas’ singular body is made up of a specific history, and that includes his trauma, but his body also houses the history and experiences of Roxy Le Roux. Thomas’s body is shared by both the personas of Roxy and Thomas, and so their feelings and experiences are shared, and affected by one another. In their symbiotic relationship Roxy provides Thomas with feelings related to motivation, confidence and the feeling of being worthy of being loved, while Thomas does all the heavy lifting and makes space for in both the real and fantasy worlds. Roxy is an external character, who functions an external source of motivation for Thomas. In some ways the outlet that she allows Thomas, allows for some aspiration that he can reach for through the act of adopting, and internalising that which is gained through the external performance.

The mask and everyday life

In his writing on everyday life, John Storey states “everyday life is continually named but rarely presented” (Storey 2014, 1), he goes on to say that “it is so self-evident that there seems little to say about it” (Storey 2014, 2). Everyday life becomes so general and mundane that there is very little focus on the regular gestures and interactions between individuals, who perform within the bounds of socially mandated behaviours. There exists a mask of everyday behaviour for each of us. This keeps many of us inconspicuous as long as we keep in line with the dominant ideology. The mask of everyday behaviour functions as protective because it connotes sameness and allows for comfortable and expectant behaviour. Of course, those who participated in this research have their everyday mask, but they also apply the use of the characterised mask of the persona during their performances. Performers regularly refer to their character in the third person, a linguistic action that places the performance character as outside themselves somehow, and mediates their everyday selves as being more likely to participate in the activities of the dominant ideology of the social groups in which they situate themselves in. Jung’s understanding of the persona/mask as creating a barrier is appropriate here, as the persona allows the individual to distance themselves from the performance when necessary – and as such allows spectators to

distance themselves from the individual who performs when they are away from the performance space. This assists in separating the two worlds which performers attempt to balance upon the shoulders of the single body who carries both the performing and living personas. One of the uses of the mask of the performance character is that it has the effect of making the performers, and the world around them appear *more strange*. During the time of performance, they are able to do and say things that most people are not allowed to say and do in everyday life situations. Thus, the performance of drag or neo-burlesque becomes an event, not just for the audience, but also for the performer. Performance here goes against Lefebvre's interpretation of Anton Chekhov's idea of theatre, where he makes the assertion that it (theatre) should be a representation of everyday life (Lefebvre 1991, 7), because everyday life can be tedious and mundane. The theatrical elements of drag and neo-burlesque performance take us outside of the conventional behaviours of everyday life. It becomes an event, and a break from the mundane - a showing of the fantastical elements of (largely) hyper-feminine performance and demonstrates the use of the body as a tool for communication of fantasy, of provocative expression. The mask also allows the audience to let their guard down, effectively letting go of their own masks that are tied to social regulation. Thomas goes on to say, "When I put on the mask (of Roxy), people who I engage with on a normal basis, they take off their mask – They can't help but to bare themselves. They become more 'out there,' more flamboyant, but they only do that when you put on the mask. You really see people when you're fake," he laughs. The impression of the performer's mask then has the ability to affect the viewer, who may start to adopt the behaviours of the performer, or even feel that they have license to rid themselves of their everyday mask. During this time, the pressures of social regulation drifts away, even if it is just for a moment, or for the time that the viewer is in the performance space.

The mask and social regulation

Henri Lefebvre writes of the death mask, a plaster cast that is taken of a deceased person's face that is used to make a mask or a model, saying of the mask, that it is "the replica that clings to the skin, is closely related to the absolute other, the deceased. It reincarnates him, transferring the

one who wears it into one of the living dead” (Lefebvre 2002, 69-70). This death mask symbolises a lack of social progress, as it requires the wearer to adopt and replicate a mask that is rooted in repetition of the behaviours of those who came before. Thus, to participate in acts of social regulation, and to act in accordance to the available social regulations, is to constantly re-inscribe and reincarnate this mask. This death mask is like the mask of the everyday when it is closely tied to the conventions of social regulation. Social facts, and the regulations that are inferred and asserted by them is a stipulation of participation in the social group, that becomes cyclically imposed upon individuals who participate in the group (Durkheim 1982, 56) – if the individual does not participate in, and conform to the group’s regulatory ideals, then they are sanctioned against and are viewed as socially abhorrent in some way. Social facts, and social regulations form part of the everyday, in the same way that everyday acts are constantly reproduced and re-inscribed by the hegemonic, dominant social group (Lefebvre 2002, 2). Social facts are thus that “which is general over the whole of a given society whilst having an existence of its own, independent of the individual manifestation” (Durkheim 1982, 59). The individual actor in society then does not have to conform to every social fact and social regulation, so long as the dominant group complies to its application and re-inscribes and replicates its significance as playing a part in the social order. Social facts, and the social regulations that are associated with them in a social group are repeatedly replicated, and so continues as the dominant social order. There are thus ways of acting, as well as ways in which one *ought* to act. The former implies freedom of choice, while the latter implies that social regulation will dictate the ways in which people will have to act, in order to play the part of the socially uncomplicated who do not challenge the status quo. During the performance, context dictates that those who perform hyper-femininely in drag and neo-burlesque are thus allowed to temporarily shed the mask of the living dead and act against the social regulations that act against public displays of nudity and incongruous gendered dress and performance.

Feminine as fantasy

It's after midnight and neo-burlesque performer, *Fiona*²³, aka *La Belle Pique*, aka, *Poppy Fields* is speeding up the highway in a less than roadworthy, decades old white Mazda, that she unlocks with a stick that she always keeps close by when parking her car. I double-check that my seat belt is buckled, as she constantly turns her head to me, shouting over the music blaring from the battery-operated speaker that she has plugged her phone into, as we talk about the other side of my research – drag. Fiona is a neo-burlesque performer who states that she possesses a keen interest in drag performance. As we turn the corner of the dark street, heading for the driveway of the house where she is house-sitting for the month, she laments, and expresses disdain for her existence as a white, cisgender, feminine presenting woman. In these moments she speaks of her wishes for some type of difference that does not exist within her, and that she feels would be inauthentic of her to attempt to express through her performances.

Fiona's interest in the performance of neo-burlesque, and its hyper-feminine forms of presentation allude to her interest in drag. The hyper-feminine performance and presentation in both forms of performance indicate that there is much more alike about drag and neo-burlesque, than what could be perceived to be difference. Neo-burlesque performance becomes her way of performing “drag,” as a means of making use of “similar symbolic resources to produce and perform femininity” (Ochoa 2014). Fiona identifies herself as a white, feminine identified cisgender woman, yet the ways in which she produces femininity in terms of her characters, alludes to an aspiration towards the hyper-femininity that drag performance can often exude. Yet, Fiona hopes to *queer* her femininity, with hyper-feminine performance to some extent, with the performances by her characters. In one instance she may attempt to channel “old-Hollywood glamour²⁴” with a performance by her one performance persona, *La Belle Pique*, and in the next

²³ pseudonym

²⁴ This idea of “old Hollywood glamour” is exemplified in the accompanying photographs, taken in a very dimly lit setting. Fiona requested to see some of these images, as I was the only person to ever document these two particular performances, and after editing the images to combat the terrible lighting, Fiona wrote back to me, telling me that I captured both *Poppy Fields*' and *La Belle Pique*'s personas and performances, as they allude to “old school glamour” – telling of a kind of nostalgia for a time that she never experienced/lived through. Note: in cleaning up the images, I used reference of “tintype” photography, reminiscent of a photographic style that is made by creating a direct positive on a thin sheet of metal coated with a dark

she may attempt a “coy, energetic, girlish” performance with her other performance persona, Poppy Fields. We can say that everyone “does gender” without thoughtful consideration (Lorber 1994, 13), as if it is something that is purely innate, and instinctual. Yet, when we consider performances of drag and neo-burlesque, it becomes more apparent that there is the potential for “doing gender” or gendered performance with thought and intention – by means of a thoughtful process. That Fiona’s attempts to channel a specific type of glamour, or coyness, or girlishness, indicates that there is intention behind her performance, that the notion of hyper-feminine performance is done so intentionally, and that there are a particular set of values that become ascribed to it. She does this by means of dress, and bodily movement, to embody a particular fantasy of feminine performance. While the performance of neo-burlesque usually incorporates elements of striptease, both neo-burlesque and drag performance make use of costuming and clothing to allude to their performance. These forms of performance are gendered toward a feminine performance conceived by the performer using clothing and costuming. This infers that “clothing, paradoxically, often hides the sex but displays the gender” (Lorber 1994, 16). The gender/gender expression that these performers attempt to display, is a feminine gender expression, though it is one that is pushed to its extremes through a performance of hyper-femininity. This hyper-feminine performance contrasts the male gaze, and functions as a response to the expectations of, and related to masculinity. Gender should not be assumed, but in the gendered performances of drag, and neo-burlesque, we are informed of the gendering of the performance in the act, by using costuming and dress, which also informs the ways in which the performer may choose to move around the stage. This leads to the question: what *kinds* of femininity are performed on stage? The forms of feminine performance and presentation that inform much of contemporary neo-burlesque performance references an idea of “glamour” that is associated with images of Pin-Up Girl models of the 1950s and 1960s. These images of Pin-Up Girl models were mass-produced for their perceived wide-ranging appeal in Europe and North America. These images most often presented perceived sexually available white women whose images were produced to be consumed by an assumed white male consumer who would purchase posters or cards, to admire these feminine figures. Popular figures from this time include Betty Grable, Bettie Page, and Jayne Mansfield, to name a few. In later years these Pin-Up models

lacquer or enamel and used as the support for the photographic emulsion. The results are simultaneously glossy and grainy, alluding to a time before cameras were of a good quality, and large external flashes were part of the posed, stylized package.

would come to represent women's sexual liberation to some. Though the most prominent and popular figures of this era were largely white women, there were a small number of light-skinned black American women who participated in the production of these images of feminine glamour – namely Dorothy Dandridge and Eartha Kitt. It must be noted that they were not the most widely recognised Pin-Up Girls of their day. Neo-burlesque performers in Cape Town, and the world over, make use of these images of Pin-Up Girls as a form of inspiration for their costumes, hairstyles, makeup, gesture, performance, and presentation. This results in an image that calls out to past understandings of the “glamorous” white woman of the 1940s and 1950s. Even though none of the participants in this research have any real or significant relation to these images, the consumption of media, and the desire for nostalgic ideals plays a significant role in fashioning what it means to be, look like, and become a neo-burlesque performer. The femininities aspired to here, are a far cry from the reality of women's experiences in South Africa – where life is often far less glamorous than those of the beauties of stage and screen of old. In reality the lived experience of women, when looking at what is considered as beautiful, is affected by race, and the politics of skin colour that affects the life experience of many black women, as well as non-black women of colour. Further, a glamorous lifestyle is so far out of reach for most South Africans who have to busy themselves with earning a living through non-glamorous means as a means for survival. The image of glamour is tied to access to wealth, and the means to wealth. It is no coincidence then that a large volume of memes exists for public consumption, of now-famous actresses and singers comparing their appearances before and after access to wealth, stating “you're not ugly, you're just poor,” meaning that access to beauty means access to wealth.



Above: La Belle Pique performs “Black Coffee,” her arms languidly stretched out above her head, her face demonstrating a look of ecstasy (2014).

Below/next page: Poppy Fields performs “‘taint what you do, it’s the way that you do it” a performance that is heavily reliant on tap-dancing, while dressed in a costume she has owned since her early teens. She gestures invitingly to the audience, in an attempt to draw their attention to her performance, while smiling in a cheekily flirtatious manner (2014).



This notion of “old-Hollywood glamour” and the production of a nostalgia that has not been lived/experienced by the performer (and the audience alike) is what appears to set the performance of neo-burlesque apart from the performance of stripping – a distinction asserted by neo-burlesque performers that is likely linked to the social stigma associated with contemporary ideas around stripping as a profession. In neo-burlesque performance, there is a focus on the “tease” element of striptease in their performance, “as part of the ‘tease,’ performers adopt a performative stance toward the striptease act” (Dodds 2013, 80). Neo-burlesque performers also place an emphasis and importance on the idea of art, as the element that, to them, distinguishes their form of performance from stripping:

“The art often seems to centre simply on the use of vintage accessories, such as feathered fans, and nipple tassels, huge martini glasses, and corsets. But as burlesque dancers come in various shapes and sizes, and can wear more unusual costumes and construct more complicated narratives around the striptease act, burlesque is often seen as a truly creative way for women to take their clothes off”

(Walter 2010, 43)

What qualifies as creativity? Is it the costumes? Is it the performance style? Improvisation in neo-burlesque performance dictates that the creative removal of clothing is in the hands of the performer. Walter goes on to quote two internationally recognised neo-burlesque performers in her book, *Living Dolls*, stating that “Immodesty Blaize has said ‘I find burlesque empowering because instead of all being told we have to be one type, showgirls all have individual characters, and body shapes.’ Michelle Baldwin, who performs as Vivienne VaVoom says, ‘Our performance personas, costumes, all of it comes from us. Before, women were given their persona, and even stage names by men. This time women are in control of their own image, and that’s empowering” (Walter 2010, 43). Part of this empowerment and control, demonstrated through felicitious spectacle, also includes the notion that performers of neo-burlesque also allow themselves to be gazed upon as not only performing bodies, but as hyper-feminine performing bodies. For Ochoa, this notion of hyper-femininity is created with the idea of an imagined masculine gaze in mind (Ochoa 2014, 208). Considering Ochoa’s statement, as well as Laura Mulvey’s idea of the male gaze, the ways in which audiences of neo-burlesque are structured subvert the notion that the performance is only for the masculine gaze. Even though there are men in neo-burlesque audiences, large groups of women (queer and heterosexual) are invited to look too, to also gaze upon these femininely performing bodies. I acknowledge that “there is power in looking,” (hooks 1992, 115), as feminist scholar, author and activist bell hooks puts it, but the power to actively look has not always been in the possession of women in an audience. Of course, women have been members of the audience, though the scopophilic intent of the moving image is usually not intended for their viewing pleasure. The moving image on stage and screen has typically been intended for the male audience to take ownership of, if these performances are considered through Laura Mulvey’s male gaze. In response to this, the act of looking and looking back becomes an act of defiance, much like allowing others to look at one’s

performing body also is an act of defiance. This defiance is hinged on the active choice that performers and spectators in this setting make to look at one another, thus challenging Mulvey's concept of the gaze as *necessarily male*. I argue that for the gaze to be "male" it must be produced as such. Mulvey's theory is clearly a product of its time - 1975. Film and media in this time did have a greater focus on the masculine consumer, and in many ways that is still present in entertainment today. Though, I argue that the difference in Mulvey's "male" gaze, and the way in which I make use of it in stage performance depends on who the image/act has been produced with in mind as a prospective spectator. The social scene for LGBTIQ people in Cape Town, at the mainstream level, is dominated by homonormative, cisgender, privileged, white gay men – those who would have less difficulty being able to traverse the world of classed male privilege and have access to spaces where they are not only allowed to look, but they are explicitly invited to do so. When queer audiences *are* spectators of drag performance, and in Cape Town much of the queer audience that make up drag audiences in venues such as Zer021, and pageant spaces are people of colour²⁵, thus another group that does not traditionally dominate the act of looking, historically, gains the power to look. The act of looking regarding drag and neo-burlesque performance thus gives power to groups who have been dominated historically, and had their access controlled in the past. In Mulvey's understanding, the right to look was only afforded to men, and historically the power to enact a gaze upon others was afforded to white, cisgender, heterosexual men. According to bell hooks, the repression of the "right to gaze," produces "an overwhelming longing to look; a rebellious desire, an oppositional gaze," and that "by courageously looking, we defiantly declared: 'Not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality.'" (hooks 1992, 115). Where performers are concerned, they do not have this act of looking enforced upon them in the performance space, though the gaze of the audience is necessary in order to have the performance recognised as such. In this context they choose to be looked upon in a certain way, in relation to their performance. They invite and allow the audience to view their performance, and their performing body.

²⁵ Outside of these spaces, drag is performed in spaces such as Beefcakes, where the audiences are largely white, middle class, not queer, and consist of bachelorette parties and heterosexual couples on an outing to the "gay village."

Beauty and feminine performance

In drag as well as neo-burlesque performance, as I discuss here, performance is at the heart of the discussion. Yet, performers feel that they also are required to look good while doing so. Beauty becomes one form of currency that the performers make use of to draw the audience in, in the first instance. While beauty is not standardised in all places at all times, for all people, what is considered to be beautiful, and who is considered to be beautiful is influenced by the society in which we live, as well as the media that is consumed. Very few performers intentionally push away from these contemporary, hegemonic ideas surrounding feminine beauty, and what it *should* be. This inclination is not entirely “about women at all. It is about men’s institutions, and institutional power” (Wolf 2002, 13), this institutional power is enacted through society, as well as through the media that is consumed. This institutional power sets those who live in a society influenced by it up for a very strange and strained experience. There is no strong history of popular mainstream media in South Africa that frames South Africans who are neither black nor white, as beautiful, or aspirational. Magazines such as *Drum* (established in 1951) and *True Love* (established in 1972) were marketed specifically toward a Black audience, though these magazines were not always so readily available to “Coloured” audiences. Growing up as a “Coloured” person in Cape Town, I only ever saw these magazines in larger supermarkets, and never in the homes of family and friends. Thus, for some “Coloured” South Africans there appeared to be a lack of representation outside of the media coverage of beauty pageant events such as Miss Africa South²⁶. There have been recent moves toward changing unequal representation over the past two decades with the inclusion of media such as the *Kuier* magazine (established in 2009), a lifestyle focused on coloured consumers, yet the popularity of overseas, largely Western media has not waned. Mainstream Western media, such as film, television, magazines, and other forms of popular media continue to promote whiteness as aspirational and beautiful. The “whiteness” aspired to here is not necessarily hinged on being white, however – this is related to the social privilege that white people experience and normalise – thus the desire is to have access to what is aspired to, to feel that it is a possibility. And even though consumers

²⁶ In the past South Africa held separate beauty pageants for white contestants and contestants of colour, which would result in two representatives attending international beauty pageants from the same country, white contestants wore the sash of “Miss South Africa,” while coloured and black contestants wore the sash of “Miss Africa South”. This continued until 1976, when South Africa was expelled from the Miss World contest and did not compete until 1990.

of Western media are obviously not all from the West, the pervasiveness of the kind of imagery that is promoted becomes insidious and affects individual and group perceptions of what is beautiful, what should be desired, and what should be considered as “exotic”. Of course, what individual people find beautiful is not the same for everyone, there are still stereotypes regarding who/what is considered outwardly beautiful, in particular where ideas of feminine beauty is concerned, and what the ideals of this should be. While neo-burlesque performance is freeing, and empowering (as is drag), to the individual who performs, it does have the potential to re-inscribe an idealised performance of femininity in a variety of ways. This is performed through conforming, hegemonic bodies. Maria T. Pramaggiore, in discussing the performance art of Karen Finley, whose work confronts the “degradation” that she considers to be a part of being a woman in a “patriarchal capitalist culture” (Pramaggiore 1992, 270). She states that there is a confrontation in the “desire for a ‘classical’ female body – one that is clean, hairless, bloodless, bodiless...” (Pramaggiore 1992, 271). We can infer that this body is also white. The “classical” female body in this sense, is akin to a mannequin – a body that has no discernible scent, is devoid of the livelihood of body hair, can be positioned and repositioned, has no active speaking voice – a body that is less like a body, but is instead a figure to be looked upon rather than a figure that exists and lives. Advocates for neo-burlesque say that they invite and promote bodily, physical diversity. Yet many of those who perform neo-burlesque can be viewed as conforming to aspirational ideals of white femininity, feminine presentation and performance associated with the idea of the traditionally white Pin-Up Girl, discussed earlier in this chapter. While those who perform neo-burlesque may vary in body shape, to a large extent most performers fit into a mould of femininity that is neither too large in frame, does not display too much or any body hair, nor perceived to be as too masculine in performance and presentation. Drag performance similarly fits into this conforming space, as there are aspirations towards a glamorised (often, outwardly white presenting) femininity, though this feminine ideal is not necessarily the same as the one aspired to by neo-burlesque performers.

Drag performance in Cape Town sometimes appears to play with the uncomfortable connections between race, class, and feminine performance. In the images below, a performance by drag performer Manila Von Teez is presented. In this performance she enters the performance space

dressed in a domestic worker's uniform, pushing a broom along, pretending to sweep the bar's floor. In South Africa, the uniform of the domestic worker - unlike the stereotypes surrounding the "French maid's uniform" - is not considered to be "sexy" or physically appealing. There is often stigma attached to the wearing of the uniform as it indicates that the individual wearing it is involved in "dirty" work that is reserved for those who are considered to be "low class" and poor (Bronner 2016, 21-22) in South African society. Domestic labour is considered to be "beneath" many people, and "disposable," implying that those who perform the tasks of domestic labour are also "beneath" other people, and are also considered to be "disposable". Domestic labour, like the domestic worker is simultaneously invisible and hyper-visible. Manila's performance in this instance, takes us on a journey where the "maid" becomes the "madam," where the "servant" becomes the "master" – to make use of fetishistic terms as a means to point out the stereotyped fetishism tied to both of these roles. One of subjugation, and subservience, the other of dominance. Manila's transformation also takes us on a journey through aspirational performance. She wears the domestic worker uniform, but underneath it all, she wears the sexy, hyper-feminine costume, the costume that allows her to display her sexuality publicly, rather than hide it beneath a housecoat. Her performance starts out slowly and comically, indicating that domestic work, while societally largely considered to be women's work, a passive gender expectation, is not sexy, or worthy to be looked at as interesting, as she covers her hair/wig with a head scarf, and hides her frame beneath a long, shapeless housecoat and apron. Later, in the performance, she proceeds to strip her heavy domestic outfit, to reveal a short skirt, and form fitting leotard that exposes her fit body, as the music switches from local, to global, Western pop music. This decision to transform the performance to something that infers the "global" attempts to display the difference in performance that is located in Cape Town, in South Africa, while also demonstrating how the performance can inspire thoughts about sameness in reference to the rest of the world's understanding of drag and gendered performance (Boellstorff and Leap 2004, 18), as it relates to class, glamour and extravagance. With this performance, Manila displays an aspirational performance, as it is the "madam" who can transform her, who can be global, who can be performatively sexy. As the music changes, so does the movement that she makes use of in her performance. While she started off, making use of smaller steps and physically constricted movements early in the performance, as each layer is stripped, her movements become larger, freer, and more erotic, as she performs to an Ariana Grande song toward the end of the

performance, mimicking the performance style and movements of the white pop star whom she emulates in what is interpreted to be an aspirational performance. In doing so, Manila thus reveals a hyper-feminine, performing self, but a hyper-feminine performing self that is tied to whiteness as a generality toward beauty and aspiration. Her movements are no longer small and contrived – movements that make her appear to take up less space and appear less remarkable. Instead she opens up her performance and her physical body to take up space – space that is afforded to some forms of femininity, but not to others.



Manila sweeps the floor as she lip-synchs in Zer021 (2014).



Left: Manila peels off the layer of the domestic worker's uniform (2014).

Below/next page: She reveals two more, hyper-feminine, overtly sexually stylized costumes, after removing the form-fitting white skirt that she wore for part of the performance. First, a black imitation leather dress. Last, a form-fitting black leotard with sequined hand prints covering her breasts (2014).



Bodily and physical appearances are re-inscribed in the forms of femininity that are performed. There are a few outliers that exist in the performance of neo-burlesque however. Two examples are found in the work of performers whom have since retired from performing. The first example of this was a performance of a jilted bride, to Fiona Apple's Valentine, where the performer, dressed in a wedding gown, penetrates hidden blood packets with a large, sharp kitchen knife, revealing a grotesque and jarring scene of a blood-spattered bride. The second example I witnessed was of a performer who, to the tune of The Troggs' Wild Thing, enters the performance space dressed in furs, invoking ideas of a "cave-woman" of the Neanderthal era reveals a bushy, untamed, merkin/pubic wig at the climax of her performance – usually to raucous laughter and applause. Very few neo-burlesque performers stand outside of the glamourized, fantasised norm. In fact, there is only one neo-burlesque performer who appears markedly different from the hegemony, with her shaved head, visible body hair, and insistence on performing while wearing her spectacles. Hyper-feminine performance is also the norm in

drag performance. One of the few performers who does play with, and against physical norms, is Mary Scary, a live singing drag performer who performs at Beefcakes. Mary Scary is moustached, heavily tattooed, displays thick chest and armpit hair, does not tuck, wears ripped fishnet stockings, and does nothing to attempt to participate in contemporary ideas and ideals related to feminine glamour, and drag performance.

White glamour

What is glamour, and what does it symbolise? bell hooks, in her discussion of Madonna's performance of glamour and femininity posits that Madonna's eventual embracing of an image that resembles Marilyn Monroe, is an assertion of, and aspiration to a construction of whiteness and glamour. She says "within white supremacist culture, a female must be white to occupy the space of sacred femininity, and she must be blond" (hooks 2006, 22). Further, she states that, "Madonna embodies a social construction of 'whiteness' that emphasizes purity, pure form...her willingness to assume the Marilyn Monroe persona affirms her investment in a cultural vision of white that is tied to imperialism and colonial domination" (hooks 2006, 22). For Ochoa, "glamour is a way of reordering space and time" (Ochoa 2014, 208) – thus pointing out the fantasy associated with glamour. The nostalgic glamour of the Pin-Up Girl, as used by the neo-burlesque performer, allows performers (and, by extension, viewers) to imagine themselves elsewhere, as someone else, living a different life, by means of the application and viewing of the glamorous, fantastical mask/persona that makes reference to the images of days gone by that these performers themselves have no ties of experience to. In Ochoa's writing, "glamour is a slippery, shiny thing, invoked in many ways, necessarily mystified, and rarely theorised in a sustained way. Glamour, beauty, and femininity, are technologies with specific practices that results in social legibility, intimate power, and potentially, physical survival in a hostile environment. Thus, the production of glamour allures its practitioners to draw down extra local authority (power from outside), to conjure up a contingent space of being and belonging. However, glamour is not redemptive – it will not save you" (Ochoa 2014, 89). The glamour that Ochoa refers to is temporary – fleeting. Art critic John Berger writes in *Ways of Seeing* that

glamour is ultimately tied to envy, and the joy derived from being envied (Berger, Blomberg and Fox 1972, 132). Glamour, in Ochoa's world, might help people feel good about themselves, but it does not really change anything in any tangible way in anyone's life. Glamour can be understood as a selfish export that only really affects the one who seeks to be perceived as momentarily glamorous. Fantasy works in a similar fashion – though fantasy is instead applied to those doing the viewing and perceiving. These things may temporarily make people feel good about themselves as they imagine what their lives could be, yet, eventually, reality in the mode of sociologists Thomas Luckmann and Peter Berger's "here and now" (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 36) will rear its head, and strip the wearer of the mask of their fantasy world. Ochoa continues: "glamour is what makes someone queen for a day" (Ochoa 2014, 92). This follows her assertion that "glamour becomes a form of power that serves all women" (Ochoa 2014, 89). That Ochoa says directly that glamour is a power that serves *all women*, and not merely *certain women, women who enter beauty pageants, women of certain economic privilege*, seems to indicate claims toward a universal women's experience if they may encounter glamour. These claims, however cannot be supported, as it would be logical to assume that not all women wish to pursue beauty pageants and their perceived glamour, and secondly, that not all women are able to do so, for a variety of reasons related to perceived beauty, access to beauty technologies, or access to leisure time to be able to pursue glamorous exploits. Glamour is not accessible to all women, and not all women have access to the opportunity to be queen – even if only for one day. As hooks has asserted, glamour, as constructed alongside whiteness, is tied to imperialism and colonial domination. In Ochoa's writing, glamour is only *really accessible* to those who participate in pageantry and/or the construction of what might be considered enviably beautiful. Glamour operates in the imagination of fantasy – and for hooks this includes a fantasy of femininity that is framed by whiteness. It is however not the whiteness itself that is enviable, but the forms of opportunity that it may provide. This form of glamour is out of reach for those who cannot fulfil these ideals if glamour is formulated and understood in this way. In this research I try to make sense of the ways in which glamour might function, taking into consideration the performance worlds of both drag and neo-burlesque.

These ideals related to whiteness in glamour have trickled down to drag performance, in that many personas – while performed by people of colour – are indeed white, or at least aspire to whiteness in some way. To say it explicitly, the characters performed by a number of coloured and South African-Indian drag performers, performers who are themselves people of colour, are conceived to be white, in their imagination. The fantasy here, is to portray the image of a particular understanding of white womanhood through the mask of performance. There is evidence of this in the prevalent usage of straight, blond wigs, by drag performers who are people of colour as a means to infer to the audience who the character is, underneath it all. An example of this is illustrated through Lola's persona, who she states is "a white woman with a Jewish passport...only there's no such thing as a Jewish passport, but you have a seat in the synagogue...it just so happens that I like Jewish men..." here Lola infers that her seat in the synagogue is found in the lap of a Jewish man – her access to becoming a white woman is through some form of consumption and consummation with the man who will give her access to this aspirational identity. Another example of a performer informing their character through the lens of white femininity, is the persona of Vida Fantabisher, who she describes as a 54 year old white woman, though Vida herself is really a "Coloured" man in his late 20s. Vida's persona, who is a lush white woman who enjoys show tunes and more than a few drinks, points to a fascination with excessive behaviours that are associated with some level of glamour, and wealth that is also tied to an understanding that middle aged people should have access to some level of disposable wealth. The white womanhood adopted here is not really about appearing as a white person though, but more about the perceptions around access to privilege that whiteness can afford those who it applies to. Finally, there is the persona of Roxy Le Roux, whom Thomas asserts presents as white, but is really "Coloured" underneath it all – this is the most direct example of aspirational whiteness in this research, and it also hints at South Africa's history where racial reclassification was a possibility, as a way to avoid racial discrimination. Colonial and Apartheid South Africa had a preoccupation with categorisation and classification – thus the term "Coloured" refers to a perceived creole identity that refers to mixed race people, though this implies a problematic hierarchy that positions coloured people as "inferior to white and superior to black" (Zegeye 2001). Categories such as these assume homogenous group identities through racial categorisation, though the idea of coloured people challenges essentialism. The liminal space occupied by drag, gender non-conforming people, and all those who challenge gender and

sex roles also create space to challenge essentialism. “Coloured” identity categorisation, South African sociologist Zimitri Erasmus argues, is a “socio-political position” that was “characterised by both exclusion, and selected inclusion” (Erasmus 2000, 71). “Coloured” people in South Africa thus occupy a space where there might be the potential for access toward aspirations of whiteness, through racial perceptions and categorisation and the potential for recategorization through the apartheid practice of racial reclassification, though this space that is occupied is also exclusionary due to “Coloured” South Africans not being white and most not being recognised as such. Apartheid racial categories thus positioned all other South Africans against the backdrop of whiteness and white identity. Throughout this research you may see me make use of the terms “People of Colour” or “Women of Colour,” which is a reference to 1970s Black Consciousness movement’s contestation of the “narrow use of ‘Black,’ defining it *not* as a race category or classification, but rather a political identification premised on resistance to oppression in contexts of white supremacy” (Erasmus 2012, 1). There has been contestation whether coloured people are allowed to refer to themselves as black from both coloured and black South Africans, thus I will continue to use the terms “People of Colour,” and “Women of Colour” to refer to participant identities, except in circumstances where the pointing out of a specific racial identity and categorisation is of direct importance to the discussion. The use of these terms, like the 1970s Black Consciousness movement’s definition of Black have a common interest in challenging whiteness and the ideals of white supremacy however. Whiteness possesses the potential to function as a social fact that informs aspirations toward glamour and access to the individuals mentioned above. Even in a country where white people are in the minority, whiteness as communicated through Western media is tied to ideas surrounding beauty, sex appeal, economic and social aspiration. Whiteness functions as the dominant ideology. Melissa Steyn explains that white South Africans are aware of their race in South Africa, and that whiteness is “an ideologically supported social positionality, that has accrued to people of European descent as a consequence of the economic and political advantage gained during, and subsequent to European colonial exposition. The position was originally facilitated by the construction of “race,” which acted as a marker of entitlement to this position” (Steyn 2005, 121). These advantages and entitlements came at the disadvantage of those who were perceived outside of the construction of race associated with European colonial exposition. The result of the constriction of race as a by-product of the European colonial project is that white people

positioned themselves as being entitled to certain privileges on account of their race through ideas associated to supremacy. In turn, people of colour's position in South Africa lacked the markers of entitlement that were given to white people as a result of their whiteness. Those who were not white could not have the things that white people had. Though people of colour could not physically access the privileges that whiteness affords white people, access to forms of media, such as magazines, film, and television, gave access to a white imagination which could result in aspiring toward ideas of whiteness as a source of glamour, beauty, freedom, and power. I am not saying that whiteness, and white people are the only ones who possess access to glamour, beauty, freedom, or power – to say this would be entirely inaccurate. What I would like to bring to light, is that much of the media, and the history of film and television focuses on the image of white people, telling white people's stories, and working toward making white people, and white lives appear to be the most desirable and attractive. It is no wonder then that some people of colour might internalise these desires toward what is portrayed in the media as a dream or aspiration of how they would like the world to see them. In the documentary film, *Paris is Burning*, Venus Xtravaganza says that she wants to be a “spoiled, rich, white girl,” and relates this to the understanding that she is not white and does not live as a white person. That she exists in what she refers to as “white America,” leads her to a desire to participate in “white America,” as a “white American.” Performers on stage have the ability to create an image, through the use of the persona/mask of how they would like the world/spectator to see them. This persona/mask does not have to be a mirror image of who they are perceived to be in daily life – and the specific challenges that are faced by each individual who performs. Thus, many performers use their mask to create an illusion of who they wish the world to see during the time of their performance. If the performer wishes to sell a fantasy, they might as well buy into their own fantasy too, as a way to authenticate their performance for the spectator to believe and buy what they are selling on stage. The whiteness alluded to on stage, or by use of the mask as an aspirational lens is less rooted in the reality of what it might really be like to live as a white person in South Africa, or elsewhere. It is more focused on the perception of what it might be like to be white – echoing Venus Xtravaganza's aspiration of being a “spoiled, rich, white girl.” While this may be the reality for a few white women, to be spoiled and rich, the form of whiteness that is often sold in the media makes these experiences appear to be more accessible to white people – as they appear to be more entitled to these privileges. For people of colour to gain

access to these privileges becomes out of the ordinary and is not assumed to be *as* accessible. It is telling then, that later in this research, that where a white drag performer speaks of race in drag, they mention that “drag” is their race – this indicates a lack of interrogation of their own racialised performance. Though drag performance and neo-burlesque performance are related and tied together by hyper-feminine performance – they divert when it comes to who performs, where and for whom. Drag, in Cape Town is largely performed by men who self-identify as gay, and coloured. Due to the effects of spatial apartheid in Cape Town, many of the participants in this research, who perform drag, come from areas that the apartheid designated as “Coloured” area and townships that are far removed from the city centre. These are largely working-class neighbourhoods, where many “Coloured” people still live. Drag, as is evident in this research is largely performed by people of colour.

While drag performers often perform in spaces that are largely attended by people of similar socio-economic, and racial backgrounds, there are occasions where “Coloured” drag queens perform in predominantly white spaces, such as Beefcakes, and on even rarer occasions, white drag performers might perform in spaces predominantly frequented by people of colour, such as Club Zer021. In this research, and at the time in which the data was collected, neo-burlesque performance is largely performed by white, cisgender women from middle, to upper middle-class backgrounds. The spaces in which they perform vary, as much neo-burlesque performance takes on a do-it-yourself ethos to both the performance and the performance space. As performers of neo-burlesque are often a mix of heterosexual and LGBTIQ individuals who perform, so are the audiences – though, mirroring the make-up of those who perform, the audiences who view neo-burlesque are also often white, and middle, to upper-middle class individuals. In *A Phenomenology of Whiteness*, Sara Ahmed persuades the reader to consider whiteness as that which coheres and orders the world. She states that “whiteness becomes worldly, as an effect of reification. Reification is not then something we do to whiteness, but something whiteness does, or to be more precise, what allows whiteness to be done” (Ahmed 2007, 150). Reification works in such a way that that which is abstract becomes real and affects those who come into contact with it. If we consider the effect of the consumption of media that focuses on white lives, white experience, and white people, taking Ahmed’s writing into consideration, whiteness is done to

those who are exposed to it, and this starts to order their world, and how they may consider their position within it. If whiteness is a drug that is consumed by means of the media, it intoxicates those who buy into it, wanting more so that they might feel closer to its privileges and effects.

To aspire to whiteness thus means aspiring to more than what is available to the individual when they view themselves as without – as lacking something that brings favour and appeal. Another performance persona worth noting in this instance, is that of Mary Scary, a white South African man from the Eastern Cape, who performs as a white American woman, mostly adopting a broadly American accent for performance, yet often adopts a “Cape Flats, ‘Coloured’” accent for comic relief in her performances (which is problematic, considering the individual presented in the performance space – white drag performer who performs in Beefcakes, a restaurant largely frequented by middle-class white people, and where the staff is all white and male, with the exception of cleaning and kitchen staff), while dropping her voice to a more masculine tone, when doing so. This draws attention to the problematic ways in which women of colour – in this case, specifically “Coloured” South African women - are perceived and portrayed – as comic relief, a masculinised, “ghetto-ised,” sexually available, “good-time-girl,” to be laughed at. In this imagination, coloured women are people who you would not bring home to your mother, because she would likely make a bad impression due to the way she might be perceived to speak and act. When Mary Scary adopts an American accent in her performance, she is also buying into another form of aspirational whiteness – one that is associated with an attempt at closeness with Western culture and ideals. To be perceived as both foreign, north American, and white, makes her all the more special as she plays into the imagination of the forms of media that are consumed through film and television, while using her accented speech as a way to distance herself from the reality of life in South Africa. She makes herself more special than that. She makes a good impression because she is special. Though when she adopts the stereotypical “Cape ‘Coloured’” accent, she plays it for laughs, precisely because in Cape Town this is not special, but “common,” and to be “common” in Cape Town slang, is to be uncouth, unrefined – low class. Yet the audience laughs at the perceived poverty alluded to in this form of speech. The audience derives joy and responds with raucous laughter at being told “*jou ma se poes*” (literally

translated as your mother's cunt) in a Cape Coloured accent, precisely because they are being told so by a white person, while in the comfort of a venue where the only people of colour are the cleaning and kitchen staff. They feel safe enough to laugh at the words, and the way in which the words are spoken because Mary Scary's whiteness and faux-American accent do not threaten their position and perception of safety in Cape Town. Even though Mary Scary might on occasion adopt the language and accent associated with perceptions of Cape Town's gangsters, she is no real threat in her high heels and sequined dress.

There are only two drag performers who do not identify their performance personas as being of any race of the human realm. Manila Von Teez, and Morticia LaValle identify as somehow other than white, when discussing their performance personas. While Manila views the persona as being an "alien" of sorts, Morticia has mentioned that "drag" is her race – an inference that to her drag performance is something different a performance that is rooted in ideas surrounding race and gender but is something else entirely. Though, at a closer look, Morticia's call for drag, as her race indicates a lack of interrogation into her performance of drag as a white person who performs music that is largely associated with people of colour. Her attempt then is to make drag the distinguishing factor of her performance. The mask that she attempts to wear is one that separates her from her whiteness and focusses on the drag. Manila on the other hand also attempts to separate her performance from the perceptions of her race, as a "Coloured" person in Cape Town. Still, Manila and Morticia live in a society where race is a distinguishing factor and affects the ways in which they experience the world around them whether they are in drag or not. When it comes to the performance space however, they wish to be identified and associated with their performance of drag. Drag thus becomes the lens which they read themselves through and wish to be read through by others too. Though, drag performance does not exist in a vacuum, and as such is affected by the race and class structures of the world around them – in this case, Cape Town, South Africa.

Fiona, who performs as Poppy Fields, and La Belle Pique laments her white cisgender femininity, as is mentioned earlier in this chapter. Nevertheless, through her neo-burlesque performance, she possesses the potential to re-inscribe ideals of white cisgender femininity through mimetic participation in performances that are largely dominated by white, feminine presenting bodies. The framing of “whiteness” in neo-burlesque performance is not always glaringly obvious to those who participate in it, either as a viewer or as a performer, due to the demographics of those who participate in neo-burlesque. This is attributed to the way that whiteness functions in media and society – even in certain parts of South African society. Whiteness is pervasive even though white people are a statistical minority in South Africa. Whiteness operates as a “pseudo-universal category that hides its specific values, epistemology, and other attributes under the guise of non-racialised, supposedly colourless ‘human nature’” (Richards 2008). Whiteness thus functions as the norm that stands in for everything else, until a deviation is specifically pointed out. When viewing neo-burlesque performance as an outsider, it is easy to see that the performances look outward, toward white Western ideals, instead of looking inward toward the context from which the performers come – from South Africa. This is displayed through the music, costuming, grooming conventions, makeup, and even props that are used during performance. Much of neo-burlesque performance conforms to a particular “standard”, and that standard alludes to ideas and aspirations toward a globalised imagination of white femininity. While there are people of colour who do perform neo-burlesque, these performers do not veer too far off the standardised path related to neo-burlesque performance and performers. They fit into the mould by not standing out, by not making themselves appear too different from the norms of those who perform around them. Difference thus goes through a process of being “whited out,” and “this whiting out can be done through the hegemony of performing bodies, barring a few outliers” (Wing Sue 2004, 763), though the outliers still conform to some of the ideals of that which is normatively dominant. The performance of drag does not exist in a vacuum, and as such, is also affected by whiteness, and the influence that this has on South African society. The three examples above, of Lola, Vida, and Roxy highlight different aspects of aspirations toward white femininity. For Lola and Vida, their understanding of white femininity is tied toward ideas of the fantasy of glamour and excess – white women appear desirable to them, as historically, in South African society as well as in media representations, they had greater access to the potential to lead extravagantly glamorous

lifestyles. Roxy, on the other hand, is a character that passes as white, but ultimately is not. The mask of Roxy le Roux is an allusion to illusion. She has the potential to be white, and benefit from whiteness, but ultimately does not, and puts her pieces together from that which she finds around her – this will be discussed in the next section. Roxy is almost glamorous but opts out of the opulence of frequent costume changes, and the fantasy of aspirational wealth and class categories.

Through the potentially hegemonic performance of neo-burlesque, while not intentional, the classism arising from neo-burlesque study and performance inadvertently re-inscribes whiteness as a universal identity. Similarly, drag, while not entirely a hegemonically classed form of performance, is not devoid of this glorification of hegemonic, homogenised presentation and performance, however, it does bring to light the aspirations towards white feminine/feminized glamour and ideal, that has been illustrated as good/attractive, through the media for many decades.

Putting the pieces together

The performance, individual performer, and the persona do not exist, nor are created in a vacuum. I posit that the concept of bricolage can be used to address this, and the Do-It-Yourself nature of the performance style of drag and neo-burlesque. French anthropologist, Claude Levi-Strauss wrote of bricolage in 1962's *The Savage Mind*, as the act of using pre-existing materials to create something new and useful. Bricolage is thus used to discuss the physical “putting together” of a performance, but also the seemingly haphazard ways in which the performance is put together metaphorically within, and for the individual performer, that is not actually haphazard at all. I use bricolage here to discuss the construction of femininities in the following ways: to construct femininities from media influence that often include masculine prescriptions towards the ways in which femininities are performed; and to construct white femininities. The

term *bricolage* shares its etymology with “*bric-a-brac*, the characteristic of the junk shop...” (Kelly 2008, 26).

“...and that’s showbiz, kid”

Before the performers at Crew Bar take to the stage, there are a few people seated in the upstairs bar area, where the weekly Wednesday night drag performances take place. The room is spacious, dark, and smoky. There are two sections of the room that are well lit, that of the bar, to the right of the stage, and the stage, which juts out in the form of a runway in the centre of the room. Loud pop music is blaring from the straining speakers, while a medium sized disco ball reflects coloured lights into my eyes. The decorations surrounding the stage include tinsel, balloons, and a comfortable looking arm chair. On each side of the stage, there is a small table that holds plastic flowers. Some of the performers for the evening are downstairs, trying to lure potential audience members upstairs to watch the show. Eventually a few more people arrive, and the audience grows to around 20 people. The show finally starts, Roxy steps onto the stage wearing black fishnet stockings, a black leotard and corset, with a short, gold sequined jacket on top, that sparkles and reflects every time the light touches it. I remember this costume from the previous two weeks that I have been attending performances at Crew Bar, and I have started to think of it as Roxy’s uniform. She grabs hold of the microphone, welcomes us all to the venue and performance, before singing “Roxie” from the musical “Chicago”, her light baritone voice rings out:

*“And the audience loves me. And I love them for loving me. And we love each other.
That’s because none of us got enough love in our childhoods. And that’s showbiz,
kid...”*

The concept of bricolage is most evident in Roxy's presentation. In conversation with Roxy about the outward appearance and aesthetic of the performance persona, she asserts that she prefers not to spend money on costumes. Roxy is fashioned from found items, and hand-me-downs, that are used in her performances. These hand-me-downs come from friends and other drag performers who she feels have been influential in her life. Roxy takes the found and given items and breathes life into them with the spirit and performance of Roxy le Roux. Without Roxy, these items are just lifeless, dull things, taking up space in someone else's closet. When Roxy uses them, they become a part of the character, they belong to Roxy now, but in some ways, they belong to all of us through Roxy. She shares these items that have become a part of her with us through her performance, and we cannot imagine her without them.

A hand-me-down gown

It is an overcast Friday afternoon, and after spending a lengthy amount of time in traffic entering Greenpoint, Roxy and I are seated in a crowded KFC in Greenpoint/De Waterkant, across the street from Beefcakes restaurant. She asked me to photograph her in a park in Claremont earlier that day, for a competition that she was entering, that was geared towards environmental awareness. She rushes out after receiving a phone call, leaving me alone, seated across from her half eaten Streetwise Two – two pieces of fried chicken and a small portion of fries covered in an orange coloured spice. Eventually she returns, carrying a wedding dress in her arms. "I'm going to use this in my next show," she tells me, smiling. The Late Night Drag Show at Crew Bar has recently come to an end, after Roxy demanded from management that the regular, amateur performers start receiving payment for their participation in the show. This was refused, and Roxy decided to leave the show. There have been rumours going around that Roxy has run away from The Late Night Drag Show, so she has decided to put these rumours to good use, with an idea for a new show at Beefcakes. "It's called 'Roxy dragged *Thomas*²⁷ to the show.' It's sort of a runaway bride story, since people are saying that I ran away from Crew Bar."

²⁷ pseudonym

Roxy does not place a great deal of importance on her aesthetic performance, though she does always rely on essential elements to the character, such as her silver eyeshadow, as well as her blond hair. Instead of focusing on the collection of items, whether bought, found, or donated, Roxy instead focuses on meaning, and making meaningful connection with her audience. Roxy's use of objects can thus be read through readings of assemblage, as understood through Levi-Strauss' use of found objects, where "all uses of found objects are a kind of assemblage, involving a kind of assemblage involving the collision of meanings" (Kelly 2008, 28-29). The objects that are used in performance thus are not the focus of performance for Roxy and other performances. Rather, it is the meaning that is created through the use of these objects, whether makeup, costume, or props, that is of importance to the performance – as well as the ways in which these meanings allow for communication and connection between the audience and performer. As she always sings in her introductory song, "...and the audience loves me. And I love them for loving me. And we love each other..." She attempts to breath love into her performances through the act of connection with the audience. Any time Roxy is on stage, you can expect her to call upon the audience, bringing them on stage to introduce them to the room and interview them, or reaching a hand out into the audience, asking it to be held while maintaining eye contact with those seated beside the low stage. When Roxy performs, there is no need to feel lonely in a room full of people. Her aim is to make those who view her performances feel seen. Roxy does not exist to just be looked at. She looks back at the audience and welcomes them into her world. Thomas views Roxy as a positive force upon her life and attempts to share those elements of positivity through her act of performance and interaction with the audience.

The wedding dress mentioned above that Thomas makes use of is symbolic to the performance of Roxy. As the proposed show title alludes to the recent cutting of ties with Crew Bar, after demanding payment for other performers, Roxy is viewed as leaving the drag show in the lurch by some. The wedding dress that she wishes to make use of in this proposed performance belonged to a friend, whose marriage has recently ended, and wanted to rid herself of the memory of her failed marriage thus connects/ties into the premise of Roxy's proposed show where she was to portray the "runaway bride" who ends up performing drag at Beefcakes. Roxy

makes use of these found items to tell a story. Her corset that she often wears, was given to her by a former drag performer, as was the gold jacket that she often wears, which symbolically brought her to the fore, as the “star”/host of the Late Night Drag Show, as the jacket’s gold colour and sequins glistened, and gleamed in the glow of the nightclub’s lights – a fantastical element that she makes use of to indicate to the audience that they are about to view something special. She often wears this for the entire show run, never changing costumes, because for her, performing drag is less about the costumes, the changing of costume, or the fantasy, than it is about making a connection with the audience.



Roxy performing in her gold jacket on numerous occasions at Crew Bar (2014).

Lola disagrees with this manner of staging a performance/show. “People are there to see you, she says.” Lola’s idea of drag, is related to her ideas of what a showgirl is. She often mentions “glitz” and “glam,” as she discusses her hopes to always wear eye-catching outfits, and feathered headdresses – an aesthetic, that she asserts is Lola’s trademark. Lola’s costumes are assembled to her specific aesthetic, as she has all her costumes made for her, based on what her vision for Lola is. For Lola, the fashioning of femininity as part of drag performance, is both particular and conspicuous. To Lola, the performance of drag is female impersonation. While many performers of drag in Cape Town do not make use of padding (and neither does Lola, for the most part), she always makes sure to wear her breast pads, to physically symbolise her transformation. Lola’s aesthetic transformation is assembled through her collection, and use of outward things/items, that are to be looked upon as part of Lola, these “assemblages are not simply discrete collections of things, but should be understood in terms of their exterior relations” (Hamilton 2008, 64).

These exterior relations are important to the performance, as what the performer is wearing, how they look, and the items that they make use of infer that the performance is taking place or is about to take place. The items that are used in performance can be ordinary and insignificant in other circumstances, but when in the hands of the performer at the right time, they possess the ability to communicate to the audience that something out of the ordinary, that something extraordinary is about to take place, and that they should sit up and take notice.



Lola's handcrafted breast pads (2015).

Lola's exterior presentation in drag, is to perform femininely, and to perform what she considers to be feminine. Further, her performance of drag is a construction of what she considers to be glamorous femininity to be, which is high-heeled, form-fitted, hair made-up, face made-up, "showgirl," "glitz and glam" that makes people want to sit up and take notice – hyper-feminine physical expression that is adopted to engage the male gaze. Thus, her use of costuming and

padding is significant to her act of transformation. Even the use of her own, long hair is also significant, in that these are the markers that she has chosen to make use of, in order to draw our attention that she has transformed, and is performing drag, and performing theatrically, in that moment. Lola makes use of her surface/exterior mask as a means to communicate for herself, and for an audience that a performance of femininity is taking place. She makes theatre out of the gendered performance. She translates what she understands as femininity, and feminine performance to be, and passes on this translation to her audience for their own interpretation. When the audience takes this in, and affirms her performance and presentation of drag femininity, her performance and presentation is affirmed through the act between her and the audience. For herself, the changes on the surface allow her to enter the realm of her character through an act of becoming, of transformation, while for the audience, these surface indications assist in accepting the presence of the character, and allows them to be captured, and taken in by the performance. Yet, what exactly is this surface/exterior and how does the audience come to accept the meaning of the exterior level of the performance? If we understand the performance character and what the performer makes use of to infer this character as a form of masking, we can begin to understand the process of communication between the audience and the performer. Masks, when successfully applied, provide physical information that does not have to be translated into words for the audience that views it. The mask that performers such as Lola use in order to infer feminine performance is applied through costuming, bodily performance, gesture and posturing, changes in voice, and even the use of makeup and hair in specific ways. The mask possesses the ability to conceal the person who wears it, but it also draws attention to the fantasy and the fantastic elements that become evident during the performance of hyper femininity. Making reference to Butler's understanding of fantasy, it is said that "fantasy is what establishes the possible excess of the real, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home" (Butler 2004, 217). This "elsewhere" that is brought home does not have to contain any personal experience for the individual who performs – that individual who wears the mask of performance. Fantasy is able to bring home that which is "experienced" and constructed in the imaginary, for many, into fruition. Both drag, and neo-burlesque performance, but more obviously so drag, works in the mode of fantasy, and allows for the ways in which that which is considered to be reality is made real. If we consider, as Butler does in *Undoing Gender*, referencing Plato, that gender is what makes the human more human, then the playfulness and

malleability of gender expression, that is displayed through the act of performances that bend the limitations of what gendered performance and presentation ought to be, then it can be inferred that to be human is not just one single thing – it is a constant process of translation, of transformation, of becoming. This is achieved through the application and use of the mask as a performative tool. This mask is not distinctly unique to drag performance. Drag makes the transformative elements of shifting into the performance character obvious as the mask of drag performance is applied in such a way that the audience is usually aware of the act. In the following vignette, I demonstrate my own experiences with the performance mask and the act of transformation.

Uncle Johnny – a vignette on the act of transformation

It is a Wednesday afternoon, and I have come home early to prepare for my first performance alongside the other amateur drag performers at Crew Bar. At my table I have lined up all my make-up, Prosaïd (a makeup and special effects glue), and hair clippings that I will use to create facial hair. In my bedroom, I lay out my binder that will flatten my chest, a jockstrap that will keep my packer (prosthetic genitals, that will provide a bulge in my pants), a navy-blue shirt, a maroon tie, pants, and waistcoat. I feel some nerves rising up in the back of my throat and chest as my breathing speeds up. I try to calm myself by listening to the songs that I will perform that night – a swing/jazz version of Sir Mix-A-Lot’s “Baby Got Back,” as well as a swing/jazz version of Radiohead’s “Creep”. The last song I play, and repeat a few times to refresh my memory, is Aqua’s 1997 pop hit, “Dr Jones”. Sasha, one of the amateur performers at Crew Bar has asked me to be her duet partner for the song, making me the titular, Dr Jones. I have no experience lip-synching, as all my previous performance experience is as a live singer – including the number of drag performances that I have done prior to this experience. In the back of my mind, I heed Manila von Teez’s advice regarding lips-synching, that if you don’t know the words to the song, just mouth the word “banana” as it will create a passable illusion.

In my living room, I rehearse the three songs that I will perform later that evening, blocking some of my movements on an imaginary stage. I start on my make-up, and the power cuts just as the sun starts to dull before it sets. Loadshedding. Again. I grab a battery-operated lamp, and my makeup mirror after applying primer to my face and neck, and start to apply my foundation. Once the foundation has set, I lightly sketch out the ways in which I will contour my makeup, dotting out where I will shade, and where I will highlight. My aim is to masculinise my face, unlike what most drag performers in Cape Town do. My face is soft and rounded, and I use shadow to attempt to create a more angular and harsh appearance, by creating a harder brow and thicker nose. After blending and contouring my face, I fill in my light, sparse eyebrows with a pencil, and using a lighter eyebrow pencil, I start to sketch out my facial hair. This I use as a guideline of where I will apply the shavings of hair that I have saved from my last haircut. I apply a setting spray to my face, and snap on a pair of gloves to apply the Prosaïd and the facial hair quickly before the glue dries, without getting excess hair stuck to my hands. Finally, I can sit back and have a moment to relax. But first, I must admire my handiwork. My face resembles my own, but not quite. I imagine that this is what I would look like, were I a man, and I am quite impressed with what I see – Uncle Johnny is a handsome devil.

I formulated the character of Uncle Johnny in 2006, in my second year of university. First, he was called “Andrew Genus,” a play on the word “androgynous,” then after my then house-mate commented on a resemblance to the actor Johnny Depp, he became Johnny Deep – a parody of the brooding heartthrob, and an allusion to sexuality – all in a name. In more recent years, when Johnny Depp became embroiled in scandals involving allegations of domestic violence, I chose to distance myself from the name, and renamed Johnny Deep as Uncle Johnny. The character of Uncle Johnny took on characteristics that I, as Lindy-Lee, do not possess. Lindy-Lee is shy, timid, and a bit more reserved, while Uncle Johnny is overly confident and perhaps a little lecherous in his belief that he is “wanted” by everybody. I look at myself in the mirror again and catch myself sneering. The transformation is starting to become more obvious, and accessible to me in the concrete world. The next step is getting dressed. First, the binder comes on, and as it constricts my chest, the little bit of pain that I experience makes me stand up that much straighter and taller – appearing more confident and robust enough to take up more space in the world.

Next comes the packer and the jockstrap, and after putting on my pants after this, my gait adjusts to the bulge that has settled between my legs. The strides I take are a little bit longer, and I no longer walk as rushed or quickly in my steps. The transformation spreads as I finish getting dressed, and while I still feel some nerves, the character starts to override these feelings. Like the Incredible Hulk, once the transformation starts, it is very difficult to get it to reverse, or cease entirely before the hidden persona emerges, to “smash” everything around them, as Hulk so often does. I feel powerful now.

Once at Crew Bar, Roxy shows me to one of the back rooms where I am allowed to leave my bag, costumes, and props. I join Sasha, Morticia, and another drag performer, as we head to the downstairs bar and club area to invite and entice some of the patrons to come upstairs to watch the show. I still feel a bit nervous, and don't approach anyone by myself. A little while before the show starts, I go back to the backstage area, take a seat, and gather my thoughts and try to calm my nerves. Showtime is almost upon us, and Roxy gives me a break down regarding the order in which performances will take place. Just before I am meant to go on stage for the first time that night, I am led behind the black curtain at the back of the stage, I hear Roxy introduce me, and as I head out onto the stage, my world stops, and Lindy-Lee's thoughts disappear. I don't remember that much about what takes place once I'm out on the stage, as this is Uncle Johnny's domain. He takes over the performances for me, while the conscious Lindy-Lee takes a backseat and goes along for the ride. After the performances are done, some friends who have come out to support me, congratulate me on the performance. According to them, and the subsequent photographs that emerge from the night, everything appears to have gone well. As the night comes to a close, the adrenaline of Uncle Johnny's takeover starts to wear off, and I feel utterly drained, as Lindy-Lee starts to return, and I become more like the version of myself I am most familiar and comfortable with, again. The transformation has worn through and run its course. I was able to become another, an other, the projected persona. Once the function of this passes I return to the less overtly confident, more reserved person I feel to be every day that I do not perform.





Above: Uncle Johnny performing at The Late Night Drag Show at Crew bar. Roxy Le Roux engages with his performance and becomes part of the performance (2015).

Neo-burlesque performers also make use of transformation to apply a mask for performance. I return to Fiona whom I introduced earlier in this chapter. Fiona also makes use of found items, like Roxy le Roux does, though she makes her own costumes. She appears preoccupied with a feminine nostalgia for a time that she has not experienced. Fiona's back story for her two performance personas, Poppy Fields, and La Belle Pique, speak of a story created outside of the South African context and imagination. Their backstories take a decidedly European form, as La Belle Pique is a character situated in French-speaking Belgium, while Poppy Fields is housed in an imagined English tale. Neither character exists within our current time frame. Yet, both these characters are connected through the art of strip-tease and neo-burlesque. Fiona's piecing together of her persona is both foreign, and not foreign. Her performances take on the task of hyper-femininity, as she looks to drag performance as inspiration for her performances. In Cape

Town, the majority of drag performance is performed by people of colour – though it is debateable whether or not the characters that are performed are meant to be viewed/perceived as people of colour - yet Fiona’s backstories and performances are both marked by her constructions and re-inscriptions of white femininity that she performs mimetically, making reference to what she draws from as the “original”.

Drag and neo-burlesque performance function as “liminal entities”. Both forms of performance are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner 1966, 95). The performance takes on a liminal form, as they refer to idealised feminine form and behaviours that form part of the regulatory ideal, yet they do not fit quite as neatly into the prescribed social mould. In drag performance, this liminality is tied to the incongruous nature between the physical body, the socialised sex of the body, and the over-the-top gendered performance, while neo-burlesque performance becomes liminal due to the play between social regulation and overtly sexualised performance. Lola’s drag functions related to liminality, as she is both the performing Lola as well as the Lola of everyday self; she is a femininely performing and presenting individual, but also a gay man. That the performance character of neo-burlesque and drag performers is housed within a pre-existing body that has its own social life and expectations exerted upon it highlights the liminal nature of being a performer who has created their own character. During their time-bound performances, the performer applies their specific mask as a means to infer performance. When I discuss my own performance character, that of Uncle Johnny, this mask covers the entire body as a means to infer the performance – posture and gait is used to infer a physical and psychic transformation. The mask is thus not like a mask made from plastic or other materials, the mask becomes the persona, the character who the individual comes to portray and perform. The mask is related to the physical and emotional embodiment of the character who the performer has created for the drag or neo-burlesque stage. This mask then directs us to what the performer wants us to see, by making use of a directed gaze of feliciticious spectacle. What they want us to see is that the performance is taking place. This would be difficult to achieve without the mask. Throughout this chapter I have discussed what takes place on stage, and in performance spaces, and how fantasy and aspiration toward ideas of glamour and femininity that is socialised as “white,”

influence the performances of those who participate in hyper-feminine drag and neo-burlesque performance. This provides the foundation for further discussion regarding physical and emotional embodiment toward aspirational performance, and how this may influence the portrayal of the kinds of femininity that are allowed to be performed on stage. Femininity in these forms of performance can allude to conformity, as staged performance of drag and neo-burlesque appear to portray whiteness in relation to femininity (at least in outward appearance) to be aspirational and beautiful.

This chapter introduces drag and neo-burlesque performance as it takes place in Cape Town through the participants in this research who engage in either style of performance. In this chapter, I engage with feminine performance and feminine forms of expression and unpack how they are done through the lens of individual embodiment that includes the performer/actor's social reading by way of their experience as raced/sexed/economically defined situations. In this chapter I introduce hyper-feminine performance as a form of gender expression and reflect on the ways in which this type of embodiment may influence the persona that is adopted. As the chapter starts, I introduce Lola Fine, who, through the gender expression of her persona demonstrates the casual ways in which gendered performance may be practiced and accepted as malleable. Through Lola I am able to introduce the mask as a practical application of the persona, basing my understanding of the mask on the work of Carl Jung, on the topic.

By working through the concept of the gaze I turn to Marcia Ochoa's concept of felicitious spectacle. Hyper-feminine performance in this chapter is theorised as a response to the male gaze. In this chapter, I start to address the ways in which performers may make use of this as a means to combat objectification, and to assert their agency, as they look back at their audiences as much as they are looked at. This challenges the assumption that the performance exists solely for the viewing pleasure of the audience.

In the second chapter, I build on the themes of the gaze, and the function thereof in relation to the use of the mask in certain contexts. Is the gaze exerted on hyper-performance, and hyper-

feminine performance, or is it the other way around, I contemplate this in the next chapter. Considering this, I attempt to unravel the types of feminine performance that will be performed in response.

Chapter 3 – The Gaze

Susie Orbach asserts that “our bodily codes and behaviours contribute to who we are” (Orbach 2009, 7). The ways in which individuals who perform can make use of their bodily movement and their bodily codes, provide us with meaning related to who the character is, and who the performing individual aims to portray themselves to be through their actions. In chapter 1, I introduce the gaze, the effect that this may have on hyper-feminine performance, the use of the mask in context, and felicitious spectacle. In chapter 2, I continue this conversation by working through different theories on the gaze as a way to theorise on the function of the gaze in spaces where there are expected hyper-performances and hyper-feminine performances. Regarding the gaze, John Berger states that “the way we see things is affected by what we know or believe” (Berger, Blomberg and Fox 1972, 8). From this I attempt to understand how this affects what the audience knows or believes about the drag and neo-burlesque performance they view. Berger goes on to say that “we only see what we look at,” that “to look is an act of choice” (Berger, Blomberg and Fox 1972, 8) – is the potential to objectify a choice?

The lazy stripper

It started yesterday, over a cup of tea with Lady Magnolia - a neo-burlesque and belly dance instructor, performer, and the troupe leader of *The Rouge Revue* - both of us are seated in her small, but spacious flat-cum-dance studio, drinking tea, while perched on the black metal framed, plastic seated chairs that she and her dance students make use of during rehearsals and performances of various “numbers” that require the use of a chair. Lady Magnolia sits upright, with her legs crossed, clearly more gracefully seated than I, as I try to find a comfortable way to sit my larger frame on the small, round, seat of the stool. We are discussing a performance by an American burlesque performer, Peekaboo Pointe, who performed at the previous Born Risqué showcase – a showcase of local and (usually one) international, professional neo-burlesque performance. The routine that Lady Magnolia and I are discussing is titled “The Lazy Stripper,”

in which Peekaboo Pointe performs an intentionally failed neo-burlesque performance. Peekaboo Pointe's performance appears to parody neo-burlesque performance, as she steps onto stage lazily, with a barely interested look on her face. This performance requires very little costuming, as she arrives on stage in heels, black sequined thong underwear, and nipple pasties that have tassels on the end. During her time on stage she leers at the audience with a bored, disaffected look on her face, while performing what would in some circumstances be considered "bad" neo-burlesque performance. She lazily slaps her own buttocks, after clenching and unclenching them one by one performing the slowest, and most disinterested version of "twerking" possible. Before the end of the performance, she manually twirls the tasselled nipple pasties (by making use of her hands), rolling her eyes, before exiting the stage, to audience applause and laughter. "It's so funny that you brought that routine up, as I will be doing my first attempt at an intentionally failed performance tomorrow night, at the House of Machines," Lady Magnolia says, laughing.

The following evening, I attend the performance at the House of Machines. It's a Wednesday night, and the small barroom is full. I have arrived early, though not early enough to get a seat in the small crowded room. Instead, I find a small space to lean against the bar, facing the stage, without blocking the bathroom door. There is a tiny stage area at the back of the bar, next to the bathroom, that is not so much a stage than it is an imitation Persian rug on the floor. Lady Magnolia performs her duties as MC and host of the evening's neo-burlesque performance. She introduces the audience to the evening's performance and introduces each performer before they perform. During the first third of the night's performances, she pours what appears to be whiskey from a hip flask into a teacup, sipping from it as she introduces the next performer for the evening. As the night progresses, she appears on stage, once again, microphone in hand, this time holding a champagne flute, giggling and sipping sparkling wine. Finally, towards the end of the night's performances, she steps onto the tiny stage, this time holding a bottle of sparkling wine, which she gulps down, just as INXS's "Elegantly Wasted" blares from the bar's speakers. She dances with her heavily made up eyes half open, and a satisfied grin on her face. As she steps down from the stage, she loses a shoe and ends her performance by dancing on top of the bar, while the patrons cheer, shout, and applaud. Once the song ends she climbs off the bar and grabs

the microphone to thank the performers, the venue managers, and staff, but before she leaves to go backstage, she hurriedly tries to tell the audience, “I just wanted to let you know that I’m not actually drunk,” in an attempt to communicate that it was all an act. This reveals that she has a sense of discomfort regarding Lady Magnolia’s relationship with the failed performance, whether it be intentional or not. Lady Magnolia still clings to the idea that the audience should be aware that it is still all an act. In doing so, she attempts to protect herself and her performance from the potential shame of public intoxication and seemingly “unprofessional” conduct during performances. She makes use of an obvious version of the mask of performance by attempting to direct the audience’s attention to the mask directly. *They need to know that it was all an act.* Lady Magnolia uses the mask as a means of protecting herself from potential shame and embarrassment due to what is considered a “bad” performance.

What makes Peekaboo Pointe’s intentionally failed performance successful in some ways, is that she leaves it on the stage, and does not attempt to explain away the performance by saying to us in the audience that it is an intentionally “bad” performance. If she were to do so, she would take some of the magic of “what works” in that performance away. In that performance, Peekaboo Pointe intentionally takes the “tease” out of the “striptease.” She in turn strips the performance down to its base elements, and in her lack of enthusiasm in that performance, we are made aware of the ridiculousness of what is often considered to be titillating, or provocative, and in turn, she is able to elicit laughter from the audience. We laugh because we are tensely confronted with what we are really doing, at the practical level when we watch people perform striptease. By showing us that the art of the tease is *really just all an act*, Peekaboo Pointe performs neo-burlesque in a way that is very different from what is normally expected from neo-burlesque performance. By revealing that the fantasy might just be bodily movement, Peekaboo Pointe performs an act of defiance. Allowing us as spectators to look at the performance outside of the realm of the fantasy is an act of rebellion and defiance, as this circumvents the ways in which neo-burlesque is typically performed for, and viewed by the audience. The audience is invited in and asked to look directly at the physical act taking place. Peekaboo has seen countless audiences, and there have been many who have looked at her on stage, and made her an object, though, through this performance she somehow manages to say, “I see you looking, please don’t

look away, keep your eyes on me at all times.” By showing up to the stage nearly nude, she forces the audience to look, whether they were prepared to, or not. As hooks asserts, “there is power in looking” (hooks 1992, 115), and that “not only will I stare. I want my look to change reality” (hooks 1992, 116). What reality is being challenged during these performances? Neo-burlesque audiences at the Rouge Revue, in Cape Town are dominated by women as spectators, and more often, queer women as spectators, those who were not typically assumed to be looking at these performances take on an oppositional gaze, one that destabilises Mulvey’s assertion of the male gaze in spaces where women perform provocatively.

Gazing at performance, gazing inwardly

In *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Laura Mulvey posits the idea of the male gaze in spectatorship, by highlighting the voyeuristic potential of viewing a performing body. If we are to compare the performance of neo-burlesque to the cinematic conventions that Mulvey discusses, “cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself...cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.” (Mulvey 1999, 843). Here, Mulvey discusses what she considers to be “the male gaze” and the nature of objectification in the cinematic form. An example of this form of controlled gaze as a means for objectification (of the feminine form, and the feminine appearing form, in particular), is the convention to introduce feminine characters on the screen by forcing the viewer to look at them from the bottom up, whereby the screen direction pans from the feminine character’s feet, up to their legs, midsection, breasts, and finally, their face. In neo-burlesque performance, these conventions are also found, where many performers often draw attention to the lower half of their bodies by slowly pulling off their stockings, stretching the thin fabric, before exposing a bare leg and foot. Similarly, the action of slowly removing a glove, often using their mouths and teeth, before tossing it onto the stage floor draws attention to both hands and pouted, rouged mouth in a simultaneously sensual and sexual manner. While the action of biting down on a glove, or a finger may be viewed as an overtly sexual action, it may also draw attention to the perceived elements of perceived playful girlishness, and “coyness” attached to

how feminine figures ought to behave. In this type of viewing, the audience is not fed a series of images through the camera lens, projected on a screen. Instead, the audience is presented with the whole image already, but their eye is directed to specific action through the performer's bodily movement and suggestion. Ochoa's idea of the feliciticious spectacle is relevant regarding the ways in which the control of the gaze is adopted by neo-burlesque performers, in describing this action as "a spectacle that does what it sets out to do – a spectacle where one feels in command, and where one receives the kind of attention one desires. Feliciticious spectacle requires some kind of display and an audience – real or imaginary – that can provide the kind of recognition one seeks" (Ochoa 2014, 222). While the neo-burlesque performer invites the audience to gaze upon their performance, their use of feliciticious spectacle in a practical manner is taken up as a means to gain a desired response. Neo-burlesque performers, through their use of choreography, attempt to direct audience's attention to particular aspects of the act, coaxing them into a desired response. At times neo-burlesque performers may momentarily pause their choreography, when it involves an action where they are removing their clothing, and gesture to the audience that they are not continuing until they receive the desired response, in the form of cheers, applause, and wolf whistles. They become active participants in the perception making of their image on stage. They create an image of fantasy that is related to a fantasy of feminine performance, and require a response from the audience to provide a "pay off" for themselves and for the audience. For the performer, the "pay off" becomes the desired audience response, and for the audience, the "pay off" takes the form of titillation through watching the performer remove even more items of their costume – an action that is out of the ordinary in day-to-day interactions with other people, and in particular, women. Taking Goffman's study of images in advertising, focusing on how women are gendered in certain images, we find that, "just as covering the mouth with the hand can be an attenuation of covering the face, so a finger can be an attenuation of covering it with the hand. But here, another ritualization seems more common: the attenuation of sucking or biting on the finger. The impression is given that somehow a stream of anxiety, rumination, or whatever has been split off from the main course of attention, and is being sustained...the face is partly covered as though one could see, but not be seen and were therefore free to engage hand and face outside of the stream of face-to-face address" (Goffman 1976, 60). These subtle physical cues provide a starting point for the viewer to understand the actions taken by the performer. As neo-burlesque is not a performance style typically applies

spoken elements in their performances, it is the carefully considered physical movement that communicates the performer's intention and guides the audience through the intended conversation. Just as peaking at the audience through a fan in a playful game of peak-a-boo may occur on the neo-burlesque stage, the action of covering the mouth may also create a barrier between the audience and performer. The performer engages with the audience in a particular manner, in an attempt to get them to pay attention to a particular feature of the performance that the individual on stage puts forth. The assertion to pay attention to a particular feature of the performance is done through engaging with the gaze of the spectator (even while only gazing at one spectator), doubling, and blurring the gaze between the individual being watched, and those who watch. This subverts the notion of the gaze, and the assumption of the voyeuristic stance of the gaze, by challenging the construction of the power relationship between the individual who looks, and the individual who is looked at (Parfitt 2005, 98). There is power in looking, yet whose power is it that takes precedence in these instances? The performer feigns power by adopting the mask during their performance. The mask assists in public projection. The performer does not really have to be the controlled gazer, though they can fake it, and perhaps, eventually make it. For Goffman the act of being looked at and recognised during the performance is important. When the audience is invited to look at the performer, they enter into an agreement that asserts to both parties that a performance is taking place, effectively establishing the roles of each party (Goffman 1956, 10). Their tacit agreement is hinged on the interaction between the two parties. The performer expects certain beliefs and reactions from the audience, and the audience expects to be swept away by the performance in some way – to be taken to a new sort of temporary reality. The audience and the performer thus enter into a mutual agreement. The performer invites the viewer to look upon their performance, their body as a performing body, and the audience attempts to interpret what they are allowed to perceive given the bodily performance of the performer on stage. Both parties are in a tug-of-war regarding the power of looking, and the power in allowing oneself to be looked at.

For the performer in this instance, the ways in which they aim to be perceived on stage in relation to objectification, becomes somewhat controlled and produced by the performer. They make use of the mask to indicate the production of a performance, though it is expected that the

audience follow suit with the desired reaction. Returning to the performance at the House of Machines discussed at the beginning of this chapter, during an earlier performance by one of Lady Magnolia's Rougettes²⁸, a drunk audience member standing in the back of the bar shouts "Take it off, slut!" Once the performer leaves the stage, Lady Magnolia returns holding a microphone in one hand, and a baseball bat in another, and tells the audience that while the performer is there to entertain, she does so because she wants to, and that she removes her clothing for *her* pleasure, and we as the audience should feel honoured to be allowed to view her doing so. In an instance such as this, Lady Magnolia highlights the importance of agency with regards to performance and motivation to do so. The audience is invited to look, but without the performer inviting them to do so, there would be no performance for them to look upon. Neither party is obligated to participate in this kind of performance, though if an audience chooses to stick around, and watch, then the expectation to behave accordingly arises. In *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger states that "we only see what we want to see," and that "looking is an act of choice" (Berger, Blomberg and Fox 1972, 8). This would imply that the audience member who shouts out "slut" during the performance is blinded only by what he wants to see. The intended projection of the performance is lost on him. Thus, Berger continues that, "a woman must continually watch herself. She is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself" (Berger, Blomberg and Fox 1972, 46). If Berger is correct, then that would imply that the objectification of femininely performing beings is inevitable. Though, not all audiences appear to react in as crass a manner as this particular audience member. Neo-burlesque performances often draw in new recruits to their classes and performances by the perception that it empowers women. How does the gaze of objectification come into play when those who perform reject it?

Lady Magnolia introduces each event that she and the members of her troupe performs at with the same introduction and sentiment, telling the audience that "this is the only place you may wolf-whistle at a woman," in an attempt to put the audience at ease and encourage them to audibly show their appreciation for the performance and the performers who are, in some way, allowing the audience into their world. This indicates to the audience that not only are they allowed to look at these women during their performance of striptease, but also that they are

²⁸ The members of Lady Magnolia's professional neo-burlesque troupe are referred to as the Rougettes.

allowed to enjoy the experience too. Neo-burlesque audiences are instructed regarding the ways in which they are allowed and encouraged to behave in the setting. In everyday settings, most people are not invited to view the act of striptease, nor are they invited to voice audible appreciation for the act of doing so. That would be bad manners under normal, everyday circumstances. In neo-burlesque performances, those who are regular attendees often subtly instruct other audience members how they should be behaving, effectively acting as Goffman's idea of the "shill" in practice. Goffman defines the "shill" as "someone who acts as though he were an ordinary member of the audience but is in league with the performers. Typically, the shill either provides a visible model for the audience of the kind of response the performers are seeking or provide the kind of audience response that is necessary at the moment for the development of the performance" (Goffman 1956, 91). The shill in neo-burlesque performance acts in such a way that they allow other, more inexperienced members of the audience, to feel that it is okay to show audible appreciation of the performer, and their performance in ways that do not just include applause. The shill thus adopts the mask of the ideal audience member as a way to project and demonstrate to other audience members what is expected of them should they choose to participate in the performance. Neo-burlesque (as well as drag) performance is an interactive performance – there is very little physical and psychic distance between the two parties once they agree to join one another in the performance. It is okay to wolf-whistle and make noise in these circumstances. The shill thus plays a role in the social world of the neo-burlesque performance – their role is instructive and provides the performer with the audience response they seek. In the section above, where the audience member shouts at the performer to "Take it off, slut!" the purpose of the actions of the shill has been improperly interpreted, resulting in inappropriate response behaviours in relation to the performance. What that male audience member saw was a woman taking her clothes off in a bar, and due to his perceptions of what women who do so must symbolise, he responds in a manner deemed inappropriate, initiating a conversation around objectification, tact, and fair treatment of people regardless of whether their public expression comes with a side of stigma and shaming. As Goffman asserts, "once the audience has been admitted to a performance, the necessity of being tactful does not cease" (Goffman 1956, 148). While the social world of neo-burlesque performance operates within the realm of fantasy, the audience should still hold some awareness that the performance is taking place in the real world, with real world implications. Some of the rules of interaction have

changed, but the regulatory boundaries of how to interact with other people still exist – you don't touch strangers, and you certainly do not dehumanise them by shouting at them that they are “sluts.”

Playing with gazes



Above: Lady Magnolia performing Elegantly Wasted at the House of Machines, wearing only one shoe (2014).

Below/next page: Lady Magnolia performs Elegantly Wasted, making eye contact with an audience member, while biting down on her index finger (2014).



In the images above, Lady Magnolia is displayed missing a shoe, while waving sheer fabric fans. When performed successfully, neo-burlesque performance is meant to elicit a variety of responses, ranging from laughter, admiration, arousal, and titillation from viewing the performance. Lady Magnolia wears the mask of perceived intoxication as an added layer to her character, to indicate to the audience that things are about to get “wild” on stage, that now that she has supposedly shed the mask of her inhibitions, so can the audience. Though she does not really shed her mask, she just adopts it differently for a new function – the function of an intentionally failed performance, an attempt at a performance of perceived realism taking place in a performance world where fantasy is sold through performance, and the performers make use of their mask of fantasy to sell the audience an image far removed from their daily lived experience. Lady Magnolia’s missing shoe displays an act wherein she pretends to be intoxicated, “*elegantly wasted*,” if you will. She is missing a shoe, but still maintains composure enough to dance, and make use of her fans, that draw the audience’s eye to their shimmering beauty, as the coloured light hits their sheer fabric in the darkened barroom. The missing shoe, while meant to indicate her state of inebriation, is also symbolic of the sexuality of the

performance. On one level, it is an exposed body part that is usually only fully naked in private and intimate spaces. On another level, feet have entered the erotic space due to the sexual fetishes and fantasy that surround feet and high heeled women's shoes. In the second image, Lady Magnolia further elevates the erotic nature of her performance when she coyly places her index finger in her mouth. This action covers part of the face, shyly, but also attracts attention to the mouth, another zone for eroticism. By placing her finger in her mouth, she imitates an image of eroticised "innocence," like a little girl sucking on a lollypop, but because she is leaning forward in a manner that peers down from above, and forward toward the audience, her stance indicates authority – that she is in charge here.

In this research, I focus on drag and neo-burlesque performance as a form of "Do-It-Yourself" performance, where the individual who performs formulates and creates their own persona, and performance for the stage. They do so without a predetermined script, or an outside indication or prescription of who their performance persona should be, and what they should look like. They make use of the already available conventions in their performance field, and attempt to craft something new, and unique to themselves and their character. These forms of performance take place without the veneer of a fourth wall. Here the audience and the performer are in communication with one another and refer to one another throughout the performance. I argue that while the audience may interpret performances in their own way, the performer asserts their agency, as they are active participants in the production of the image on stage. Further, the performer subverts Mulvey's concept of the gaze, by controlling the means of objectification when they draw the attention of the spectator, directing them where to look, and directing them when to applaud, wolf whistle, and show their appreciation for the performance.

Yet, why is it that those who perform drag and neo-burlesque choose these forms, and these personas with which they perform? In this research I explore the performing body, the *gendered* body, the *sexualised* body, the *dragged* body, in terms of the production thereof in relation to the performance, and the ways in which individuals choose to perform, with the spectator in mind.

Susie Orbach asserts that “our bodily codes and behaviours constitute who we are” (Orbach 2009, 7), yet, “*performance* may be more precisely delineated as to what Richard Schechner calls the ‘restoration of behaviour’” (Roach 1995, 46). Here, bodily performance is related to the ways in which bodies *ought* to perform in a given society, yet these performances do not necessarily have to perform in its designated manner. Taking this into consideration then, gendered performance is then related to the idea of restored behaviour, or “twice-behaved behaviour,” as a means of performing that which can be repeated, rehearsed, “and above all, *recreated*” (Roach 1995, 46), further highlighting the malleability of gendered performance as an ‘act’.

Performance and agency

“I can’t do charity work,” says Honeybun Shortcake – a neo-burlesque performer from the troupe *Black Orchid Burlesque* - as we stand in her kitchen, waiting for the kettle to boil. I’ve just asked her about her decision to not perform at neither 2015, nor 2016’s Grand Burlesque Exhibition – a burlesque showcase for all those who perform burlesque in Cape Town and Johannesburg, that raises funds for a chosen organisation (Cape Town’s Grand Burlesque Exhibition has raised funds for Rape Crisis for the past two years at these events). “Because of the work that I do, as an educator, I unfortunately have to stay away from performing at events where I can be recognised. In the contract I signed, it stated that I have to uphold the morals of the institution, so I have to keep things undercover, so to speak. That’s why I didn’t perform at the holistic fair in Kenilworth either, as the likelihood of running into people whom I work with was far too high. Because all they’d see me doing is stripping, and they’d probably have issues with me working at a school and being known as someone who takes their clothes off. I mean, it’s a different situation to say, dinner theatre, where the audience should know what they’re coming to see, and if I’m here, and you’re here, then we both have our reasons for being there.” Honeybun highlights the terms of the apparent moral code of the institution where she teaches, she is thus bound to performative gender norms. That she removes her clothing as part of her striptease act during her neo-burlesque performance disrupts the chaste, normative ideals around

decency that are ascribed to much of women's expected behaviour in a largely conservative South African society. Due to her assertions around personal privacy and agency around where she wishes to perform in relation to her job as an educator, I have decided to not include images of her performances in this research, to protect her privacy. She presents a sense of moralistic shame related to the physical act of stripping for an audience. This shame is exerted from outside, and at the same time internalised. Shame is a feeling that is a result of stigma. Goffman describes stigma as a reference "an attribute that is deeply discrediting" (Goffman 1990, 13). For Honeybun, being perceived as a stripper discredits her work and authority as an educator, as well-behaved, "respectable" women do not take their clothes off while other people watch. Because these acts are not deemed "respectable" by those who participate in society and social regulation, women who perform in this manner are viewed with distaste and disdain for not playing by the rules of "well-behaved" women in a society that urges women to dress modestly, lest they inspire feelings of desire among men. The pressure of these kinds of beliefs results in feelings of shame in the person who becomes marked by stigma, for not conforming to "respectable," and "proper" ways of being and behaving in public. This shame becomes internalised in the private lives and worlds of those who feel its pressures. In turn, Honeybun's response is to refer to the act of stripping, in less than positive terms, and uses language in such a way that separates the striptease of neo-burlesque, from stripping as another form of performance. Internalised shame has the potential to function in such a way that it results in positioning others as *more* stigmatised, and *more* worthy of social injury of shame. While there are differences between the performative acts of stripping and neo-burlesque striptease, a key difference in the perceived intention of stripping can be found in that stripping is often a means of employment, where the performer entertains in exchange for monetary gain. Those who perform neo-burlesque see themselves as different from strippers and erotic dancers as they pay for lessons, as well as the opportunity to perform on stage for an audience. This allows performers of neo-burlesque in Cape Town to perceive themselves as being of a different "class," as *they strip for leisure and not for survival*. Their perceived motivations for performing neo-burlesque is tied to their perception of the performance as an art form. Thereby creating an assumption that contemporary forms of stripping is not an art form. The associations that stripping has in relation to acts of perceived obscenity causes them to view stripping for economic survival with a level of stigma that they do not attach to their own forms of striptease.

Their erotic performance happens because they possess the ability to thrive economically and have access to surplus funds that allow them to pursue erotic performance for personal fulfilment. Economic and social class plays a key role in the ways that neo-burlesque performers perceive themselves. They aspire to perform erotically onstage by performing striptease, but their striptease needs to be performed in a certain way, in a certain space, to feel as if they are not debasing themselves. There is definite shame attached to erotic performance and allusions toward nudity, when performed publicly, for multiple people in an audience, neo-burlesque performers thus require a means for rationalising a difference between their performance and those of strippers and erotic dancers. For neo-burlesque performers the distinction lies in the perceived technique, and the ability and aspiration to convey a story with their performance. Femininely performing bodies are only allowed agency within certain boundaries and norms. Flouting these norms comes at a price. And that price is often laced with judgement and stigmatisation regarding the femininely performing person's social value. Where Butler is concerned, "gender norms have everything to do with how and in what way we can appear in public space; how and in what way the public and private are distinguished, and how that distinction is instrumentalised in the service of sexual politics" (Butler 2009, i). Honeybun must appear as modest and moralistic as is assumed of her position as an educator who is both female, and unmarried. That she is a woman in the teaching profession must become her public identity and her everyday mask, according to the contract that she signed as part of her employment. Her public staged performances become shrouded in the privacy of the character, a type of mask that she must don, to perform the fantasy that is the character of Honeybun Shortcake. Yet, does she perform gender or gendered ideals when she performs the duties of her profession, or the performance of neo-burlesque, or is she performing the role of an educator, and the role of the neo-burlesque performer, respectively? For Butler, "gender is clearly not a pre-existing site from which certain typical acts follow; rather it is an identity that is established by means of repeating a set of stylised acts" (Xhonneux 2013, 295). Could it be then, that stage performance is a thing unto itself? While the performance refers to gender, there are elements of both neo-burlesque performance in this case, and in drag performance in other cases, where stylised elements of performance are continually repeated during teaching, rehearsal, and performance – albeit slightly differently with each person doing the performing.

It is interesting that Honeybun wishes to steer neo-burlesque performance away from the concept of stripping and striptease, as this juxtaposes Lady Magnolia's assertion of what neo-burlesque is defined as. When asked what neo-burlesque entails, Lady Magnolia describes neo-burlesque as being, "first and foremost...about the art of striptease," she continues, "and that's what I really love about burlesque, I love that it gives women a platform to express their sexuality in a safe environment, where they are totally in control. It is not limited to the traditional ideas of beauty [and] sex appeal." To me it is interesting that Lady Magnolia constantly focuses on neo-burlesque performance as a form of art. Though this form of art that she refers to, is also made use of in correlation to, not against, the concept of stripping as an act. The language that Lady Magnolia uses to describe neo-burlesque, that it is an art form seeks to elevate these performances of striptease over stripping. While Lady Magnolia may view neo-burlesque performance as being something somehow different from stripping, they still operate in a similar category of bodily performance. It would appear then, that the mask that neo-burlesque performers may make use of is different, based on the circumstance, and this mask is somehow dependent on what performers are getting from the gaze. In neo-burlesque, the gaze is not just that of objectification, or narrowed down to bodily movement, rather there can also be a look of appreciation, and this appreciation can be mutually shared between an audience and performer who share an experience of joy, of titillation, of excitement between one another. This allows the performer to make use of a mask of expression, knowing that they won't have to go to battle on stage, to fight to be seen as more than a physical body. That there are specific techniques that are associated with the striptease performance in neo-burlesque allows those who perform neo-burlesque to feel less of the shame that is associated with public displays of sexuality, as the public display of nudity, sexuality and erotic performance, in other contexts, are socially placed in the category of that which is indecent and potentially obscene. For Lady Magnolia, the performance of neo-burlesque, is a performance that places the control of the performer's image in their own hands. To Lady Magnolia the performers have control regarding where, and how they wish to perform. As she is the troupe leader and teacher of a group of performers, she maintains that her focus is on providing safe spaces in which her students and associates may perform. For Lady Magnolia, "burlesque is a form of self-expression...in my world, mainly for women, to express their sensuality, their sexuality, their self-love, their self-worth through performance. Whether it be in a cute fashion, a very demure fashion, very elegant, very sexy,

very trashy, it's like it has a lot of elements, but the thing, the common thread for me, is that it does incorporate strip-tease," she asserts. Thus, for Lady Magnolia, neo-burlesque performance includes a thematically decided form of feminine performance, and performativity, that makes use of striptease as a form of entertainment, and interest. While there are a handful of cisgender male neo-burlesque performers, Lady Magnolia situates the performance of neo-burlesque in her troupe as being a site of feminine performance. Yet, the performance of femininity is not innate in this circumstance, or even related to just being a femininely appearing figure on the stage, it is still a characterised performance, where a specific idea of "womanliness" is performed, for "the performance or 'masquerade' nature of 'womanliness' to use the terms of Joan Riviere and Judith Butler, is expressed in...erotic dance, not as an erotic dance *per se*, but as a defining characteristic of femininity itself" (Devereux 2014, 36). The performance of femininity, or rather, womanliness in the context of neo-burlesque, is thus situational, and bounded to the neo-burlesque stage. The situational element of neo-burlesque performance is made relevant to the spectator who seeks out this form of performance through the temporary, oft-exaggerated feminine performance, and expression, as "it is not so much the character, or the overall structure of an entity that gets expressed (if such there be) but rather particular situationally-bound features relevant to the viewer" (Goffman 1976, 7). In everyday situations individuals put on a specific mask that fits into the situation, that make those around us comfortable. During these performance situations, those who perform put on a different mask for that space, that makes the world strange, and display the possibility of what could be – of fantasy. The mask of the performer conceals their individual identity, but it also attracts attention as a performance, and when they have that attention, they can make attempts to direct where that attention should go. This attention could refer to the physical, or an attempt at indicating a focus on a particular "story" that the performer wishes to communicate with the audience.

While performers of neo-burlesque attempt to assert their control over the performance, and how they wish to perform, the notion of objectification is not left behind. Upon mentioning to numerous neo-burlesque performers that I have encountered individuals who experience discomfort in viewing neo-burlesque due to internalised fear of objectification of another, many agree that the potential for objectification is unavoidable. This fear of acting out of

objectification is related to the presence of hyper-feminine performance in neo-burlesque. In Ochoa's writing, she understands hyper-femininity to be created as an object of an imagined masculine gaze (Ochoa 2014, 208). These spectacular femininities include conventional gender formations that operate under normative understandings of feminine beauty. While those who fear enacting objectification on neo-burlesque performers are often not cisgender men, the associations of the masculine gaze with patriarchy and misogynistic ideas of womanhood and beauty create a feeling of dissonance between the act of looking, and feelings of enjoyment for some potential audience members. Fiona²⁹, a neo-burlesque performer from *The Rouge Revue* who performs as two characters, *La Belle Pique*, and *Poppy Fields*, states that "it is difficult for many people to think of burlesque as empowering. In my own life, my mother, and my best friend have both refused to come to see me perform, because they're just so uncomfortable with the idea of women being objectified on stage. I can't change their minds, but I do tell them that I perform burlesque because I find it empowering, and in that way, I always try to make my burlesque empowering, at least." Here, Fiona's mother and best friend indicate their discomfort with the potential for objectification in viewing the performance through the attachment of stigma to the performance of striptease – not their own act of objectifying, instead the discomfort is hinged on seeing someone they care about reduced to an object, ready for possession and consumption. Though Fiona feels empowered by her performance, she has no control over the potential for being objectified when she performs. The social regulatory ideals indicate that women be modest, that they do not expose their bodies publicly for a viewing audience, and that women who choose to expose themselves for the viewing eyes of others are worthy of shame. It is something that *other* women do – not something my daughter or my best friend does. These social regulatory ideals are learned by individuals who live within society – they don't exist and enforce themselves out of nowhere. They reflect the ideals and norms of the ideologically dominant social group. This othering, when referring to *other* women does not apply to Fiona in the same way that it does to the perceived social class of those who are employed as strippers for economic necessity. This othering also does not apply to Fiona in the same way that it applies to hyper-sexualised images of women of colour in the media either. The sexualised labour of these *other* women is reflective of perceived norms that indicate that objectification, and dehumanization is something that is done to those who are outside of the dominant norm of who

²⁹ Pseudonym

is supposed to be respectable and is expected to behave as such. The potential for dehumanization through the objectifying gaze is always possible, as it could be perceived that the body becomes an object for others and becomes seen as something which could escape the performing individual and estranges them from themselves (Folkmarsen Kall 2010, 62). The ways in which the performers of neo-burlesque challenge these conventions against objectification may differ, but what maintains throughout the discussion, is that those who perform are inviting the audience into their world on stage, and that they allow the spectator to only see as much as the individual wishes to reveal to them, often through a multi-dimensional, and multi-layered performance – what looks like strip-tease from the outside, often houses a story that lives inside the individual who performs it.

Honeybun aspires to have control over the content of her performances and at least some level of choice regarding where she might perform. She is a member of a troupe, and as such, the leader of the troupe fills the role of a manager for the troupe, and contracts performers for events outside of their troupe showcases. Often Honeybun might attempt to screen potential events in order to avoid conflict with her full-time employers. These private events weigh heavily on Honeybun, as these performances often leave her feeling physically exposed, rather than creatively satisfied. During an interview, she expresses that “one of the things that I’ve had to do as Honeybun is to take away a lot of my deeper thought that I put into some of my routines. I’ve had to remove all the, I call the second layer...you know, that extra story that I like to tell...deeper meaning? I’ve had to just remove that, and go right back to basics, and have it be just straight up performance. Ain’t nothing to see here, but my boobies...” For Honeybun, “just straight up performance,” means that she is reducing her performance to the base elements of just bodily movement. She becomes a moving body in these situations, and not a moving, thinking body with something to say. There is no consideration of the intentional act with regards to stage performance in this instance. The interaction that she has with her audiences in these situations is not an act of mutual recognition. Even if she attempts to request her audience to take the performance of neo-burlesque seriously – as an act – the request is denied through the interpretation by the audience in these situations. They view the striptease through the lens of the strip, and the mask of fantasy, of hyper-feminine performance that she aspires to is ultimately

rejected. When she says that “ain’t nothing to see here, but my boobies,” she indicates that she has been reduced to her body and bodily movement, that those who view her in these types of performances are only there to see her take her top off and expose her breasts in some way. She believes that in these contexts, those who employ her for neo-burlesque performance are not there to see art, or the telling of any sort of story, that those who view her in this context are there to see her bodily movement and the shape that her body offers. While the act of striptease involves “the strip,” at certain points in these situations she does feel as if that is all she is there to do, which moves her further and further away from her creative outlet and agency. The enjoyment that she derives from performing is removed, and the enjoyment is shifted to the gaze of the spectator. The expectation is stifling and makes her feel as if she has been reduced to a mere body that is to be surveyed and consumed. She is caught between not behaving how women *ought* to behave and present themselves, and how she *wants* to behave and present herself. The shame and discomfort are brought forth by this incongruence. Yet, the surveying of bodies and potential objectification of bodies are realities of daily life, and is particularly present when performing for an audience, as the performer exposes part of themselves, whether it be emotionally or physically. The spectator’s gaze will always be present, whether it is the spectator in the audience who recognises the act of performance as such, or the spectator who surveys the body and its actions in daily life. As Ochoa indicates in reference to feliciticious spectacle, “real audiences are not always as generous as imaginary crowds” (Ochoa 2014, 222). Therefore, the projected mask of the performance may not yield the desired results for the performer. Honeybun expresses a desire to engage the audience with her ability to tell a story with her body and bodily expression, though the types of performances that she encounters in reality leave her with the conclusion that she has been seen only physically and not psychically in the least. Being seen, and the feeling of recognition to here is not only hinged on the tangible, physical experience, but also requires engagement and an attempt at understanding/reading of the physical communication. Yet, does this gaze inform the ways in which individuals will perform in daily life, and on stage? Performers of neo-burlesque attempt to perform sex positivity, and body positivity, and gender positivity, but they are still wrapped in the expectations of the ways in which women ought to behave based on societal prescriptions and expectations, to some degree. Honeybun Shortcake is drawn to burlesque as a means for a creative outlet, and a potential means for empowerment, yet she feels less empowered when she removes the layered creative

thought from her performances. In discussing her solution to feeling reduced to a moving body she says, “I put all my energy into the fan³⁰, so at least I’m not feeling like all I’m doing is stripping. There is still some art...you know...the art beforehand used to be creation. The thought I put behind my routine...the hidden agendas, etcetera, etcetera...now I’ve gotta let all that go, and just straight up...*dance*. The corporates don’t want thinking shows. The corporates actually want what will keep the drunk businessmen happy.” There is sadness in her voice that indicates to me that she is unhappy about the situation, though she keeps going because there is a potential to perform in other contexts, in such a way that brings contentment, and even happiness into her life. In the context of performing at corporate events, the audience has not necessarily sought out the entertainment of a neo-burlesque performer because they are fans of the style of performing. Rather, in corporate contexts, neo-burlesque performers fulfil a role that is fun, titillating, and entertaining for those who are attending a work event. From Honeybun’s description, these events are largely attended by men. In this context then, neo-burlesque performers become subject to objectification through the male gaze as it surveys and appraises their bodies, removed from the performance that is taking place. For Honeybun, only dancing is not performing neo-burlesque. In her opinion, the performance of neo-burlesque includes both dance, and elements of performative storytelling. When she is requested to perform at private events, her opinion is that she is only there to perform as a femininely shaped object, there to take her clothes off, and move to music, for desiring eyes. While she is not able to effectively apply the mask of her character in these situations, as the character is neither recognised or accepted by the audience, she uses the feather fans in the performance as a barrier, a shield that still allows her to feel like she is performing fantasy in some way, in the way that she wants to.

A lack of agency becomes a recurring theme in the discussion of performance. Morticia LaValle – a drag performer who started performing drag 9 months before our first meeting - and I discuss the topic over coffee, in her office on a Saturday afternoon, where she works in departmental administration at the University of Cape Town. She tells me about one of her first attempts at trying to book a performance at a venue, “I set up a meeting with this co-owner. At that meeting,

³⁰ A large feather fan, often made from ostrich feathers, sometimes made from synthetic material, that is used as a costume and prop in neo-burlesque performance.

which was literally a week before Halloween, I was hoping to perform at the bar when it was gonna be Halloween. And he said to me, ‘your wig is boring, you don’t know how to use makeup, you can’t walk in heels, your outfit is crap, and your drag persona’s got no personality. I don’t want you performing here.’ He said, ‘I would rather have you here as a man.’ So, then I was like a Crew dancer³¹ at Lion Corner that night, with all my clothes off, and in my underwear, you know?” Morticia’s voice changes, and looks down, seemingly embarrassed. She continues more assertively this time, “after that meeting with him, I thought one of two things. The first thing I thought was, no, this is too difficult, I’m going to give this up, he *is* right. Uh, the second thought was, the best revenge you can have on anyone, is not to prove to *them*, but to prove to *yourself* that *you* can do it. And so, every month I built up something.”

Both Honeybun and Morticia reveal experiences where they, as performers, were not reduced to the characters which they wish to perform, but rather that they were stripped down to their bodily form. While the characters which they perform are housed in the bodies that they possess, both individuals express their desire to be recognised for their creativity, performance, and the character that they perform, rather than just their bodily form. In the instances above, both Morticia and Honeybun felt as if they became sexualised objects, only recognised for their body parts that a spectator might find attractive and titillating. It should also be noted that both of these instances involve some experience of the voyeuristic potential of the male gaze directed toward them, as Honeybun performs at corporate events where there are many men in attendance, while Morticia’s experience details a sexualised erotic performance in a gay bar that is dominated by gay men. In these instances, their worthiness to be looked at is tied to their perceived sexual availability – how they look on stage, the shapes that their bodies can make, and not what they can do as consciously performing individuals through their performance persona. The mask that they have crafted for their stage performance becomes less effective, the barrier between the real, and the performed is snatched away, as they become stripped bare in more ways than one. That they can convey any sort of message during their performance becomes inconsequential. They become a commodified object that is to be seen, taken, held, used, and not heard. Conveying some meaning, or even a speck of storytelling saves these performers from these kinds of

³¹ The nightclub, Crew, is well-known for their underwear clad, mostly white, muscular, male bar dancers.

feelings, as they hope to elicit some form of emotion among the audience and translate that into recognition of the performer as a special, thinking, moving, fantastical being.

A conforming gaze?

It should be obvious by now that audience spaces are not always strictly masculine domains. Women and men of all gender identities, gender expressions, and sexual orientations participate in the surveillance of performing bodies on stage, when they participate in the habits of an audience member in a group of other audience members. Laura Mulvey's concept of the male gaze provides a useful starting point for understanding the gaze, however, these ideas are not the only ones in reference to the gaze. In "Is the Gaze Male?" E. Ann Kaplan, scholar of cultural studies, English, and comparative literary studies asks, "would women want to own the gaze if it were possible?" (Kaplan 2010, 211). She acknowledges that women have long since been present in audiences, questioning what becomes of the woman as a viewer when they are watching a performance that is constructed for, and constructs all viewers as male (Kaplan 2010, 211). In order to participate in the act of viewing, might the female audience member appropriate the masculine position in viewing? What does this do for the on-stage performer? Does this mean that the gaze will always be the same, no matter who is doing the looking? And as such, will they ever be able to look back completely when they are being made object? Is this even possible to do in these kinds of situations? Drag and neo-burlesque performance is complicated in that the content and intention of the performance acts in discord to the way in which it is framed for a viewing audience – intention is not always clearly expressed or attained.

In Kaplan's understanding, the audience, too, must make a choice. There are multiple ways in which women, and other audience members are able to gaze. As neo-burlesque performance deals in fantasy the audience must also make the choice whether to buy into that fantasy. "In

locating herself in fantasy in the erotic...woman places herself as either passive recipient of male desire, or, at once remove positions of herself as *watching* a woman who is a passive recipient of male desire and sexual action” (Kaplan 2010, 214). The spectator’s gaze, for Kaplan poses a challenge for women in the audience – she must accept the objectification that takes place through the gaze and accept that it applies to her too. This is in part due to the perceived power attributed to who is doing the looking, though, where Kaplan is concerned, “men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action or possession that is lacking in the female gaze” (Kaplan 2010, 210). To Kaplan, women – whether in the audience or on stage – may be able to receive a gaze, though they are unable to act on it. As I understand it, the gaze requires context, and unlike Kaplan, I believe that there is an ability for both parties – the audience and the performer – to communicate with one another through the act of looking and looking back by both parties – suggesting that there is something else, a type of look that is beyond the gaze. Though, because the performer is engaging in a specific act, they must make use of the appropriate mask to participate in the shared gaze. When performers exercise their agency as wanting to be looked at, inviting the audience to do so, they switch roles and instead attempt to wrestle for dominance from the audience. Both parties are required for the performance to take place, and to be recognised as such, though, who really is in charge? Who is it that dominates in the ability to gaze?

Looking back on Morticia’s experience at Lion Corner, having to strip to her underwear and dance atop a bar, there indicates a gaze that is enacted upon a masculine form. This provides insight into the idea that there is potential for the gaze to not only be a display of dominance over feminine performance. Though, it can be understood that when the gaze is forced upon another man, this is done so “between dominant masculinity and subordinate male gender styles that are marginalised and stigmatised” (Wood 2004, 57). Thus, according to Wood’s line of thinking, to be objectified while presenting masculinity is to be made subordinate in some way – this relates to the social stigma surrounding effeminacy – that the one who experiences it must experience shame in some way for somehow *being like* a woman, regardless of sexuality. The gaze in these situations, starts from a point of comparison, when Morticia/Mark is on the bar, or in the bar manager’s office, the gaze that is enacted upon him is related to comparison, he is being sized up

in some way – will he pose the threat of a challenge, or will he be able to be made subordinate in some way in this circumstance? Morticia’s performance in drag eventually comes to combat this comparison, as the type of beauty that is on offer is far from “realistic,” and operates in the mode of some other-worldly fantasy that one is unable to attain in everyday life. Drag becomes the mask on stage, one that protects Morticia as she projects an outward persona that cannot be made subordinate without her permission.

Performance and empowerment

What is it then that keeps individuals coming back to performance, when there is a sense of dissatisfaction regarding the ways in which they are perceived by those who view them, and their performances? I ask Honeybun, what keeps her coming back, why she is drawn to performance, and why she is drawn to performing as Honeybun. She tells me that, “*it’s the yellow-brick road, you know*. If Honeybun is Dorothy, then burlesque is the yellow-brick road. It’s a means to an end. Um...the end, being Honeybun, looking in the mirror, and seeing Honeybun, and going...I...have...*substance*. I have quality. I have worth. I have intelligence. I have all of the qualities that I seek, embodied within me. I’ve spent most of my life looking outside of myself for ideals. And it was only when I created Honeybun, I realised all of the ideals that I was striving for outside of myself lay within Honeybun. So, she’s just a means to an end. Because, while Honeybun does those performances, *Tracy*³²takes the references back.” The references that Tracy refers to here are the lessons that she has learned through the creation of and the performance of Honeybun as a character. Honeybun possesses traits that Tracy wishes she had, and because she experiences Honeybun first hand, those traits become Tracy’s traits, and those perceptions of self, become part of Tracy’s perception of self. Even though Honeybun’s strength and her other empowering traits were formulated as being part of the mask of performance, the longer she spends alongside the persona/mask, the more she takes on the qualities that make Honeybun more brave and confident on stage, and applies it to her everyday world experience.

³² Pseudonym

The act of performance, at least for Honeybun, is related to an empowerment of self. The character that Tracy has created, Honeybun Shortcake, possesses qualities that the individual who performs – Tracy – aspires to possess. She continues, “...if, as Tracy, I’m faced with something that makes me scared, I can go back to my experience as Honeybun, and remind myself that I’ve been in far more vulnerable, far more fearful situations, and breezed through them, actually. With a smile. So, it *can* be done. So, while Honeybun is doing all the hard work, it’s Tracy that’s actually reaping the personal benefits.” It should be noted that Tracy, like most of the participants in this research, situates herself outside of her performance persona, speaking of Honeybun in the third person. This persona is so different to Tracy’s identification of her everyday self, to the extent that Honeybun possesses a different life, and personality. While the performance persona can be viewed as an extension of self/identity of the individual who performs, the persona appears to be the self which the individual may wish to or aspire to being in some form. Morticia echoes some of Honeybun’s sentiment, saying that “Morticia has a lot of confidence, than³³ what I didn’t have. She’s given that to me. Which I’m very grateful for.”

The performance persona, viewed by individuals as an extension of self, can then also be viewed as a transformational identity, where the transformation of identity from one persona (self) to another persona (the performance persona) is viewed as a movement, and means towards empowerment of self. This liminal space of identity can be perceived as an act that moves the individual performer towards self-actualisation. The theatrical performance of a particular performance identity thus pushes the performer toward what they interpret to be self-actualisation. The performance of identities is thus theatrical. The act of becoming takes on a collaborative structure between who is being seen, and who is doing the seeing, and through this recognition, through the act of being seen, the performance, and the persona becomes real to those who witness and experience this psychic transformation.

³³ Morticia’s wording

It is early August 2015, and my Facebook feed is filled with conflicting opinions regarding the recent inaugural Grand Burlesque Exhibition. On the surface, the perception is that the event was a resounding success. The event was well attended, and large sum of money was raised, to donate to Rape Crisis in Cape Town. Most of the goals for the evening were met. Yet there is one topic of contestation that repeatedly fills my news feed each time I log on to the website. A review of the event, found on a local entertainment news website has the local neo-burlesque community up in arms, where performers are divided on the concept of gaze, and body shaming. I decide to look at the article to see what the furore is about. Scrolling through the review, before reading it, I'm struck by the images that accompany the article. Breasts - but no head. A woman bending over – no face to be seen anywhere. Body parts, all disembodied belonging to the viewer, but to no one in particular. These images belong to an imagined viewer, but the gaze through which the images are taken are clearly masculine, if one applies the theory of the Gaze as understood by Laura Mulvey. The disembodied body parts on display indicate that there is no owner, for their heads and faces are obscured, or in fact, are just not included at all. The scopophilic pleasure at play in the interpretation of images such as these hinge on the idea that anyone can own and exert their desire upon these images, as they lack human context and connectedness. Because there is a lack of connection, they are very easily able to be objectified as one does not have access to the whole image, instead the image is partial – making it all the more easy to dehumanise the person in the image. The cycle continues, at least there aren't that many pictures accompanying the article/review. Though the lack of faces in his images that accompany his writing somehow indicates that his thoughts will be unchallenged, because there is no one physically there to challenge his points of view. At first glance, I could not really tell what was wrong with his writing, why this has caused so much upset online. He writes about receiving a brief and informative history lesson about burlesque. Check. Nothing out of the ordinary there. Instructions on how to behave at the show (wolf-whistles are encouraged, personal photography is discouraged). Check. And then I see it. The offending line that credits the success and applause of one performer's appearance that night, to the implication that her bodily size (as the "largest" performer of the evening) is the reason for the successful audience

response. For the next two days there is heated debate taking place on various status updates, and online links to the article.

There are two topics that keep coming up surrounding the article/review. One is related to body image, while the other refers to the male gaze, and the perception of neo-burlesque performance that has been published in the images alongside the offending article. To reiterate, the gaze is understood as a potentially “objectifying regime of looking and looking back” in this way, “the gaze is established” (Wray 2008, 70). Though the gaze can be unidirectional, as is established in the article that is debated in the previous paragraph. We should consider however, that the “gaze is never innocent,” that it “relates to our understanding of our own body, and initiates a desire as we look at objects, and want them to look back at us, to confirm our reality” (Wray 2008, 70). The trouble that arises through this form of objectification through the gaze, is that while our reality is confirmed, the objectified is never recognised as such. In general, the “gaze is considered a male preserve: men assume the active gaze, and male, women its passive object, it distinguishes, objectifies, is used by men seeking otherness in women” (Wray 2008, 70). During live performances, however, the one who is looked at can never truly be passive, as performers inevitably do end up looking back at their audiences. When the scopophilic pleasure is solely hinged on disembodiment and objectification, then the gaze dehumanises the gazed upon through a lack of recognition of their substance.

Body image can be defined as “the image that an individual has of his or her body that is largely determined by social experience.” Also, “body image is elastic and open to change through new information,” while, “media imagery may be particularly important in producing changes in the ways that the body is perceived and evaluated, depending on the viewer’s perception of the importance of those cues” (Grogan 1999, 3). Body image then is either determined by the ways in which individuals are treated in relation to their bodily size, shape, race, colour, and other physical and aesthetic features. Though, the ways in which bodies are treated is determined by the social interpretation and adoption of bodily scripts and prescriptions, with regards to what the media determines as acceptable and beautiful. Body image is related to self-esteem in that the

social response to the body becomes internalised in such a way that it may affect the individual's feelings of self-worth.

In neo-burlesque performance the body of the individual who performs is constantly on display, during the performance of striptease, where the performer peels away various elements of their costume, finally revealing a near naked bodily form. Most neo-burlesque performers do not make use of speech during their performances - thus the body becomes the most important tool for communication. Though there is a distinction made by performers, between being read as "just" a body, and being read as a "performing" body. The performing body possesses the ability to look back, and to challenge the viewer, so that they may ask themselves, what it is that they are able to see in the performance. If they only see the body, then the viewer participates in an act of objectification – taking in the performer and taking control over what she wishes to reveal. The latter indicates a recognition of substance to their acts of physical communication. Many performers view the ability to perform in this way as empowering to themselves, and to the audience once they are read as a performing body with something to communicate, rather than an object body that exists merely to be seen and consumed. However, some performers assert that they do experience discomfort if they perceive themselves to be overweight, or out of shape. Cherry Lesque – a neo-burlesque performer who is part of the professional troupe from *The Rouge Revue, The Rougettes* - states that "before a performance, I always make sure that I eat properly, cut down carbs, don't drink or go out...because I hate performing when I feel fat or bloated. I just don't feel sexy." Lady Magnolia similarly feels discomfort referring to her body at times, stating that "my weight is always fluctuating, 5 or 10 kilograms. Sometimes I'll freak out before a show and say 'I'm not going on. I'll leave the performances to the other girls.' But then I have to stop myself and tell myself that I have to lead by example, and it doesn't matter what I feel like, I still have to perform."

Lady Magnolia asserts that neo-burlesque performance is a space where women of all shapes and sizes are allowed to perform, yet there is still an internal struggle, when confronted with perceived fatness, or bodily shape and size that is deemed too plump. Here, the real-world persona affects the ability for the onstage persona to do their job. Perceived plumpness appears

to get in the way, so the mask no longer fits – for Lady Magnolia and Cherry Lesque to adequately make use of their respective masks in performance, they must fit into the idea of what their respective masks should look like. Lady Magnolia regularly states that neo-burlesque performance empowers the self-esteem of women both on the stage, and those who view it from the audience, yet, how can these allusions to bodily discomfort relating to size, be related to a sense of empowerment?

During one of my first meetings with Lady Magnolia, she tells me that, to her, those who perform neo-burlesque represent an image of femininity and beauty ideals that differs from what is represented in the media as conventionally beautiful. She says, “we all have different body types...many of us are what you would consider voluptuous, and not carbon copies who look like models from magazines...” Even with this assertion that bodily difference is accepted on the neo-burlesque stage, there still exists discomfort related to bodily shape and size when performing. Considering the comparison made to models who appear in magazines, it is found that, “models, initially used as mere clothes-horses, have now become physical embodiments of ideal identities. They come to represent our ideals of social perfection. They mimic the cultural values that have produced them and exemplify the success that sanctions conformity” (Soley-Beltran 2004, 317). While the neo-burlesque performers from *The Rouge Revue*, and *Black Orchid Burlesque* may all look different, there is also a focus placed on self-perceived fitness, and thinness, and a masking of individually perceived discomfort related to bodily imperfection.

The heated discussion and debate surrounding the article that mentioned the bodily size of the neo-burlesque performer as a qualifier for the success of her performance at the Grand Burlesque Exhibition simultaneously appears to subvert ideas surrounding bodily conformity, while enforcing ideals of bodily and social success in relation to bodily size and appearance. It can be understood that “success is also signified by slenderness...(that) the standardization of beauty performed by the modelling system has made slenderness the canon as well as a sign of leisure and conformity” (Soley-Beltran 2004, 320). The performance and consumption of neo-burlesque could be considered a leisure activity that is only tangibly available to a few. In December 2015 I attended the final neo-burlesque performance of *The Rouge Revue* for the year. During the

intermission, an acquaintance from Johannesburg who was attending her first neo-burlesque performance in Cape Town, leans back over her chair and gestures to me to move closer, so that she may whisper in my ear. She says to me in English-accented Afrikaans, hoping that those immediately around us don't hear or understand us, "dis baie wit, en baie skraal, dink jy nie?" (it's very white and very skinny, don't you think?). She is not entirely incorrect. The feminine performance that has taken place on the stage for the evening, where *The Rougettes* have just performed, does in many ways conform to ideals surrounding a particular white feminine performance – a form of feminine performance, that in this context stands in for all forms of feminine performance for those who view it. I point out to her that there are at least two performers that evening who do not conform to this standard, but it does become obvious that those on stage perform a similar formula of perceived beauty ideals – at least physically. Harkening back to the aforementioned aspirations towards whiteness in the form of the nostalgic pin-up, the viewers of these performances sometimes recognise the sameness represented on the neo-burlesque stage. To put it bluntly, those on stage do not fully represent the diversity of South African society in Cape Town, as most performers are white, or present as white, and there is very little variation in bodily size among those who participate on stage. While Lady Magnolia feels that those who perform as members of her troupe subvert the conformity of slender-bodied feminine performance, to the spectator, this may not appear so.

Those who perform neo-burlesque assert that the act of stepping on stage and performing an incarnation of strip-tease has lent them the ability to feel more at home in, and more accepting of their own physical form. Honeybun, who is quite petite, draws attention to her acceptance of her frame, tells me that due to a medical condition, one side of her body is muscularly smaller than the other, and that this side of her body also houses a large, slightly darkened birthmark. For her, performing neo-burlesque has afforded her the opportunity to become more comfortable in her body, by the ability to expose it to those who may not ordinarily see what she considers a flaw. She tells me that, "I've never met a burlesque dancer that was happy with her body. They all have one aspect that they want to change. I will be honest and say I have nothing I want to change. I'm very happy with my flawed body. It is my tool. The flaws are what I use to psychologically connect to my audience. There's an emotional connection there when I take off

my top, and bare my belly, and a woman, who's been suffering from low self-esteem sees me on stage, baring my birthmarks, my scars, proudly." She views her perceived flaws as a means for empowering herself in her daily self, as well as a factor for inspiring potential empowerment in others, who view her on stage. She continues, "...and she says to herself, wow. If that chick can do it, I really shouldn't take issue with my one little stretch mark, or my one little birth mark, or you know even Starr³⁴, she has a birthmark on her face. And that's one of her, like, little things, she'll openly admit it bothers her. I'd been with the troupe for a couple of months when she pulled me aside and she said, you know, bringing you into the troupe is one of the best things I could have done for myself. Because watching you go out there with your body, knowing all these flaws that you have, and you still, you just, you laugh it off.... I could turn this into an issue. It was an issue for 35 years of my life, it was an issue. Until the day I realised that life is too short to make issues out of birthmarks, you know?"

In chapter 2 I am largely preoccupied with providing context and content to the ways in which the gaze, and in particular the male gaze, is understood through the definitions provided by scholars such as Laura Mulvey and E Anne Kaplan. In this chapter, the gaze is used as a means to understand a variety of performances – the perfected, and the intentionally failed. The gaze is discussed in this chapter as a way to understand what both the performer and the spectator expect to achieve or receive through an engagement with the performance. By focusing on the gaze in relation to what the body does, can do, might look like, and the ways in which it is presented, I attempt to further a conversation that questions the ways in which the gaze may affect the form that the mask takes, and is accepted in performance, and how this affects the ways in which the performance will be understood.

The following chapter will continue the discussion of the body, and how it relates to feminine performance, though there will also be a focus on the concepts of stigma and shame. I am eager to discover how these concepts work against feminine performance that does not fall in line with the dominant social regulation. Further, I also seek an understanding of how these themes affect

³⁴ The troupe leader and manager of Black Orchid Burlesque.

ideas around effeminacy. Chapter 3 will continue discussions of, and build on the existing themes of the mask, stigma, and shame and how these concepts are applied and may operate in a world that is socially regulated.

Chapter 4 – Rehearsing Femininity, Drag as Liminal Space-Embodiment, Stigma, and Laughter

In chapter 3, I discuss themes relating to stigma and shame, as it works against feminine performance that does not directly comply to the types of feminine performance that is sanctioned by the dominant social regulation – I will also address how this affects ideas around perceptions of effeminacy, particularly among drag queen performers. I continue by introducing a conversation on embodiment in relation to the mask, that was briefly touched on in chapter 1, furthering the conversation on the attempt to understand the function of the mask as a response to the “public” gaze that is enacted upon them. I will unpack the ways in which Lola understands her actions as a means to combat stigma and shame, by means of adopting a mask for a specific purpose and gain a better understanding of why and how these actions make use of the concept of feliciticious spectacle as a means for working toward agency in performance. While the gaze works as an act of authentication in relation to the mask, I question the ways in which this mask functions within liminal space, and what this means for those who perform in drag, firstly, and possibly those who perform neo-burlesque.

Playing the role of the comedy queen

“Let’s scroll right to the beginning, to the first profile picture, just for a laugh.” Mark cocks his head to the side, as we sit in his shared office at the university campus where he works, after our first interview has been completed. “It’s always so weird to see what all the queens looked like right at the beginning, because no-one knew how to do their make-up at all!” Mark is a new/young drag performer in Cape Town, whom I met at Crew Bar during the amateur drag performance nights that take place. Mark performs under the name, Morticia LaValle. I first encountered Morticia on a rainy Wednesday night at Crew Bar early on in my research. That night as she performed a live rendition of “Sweet Transvestite,” from the cult movie musical,

“The Rocky Horror Picture Show.” Dressed in a form-fitting, short black dress, a curly shoulder-length black wig, her make-up is exaggerated, very pale, and pancakey, flattening out her features. Before she enters the stage, Roxy introduces her, making sure to tell the audience that Morticia is a “comedy queen,” to indicate to the audience that the performance that they are about to view is one that is meant to elicit laughter, and attempt to provide a moment of hilarity. This differs from performances that are often serious, or performances that highlight sexuality that are commonplace at Crew bar on Wednesday nights. Mark describes Morticia as a “comedy queen,” using a term that has been popularised in the media in 2014, by drag performer *Bianca Del Rio*, on the sixth season of the popular television programme, *Rupaul’s Drag Race*. The idea of a “comedy queen” fuses together ideas of performance around drag in relation to stand-up comedy, combined with makeup and costuming that is potentially garish, overly exaggerated, and outmoded to those who make use of a more natural feminine aesthetic in drag. This is different to popular ideas surrounding what drag performers (and their subsequent performance) ought to look like – following a script where those who perform drag are meant to look as close to mass-media ideas of femininity, and feminine beauty. While Morticia does not perform stand-up comedy as part of her drag performance, her appearance, at least early on/initially, takes a step back from iterations of traditional feminine beauty ideals in favour of obvious drag aesthetics inspired by performers such as Divine³⁵. It is debatable whether Morticia is intentionally performing comedy. This is juxtaposed with Vida Fantabisher’s comedic, hyper-performance of show-tunes, alluding to the humour through exaggerated facial and physical performances – Vida is never announced as a comedic performer, she merely performs comedically at various points in her performances. Morticia’s comedy at times appears to be hinged upon her appearance and costuming. Her hair is large, her makeup on the garish side – she sidesteps the potential perception that drag performance may be a form of “female impersonation.” While she is still in the beginning stages of her drag performance, and still has yet to improve her skill set regarding the application of makeup for drag performance, she takes great delight in looking at pictures of her favourite local drag performers, during the time in which they were starting out in drag, and still lacked the necessary skill in makeup application, wig selection, and costume selection, that they possess now.

³⁵ Divine was an actor and singer who performed in drag in many John Waters films, such as *Pink Flamingos* and *Hairspray*.



Above: Vida Fantabisher performs the Sister Act medley (2015).

Below: Vida Fantabisher and Angel Lalamore perform Rossini's *The Cat's Duet* (2015).



“Oh my *goodness!* Look at her **garage doors!**” Mark exclaims, laughing, pointing to another drag performer’s image of their younger, less experienced self. Garage doors in this context refers to the application of only one colour of eye shadow at a time, creating a solidly coloured eyelid, that resembles garage doors upon blinking. Successful eye makeup application in this context refers to the combination and blending of more than one shade of eye shadow, prior to affixing lengthy, voluminous false eyelashes. When Mark performs as Morticia, Morticia does not wear false lashes, as Mark suffers from partial blindness in one eye, and the false eye lashes disturb his contact lenses. In this moment where Mark appears to be judging the appearance of other drag performers during the beginning phases of their career in drag and deriving joy at the relatability that they were once in the same position as he is in relation to the appearance of Morticia. It is striking to me that he is performing the same action that he has stated that he disagrees with in Lola Fine’s responses to Morticia, and other young drag performers. According to Mark, Lola regularly attempts to “correct” Morticia’s drag appearance by telling her to stand a certain way, dress a certain way, and to do her makeup in a specific way that satisfies her understanding of what drag ought to be, and how it ought to be presented.

Taking a sip of her beer, Lola leans in toward me and asks me, “is Morticia still doing that rap thing? Oh, I *hate* it so much! It’s awful! She loses her posture as soon as she starts, and then you’re just left with *boy*.” To Lola, drag is meant to look a certain way, and is meant to be performed in a specific fashion. To be a boy in drag is an act of failure to Lola because the illusion of drag as “female impersonation” is lost – especially when this is done intentionally. In Lola’s world, drag exists within a binary of masculine/man in direct opposition to feminine/female – thus removing that which has the potential to be subversive in the performance of drag, to instead use drag to replicate the social regulations and ways of performing gender expression of the mainstream, heterodominant society. To Lola, the performance of drag is closer to what she feels is considered “female impersonation,” where the drag performer subscribes to the dominant prescriptions of feminine beauty ideals that are prescribed by mass media. If a performer falls outside of this perceived normative ideal, they make a mockery of the performance of drag, by relegating it as something that can be laughed at. Yet, performers such as Morticia La Valle, and even Mary Scary, who performs with facial hair and body hair (such as thick chest hair and leg hair) exposed, do want their audiences to look at them, and enjoy their performances through the enjoyment of laughter. Lola’s desire is to be taken seriously while in drag, while Morticia and Mary desire audible appreciation from their respective audiences.

For Morticia and Mary, the laughter of the audience is not a source of pain and disgrace, but rather a part of the audience’s appreciation for them. Both performers are far younger than Lola Fine, and have created their characters to have a caricaturized look, that infers some form of femininity and feminine performance and expression but is removed from it. Mary does this by including elements such as a glitter-filled moustache and exposed body hair, while Morticia attempts this with the more garish, gothic look from her early performances. Laughter, due to the structure of their performances, does not frighten them – the laughter is all part of the (hoped for) plan when they perform. For Lola, the potential for laughter opens the performance of drag up to a sense of shame, as she wonders exactly what the audience may be laughing at. *Are they laughing at the performance, or, are they laughing at the performer as they appear?* Laughter, for Lola, would be an unintended response to her performance. Lola’s fear of laughter here is

related to the exertion of social facts through the exertion of dominant social regulation – regarding Durkheim’s function of social facts, these social facts are not only asserted through violent and potentially oppressive measures. The provocation of laughter places the one who acts inappropriately for the situation at a social distance. They become separated from the dominant group through their ridicule. They appear to lack understanding of the rules of the dominant social order, and when they step out of line, they reveal their lack of understanding of custom and social convention (Durkheim 1982, 51). They thus elicit laughter. But the laughter here is less innocent, and far more sinister, as it functions as a form of punishment that is used to indicate that the one who has broken the rules of the social order is worthy of shame – and they should feel that shame through the laughter of ridicule that is being enacted upon them. To be overtly queer as a person of colour, as in Lola’s case, is to perform a stereotype through the spectacle of shame (Matebeni 2018, 323). There is the well-worn trope of the working-class, “gay coloured hairdresser” in South Africa, who identifies, dresses and behaves like a woman as a way of communicating that they are gay. Through these acts, femininity and certain types of feminine performance are used to reproduce and re-inscribe mainstream forms of gender performance (Rabie and Lesch 2009, 717). These stereotyped behaviours on the one hand allow people around them to understand who they are through their clothing, “gendered constructions and the act of sexual intercourse that construct masculinity and femininity” allowing them to “live comfortably, and strategically in gendered spaces” (Potgieter 2006, 121). Thus, to live as a gay man, in these circumstances is to try to live as a heterosexual woman. Trouble arises for some gay men then, when they resist “authentic masculinity,” which implies “freedom and control, yet anything marked as feminine is strictly proscribed” (Hennen 2008, 49). Thus, the prescribed masculinity of being a man means not being a woman, or not like a woman, as being like a woman is to lack freedom or control – to be like a woman is to hold less social power. This lack of social power may lead to oppression in various forms. For Lola, the laughter may well mean far more harmful action is coming. Laughter can therefore be implemented as a tool that is used to regulate ways of acting and assert conformity toward the dominant social ideal. Lola worries that the laughter that some performers elicit is not taking place because of their use of comedic elements in their performance. She worries that the laughter that they elicit is based on their inability to conform to the ideals of what femininity and feminine performance should look like. In response to this, she attempts to direct and control the actions and physical styling of

other performers, telling them how they should dress, do their make-up, stand, and perform. Because she has been performing in drag for decades, she feels that she possesses the authority to tell other performers how they should and should not be behaving when they are in drag – much the same how people in society are taught how to behave and perform in relation to the dominant social ideals and the social order – “men must behave this way, and women must behave this way; little girls don’t sit with their legs open, boys don’t cry...” Lola’s actions act as a call toward “collective belief,” to invoke Margaret Gilbert’s assertion of the term. Lola’s aim through her actions is to standardise the performance and presentation of drag in order to gain acceptance from not only the dominant social force from the outside, but also as a means to ascribe certain standards within the perceived group as a means for acceptance by the perceived group – that of other drag performers. She possesses the belief that one cannot expose any form of masculinity or masculine performance during the performance of drag, as this ruins the illusion of female impersonation, and, to her, opens up the performance to laughter and ridicule. Laughter and ridicule in her belief take away from the performer’s dignity.

Stigma, as understood by sociologist, and social psychologist, best known for his work on symbolic interaction, Erving Goffman, connotes something that is *shameful* about the person whom it is applied to. Stigma indicates that the individual whom it is applied to is in some way a failure or has succumbed to their shortcomings (Goffman 1990, 13). Anything that falls outside of these norms may be viewed as deviant behaviour. This leaves those who are perceived to be behaving in a deviant manner at the risk of having dominant social beliefs enacted upon them through violence and discrimination. Lola views laughter at drag performance as violent and discriminatory as drag performers become rendered as an *Other*. Lola is older than most of the participants in this research, thus her experiences of queer feminine performance is read through her experience, and her past, before the decriminalisation of homosexuality and the protection of LGBTIQ rights in South Africa. As someone who lives their life as visibly LGBTIQ, to Lola, laughter can indicate danger, and her self-preservation instincts lead her to a need to protect herself, physically, emotionally, and professionally. This self-preservation also leads her to refuse using the men’s bathrooms in the mall where we meet up for our interviews, she tells me. While this mall is the closest mall to where she lives, Lola often feels vulnerable and unsafe

when people laugh or make some sort of comment upon her entering the restrooms. This space of privacy and relief leaves Lola feeling hyper-exposed as she is unable to conform to both the perceptions of who should be using the men's or women's bathrooms. Outside of the context of her drag performance, she is unable to charm those whom she encounters into a feeling of personal safety. In these situations, Lola experiences life without the protection and projection of her mask. She has no armour with which to protect her from what laughter may mean when it is directed at her in these spaces. Thus, when she is able to armour herself with her mask, she attempts to do so on her own terms, and with her own expectations regarding how the performance should be received and perceived.

"The world only fits you, on a 'straight acting, straight looking' basis. You know, that's actually the worst term that I...that really irks me...in gay society. 'Straight acting, straight looking.'"

(Lola Fine, Interview segment, 2015)

In conversation with Lola regarding her experiences in the world of mainstream gay culture, she asserts that there is a push toward prescribed masculine/manly behaviours for all those who are assigned male at birth. These masculine gender roles are damaging to the ways in which gender-nonconformity among feminine/effeminate men is perceived and treated consequently. To Lola, the treatment of drag queens and femme identified men highlight the damage that these roles can do.

"It is the easiest way to get into a dress (doing drag)...but it's the hardest life that you would have out there. You know, I felt very upset when I read that that day (about the rumours of a drag queen ban at Glasgow Pride events in 2015). And I thought about...even here in Cape Town, when we had the first gay pride, I was here. Johannesburg. It was drag queens right at the front. Screaming. Ranting. Raving. Which is...something that we had to do. But you have your little um...butch...gay boy, that would stand on the sidewalk, and say 'oh, they didn't have enough floats' or 'ooh, I don't really like drag queens.' But he's the one that will go down to...um, you know, the court, and have his first gay wedding with both boys in suits. That it's such a thing, you know! We didn't get dressed up in a dress. You know, it's very proudly

said. And...I hate seeing the term 'straight acting, straight looking.' If the term 'straight acting, straight looking' was so powerful, something that you, you aspire to be in life...go ahead and live that kind of a life."

(Lola Fine, Interview segment, 2015)

This prominence of “straight-acting” gay men, while a seemingly antithetical term, then complies to the social fact in such a way that it limits alternative individual behaviour (Durkheim 1982, 59). The ways in which alternative behaviour becomes limited is through social sanctioning and subtle ways of punishing seemingly “improper” masculinities through ridicule and shaming practices that are attached to stigmatised behaviours. When considering these “straight-acting, straight-looking” men that Lola refers to, they make use of a “carefully studied ‘regular guy’ appearance (that) might be considered a form of drag,” though these men “are anything but queens” (Hennen 2008, 4). “Straight-acting” then forms part of the mask of masculinity that is used to reject assumptions and stereotypes of gay men’s supposed effeminacy. That drag queens lean into these stereotypes highlights an anxiety that some men have – that they may be considered to be *like a woman*, and to be considered *less of a man*, or *not quite like a man*. Even this rejection of being a *queen* indicates anxiety around being perceived as somehow feminine. While popular culture has recently adopted the use of the word “queen” or “kween” to highlight strength, and oft-feminine/femme power, in heterodominant discourse, “queen” has been used as a pejorative term – expressing contempt for feminine expression in association with perceived masculinity and manly behaviours. As a result pejorative language is used as a means of coercion to behave as expected by the dominant social group (Durkheim 1982, 51) – though this coercion will not be so strongly felt, if the potential transgressor changes their behaviour of their own free will. That some gay men adopt the moniker and behaviours associated with this idea of being “straight-acting” and “straight-looking” is a response to social coercion and a potential means to attempt to live an authentic life while also fitting in with the status quo. This, however is not a unique response to the stigma and shame associated with some men’s desire to present as overtly queer, and overtly feminine. “Any talk of lionizing the drag queen as the brave revolutionary battling an oppressive regime would be overwhelmed by a frenzied rush to masculinity on the part of a majority of urban gay men...many gay men in the United States and

elsewhere in the industrialised world choose to distance themselves from the most extreme forms of gender trouble as soon as they had the political and economic means to do so” (Hennen 2008, 12-13). Homonormativity has been proven to be profitable – in South Africa, this conformity won’t necessarily cost you your job or a prospective partner, as these behaviours operate within an idealised structure of society. Presenting oneself outside of these norms, however comes at the risk of these protections. The mask of feminine performance in drag on one hand functions as a tool to demonstrate strength, though on the other hand, it also exposes the wearer to potential shame, ridicule, and at the most extreme – violence.

It is not a given that drag performance will result in ridicule and stigma – as this is not the case for much of drag performance and many drag performers. However, this is an issue that has required addressing due to the experiences related to some of my research and interviews. What is it about the performance of drag that opens the performance, and by extension, the performer – as Lola fears - at risk for being ridiculed? Perhaps we might be able to find an answer in the notion of embodiment, as it relates to societal expectation, and regulation. That Morticia LaValle considers herself to be a “comedy queen,” or a “clown” goes in direct violation of Lola Fine’s assertion that “drag queens are not clowns to be laughed at.” For Morticia, however, there may be something more valuable being able to elicit such responses, and potentially getting the audience to move over to her side through entertainment and engagement.

(Em)body(ment) Talk

Embodiment is linked to the ways in which individuals behave in relation to their physical bearing and physical practice. It is practiced in relation to a “public” gaze – which requires recognition of the performer’s embodiment of their character as a means for validation. In this research, this shares deep links with gender as it relates to social constructions of femininity and masculinity. Yet, embodiment in this research also explores “the social implications of dominant norms of gender embodiment, for those whose embodied inclinations do not fit comfortably with

such dichotomous models,” (Migdalek 2015, 1). On those grounds, how does embodiment function in relation to those who do not fit comfortably within gendered norms, as it relates to a binary understanding of gender in society, where masculine/male is placed on one end of the scale – along with a variety of expectations regarding bodily practice and ways of interacting in the world – and feminine/female on the other end of the scale? How then might we start to discuss embodiment, when in relation to the performance and presentation of drag? In order to engage with this question, I consider the notion of bodily technique and bodily practice, as it is discussed by Marcel Mauss as well as Jack Migdalek. For Migdalek, who invokes the work of Turner, as well as Goffman, embodiment can be defined as follows: “that which is manifest through the body and over which human beings have some form of corporeal government” (Migdalek 2015, 6). If we consider the drag performer as having corporeal government, we start to unpack the ways in which stigma and discomfort by those who subscribe to both heteronormative and homonormative ideals, arises, whether through discomfort, or through the types of laughter (that of the laughter that may be directed at the mere view of an individual in drag) that causes some drag performers, such as Lola Fine, to feel discomfort through its potentially discriminatory fashion. Thus, embodiment as a means for presenting oneself to the world, or as a method of/for performativity, is wrapped in the social regulation of what gendered bodies *ought* to do, or how they *ought* to appear, in relation to idealised social norms. The performance of drag, in particular, demonstrates that gendered bodies are not so rigidly tied to the perceived anatomy that writes their gender for them. Gender is not something that *just happens* to the body, rather it is something that the person that is housed in said body, does. And what they choose to do with their gendered performance, particularly when looking at staged performance, is play with it. Gender, in these performances, can be bent in order to fit the situation as needed and elicit a desired response from a viewing audience. Though, outside of these performance spaces, individuals who participate here, are subject to the social pressures of the world around them. I assert that drag performers build and create their own social worlds, with their own idealised ways of performing, and presenting. They are involved in creating their own *publics*, or public worlds. Warner’s intimation of a “public” informs this understanding of a social world, as “his concern is with the social body that is brought into being through a relationship with a media production and its reception” (Dourish 2010, 11). Those who perform drag at Crew Bar have created their own social world in some ways, by performing together on a

weekly basis, having drag meetings, and discussing their drag performance, as a group, in WhatsApp group conversation, where they critique and support each other's drag personas and performance. In doing so, they create a model for themselves, in which they engage with the ways in which drag is embodied as a group, and on an individual basis. For bell hooks, "appearing in drag...emerge(s) in a context where the notion of subjectivity is challenged, where identity is always perceived as capable of construction, invention, change" (hooks 1992, 145). In this context, drag performance characters are taken outside of the subjective imagination of those who perform, and become structured, and normative within the group. hooks continues:

"Within white supremacist, capitalist patriarchy, the experience of men dressing as women, appearing in drag, has always been regarded by the dominant heterosexist cultural gaze as a sign that one is symbolically crossing over from a realm of power into a realm of powerlessness...Just look at the many negative ways the word 'drag' is defined reconnects this label to an experience that is seen as burdensome, as retrograde, and regressive...To choose to appear as 'female' when one is 'male' is to always be constructed in the patriarchal mindset as a loss, as a choice worthy only of ridicule."
(hooks 1992, 146)

In hooks' understanding, one can infer that drag operates within a liminal space – indicating that the actor is neither masculine nor feminine and chooses to live between the margins of identification. The category becomes regressive due to the choice to step outside of the protection of gender normative behaviour. Lola's apprehension toward clownishness in the performance of drag becomes more clear, due to the obvious differences from the behaviours from a heteronormative, heterodominant norm. Earlier in this chapter I discussed Lola's discomfort with certain forms of laughter in relation to performance in drag. She expresses disdain at the dominant ideology that celebrates masculinity and masculine performance as a means to fitting in with the status quo of heteronormative society. Lola's does however lack experience in audience engagement in her performances, thus her experience of laughter is associated with the ridicule associated with homophobic bullying that may lead to potential danger for her, as a feminine identified, and expressing drag queen. While Lola's performance of drag is idealised as mainstream, and rooted in her ideas surrounding "female impersonation," performing an idealised feminine type, as someone who can be read and understood as being a

man leaves Lola open to embodying lack, due to the failure to actually become that which she wishes to represent on stage.

The performance of drag, is not a necessarily embodied performance of gender, in and of itself, yet it is a form of performance that invokes gendered ideals, related to (in this research project) to femininity. Yet, how is drag physically undertaken, and performed for a viewing audience? In order to attempt to answer this question, I would like to engage with the notion of bodily technique, and bodily practice, as discussed by Marcel Mauss, as well as Jack Migdalek. In order to take on bodily techniques, Mauss explains that what is learned – through movement and action – is done so through repetition and re-inscription (Mauss 1935, 273). Plainly said, individuals learn how to make use of their bodies by means of repeating the actions of those around them. The persona, and the adoption of the mask work in the same way – repeated action allows the persona/mask to be adopted seamlessly during performance. While there are supposed rules, or order regarding who is allowed to make use of their body in a particular way, performers demonstrate that these rules do not necessitate that they be followed in the desired way, when performers fashion movement in such a way that demonstrates the malleability of gendered performances. Migdalek asserts that for bodily technique, and bodily practice to take shape, one has to consider “the matter of the body – the flesh, shape, size, colour, and even adornment,” as it “is a prominent component of a performance that on impact on cultural notions of masculinity/femininity, it is the choreography and manner of performance” (Migdalek 2015, 5). The “matter of the body,” as Migdalek understands it will definitely affect the way in which a performance is able to be choreographed, however this will not dictate what the performance will be. To consider the flesh, shape, size, colour, and adornment, Roxy Le Roux provides insight into the ways in which this type of embodiment functions. As a moderately tall, stocky, “Coloured” gay man, who often displays thick stubble, and body hair that is not visible from stage, but is visible up close, he is able to transform himself from Thomas, to Roxy Le Roux, who embodies a playful, coy, bubbly femininity that is endearing to the audience. Outside of this expression, Thomas embodies an entirely antithetical presentation – one that is far more masculine than Roxy’s would suggest. Considering the performance of drag and neo-burlesque then, one has to consider the history, and the perception of the body that is performing. What is

expected from the performing body is tied to what is seen – this includes perceptions of gender, race, ability, and size, and what this implies regarding the ways in which the ways in the body is allowed to take up space in the world around them. Though these expectations change once the mask is adopted, as the mask itself is not directly connected to what is seen as physical matter. We see this in the first chapter, when Lola presents out of drag physically, yet psychically performs Lola the drag queen for a viewing audience in the room with her, and also for an imagined audience who will consume her characterised mask at home at a later stage. Migdalek’s discussion however leaves agency out of the conversation – just because a body is allowed to take up space and be perceived in a certain way, does not mean that the person housed in that body necessarily will do what is allowed or expected of them. He proclaims that “a bodily practice such as a simple walk can be perceived very differently according to the bodily technique or manner in which it is performed or executed” (Migdalek 2015, 5). Bodily technique is then related to the mask. The act of masking, in drag and neo-burlesque performance applies bodily technique to infer the presence of the character in performance. Reflecting on the work of Marcel Mauss, Migdalek explains techniques of the body in the following way, as “the ways in which from society to society men know how to use their bodies” (Mauss 1979, 97). But it is not just the ways in which individuals are able to use their bodies. What is assumed about a body, informs the expectations for how particular bodies are meant to act and present themselves to those who view them. When it comes to drag performance, the individuals who perform drag, there is a liminal character attached to the way the body is used, and how it ought to be used. The bodily techniques displayed in drag performances are curated and choreographed in a certain fashion that allude to a particular form of feminine performance and femininity, while the individuals who perform drag have been socialised to make use of masculine bodily techniques that are particular to their experience of race and socialisation, in their day-to-day lives. I wish to return to the performance and presentation of Morticia LaValle, as she presents a highly stylised visual performance of drag that is influenced by liminality in this sense, as is highlighted by Lola Fine’s opinion of Morticia’s way of performing drag.

For Morticia, the performance of her character combines bodily technique, physical adornment and styling, with staged performance. While Mark brings the character of Morticia into the

outside world, by wearing the costume of Morticia to social engagements where Morticia is not performing on stage, it is the physical transformation in which the character becomes asserted and is solidified. The physical transformation aids the psychic transformation. By taking the physically transformed persona of Morticia out into the world when not performing on stage, Mark is able to practice living in with the mask of Morticia. These opportunities allow Mark to build Morticia's social life and teaches him how to house Morticia's identity through the application of the mask that includes her make-up, and costume, but also allows him the opportunity to learn more about her personality and her interactions with the world around them. Morticia is always styled in a particular way and begins to apply the bodily technique that brings Morticia into the world outside. Mark uses his workplace, at the university, as the site from which he transforms himself into Morticia, as this is the venue in which he feels most comfortable, and views as a place that is free from judgement and prying eyes. While Mark's mother and sisters are supportive of his drag performance, his father voices his discomfort at viewing his son portray the feminine character of Morticia. This indicates that in his home, where he should be able to feel most at home, Morticia is not welcome. The university campus, where Mark works as an administrator, is where he can access his performance anonymously. While Mark tells me that at times he may be the target of a few dirty looks (and in one instance, loud laughter), while walking to his car, from the office on campus, presenting Morticia to the outside world, under the cover of darkness, there is a sense of safety, wearing the mask of Morticia at a venue that Mark has spent much of his adult life at. Morticia engages with the world differently from Mark. She walks with a different gait that is affected by the high heels worn when he transforms into Morticia, projecting a greater sense of confidence than that of the person behind the character. Morticia's physical adornments assist in the transformation of their individual gait. When considering the use of high heels, the wearer is made aware of the space that they take up in the world. Because of the way in which the shoe is designed, the wearer is forced to stand up straighter, and walk in such a way that connotes assertiveness. This assertiveness is translated as confidence when the wearer "owns" their shoes and their stride. Morticia refuses to wear a low heel and is generally dressed in form fitting attire – an appearance that calls for attention, and to be looked at. Morticia's makeup is also distinctive, as she always wears her face particularly pale, accented with dark makeup. Mark usually wears his light brown hair short, and frames his face with glasses, while Morticia always wears her hair long, and

straight, and does not wear Mark's glasses, as they are not part of her characterised persona. While Morticia and Mark are housed in the same body, they certainly are not the same person, or personality. They are two sides of the same coin. One is preoccupied with everyday social interactions, and the other operates by using the mask of fantasy – becoming something that exists in the mind as aspiration and is enacted on the world around them through the performance of the character who has license to say and do things the individual who performs would normally feel he is unable to do because of the pressures of the social reality in which he exists.

Liminal messages

Liminality is a concept coined by Belgian folklorist Arnold van Gennep, and applied in anthropology, often through the work of British anthropologist, Victor Turner, who is best known for his work regarding symbols and ritual. From the Latin word, *limen*, meaning threshold, the concept of liminality functions as a transition, which Turner expresses as being “betwixt and between” certain states. Thus, the liminal being is a form of in-between self – without deep analysis, it is already easy to see how the performance of drag could be described as occupying a liminal space, as the performance and expression is somehow caught between the performances of masculinity and overt femininity. This would be the easy route for positioning drag performance as occupying a liminal space. Preliminarily I can say that the gaze, working in combination with the mask, can also be understood as being the threshold, the site of transition, while the end performance becomes the margin. The former is required for the transformation toward the latter. Victor Turner describes liminal entities as “neither here nor there, they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arranged by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and intermediate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbolism in the many societies that ritualise social and cultural transitions” (Turner 1969, 95). The performance of drag exists in a space that challenges essentialism based on the sexed body and socialised gender roles. Drag performers perform gendered expressions that are neither

quite masculine nor quite feminine – rather they perform something else entirely, something worthy of its own genre – drag. Turner goes on to say that, “liminality is particularly conducive to play. Play is not to be restricted to games and jokes; it extends to the introduction of new forms of symbolic action, such as word-games or masks. In short, parts of liminality may be given over to experimental behaviour” (Turner 1977, 40). The use of the mask in performances of both drag and neo-burlesque then references the symbolic action of play in experiences of liminality. The mask, while useful for challenging the world around the performer, whether on stage or not, does not exist fully in either the world of the everyday nor the world of performance. The performer understands their needs best and embraces the mask that they may use to traverse both worlds. The mask exists in both worlds of fantasy and reality and at times combat the reality of the implications of the gaze with the protective fantasy of the mask.

Drag, Race



Above: Morticia LaValle performs Anaconda at Crew Bar (2015).

Morticia has her repertoire of songs that she performs live, though, most often she performs Anaconda, by Nicki Minaj, as well as How Many Licks, by Lil Kim. These two songs are significant to Morticia’s performance, as they display both her interest in sex and sexuality, as well as an interest in American Hip Hop – most performers of drag in Cape Town make use of international music in their performances and it is very rare for performances to include South African music. Though, in Cape Town, American hip hop music and culture became hugely popular and influential among Black and “Coloured” youth, from the 1980s until our current timeline in the 2010s. This influence was likely tied to the fact that performers appeared relatable to some South African youth, based on perceived socio-economic status, identifiability through race – even though in other parts of the world these artists were identified as Black, “Coloured”

people in South Africa often saw these artists as reflecting images of themselves. Because of where Morticia grew up, and where she completed school, she appears to be heavily influenced by both hip-hop culture, as well as what some would refer to as Cape “Coloured” culture – an idea that I don’t particularly agree with as this implies that there is a homogenous “Coloured” identity, culture, and experience. Earlier in this research Morticia refers to drag as being her “race,” when she is performing, though physically it is obvious that Morticia is performed by a young, white man. I consider this a sort of disconnection regarding race, as Morticia might identify with “Coloured” people in Cape Town, though this feeling of identifying with another race does not imply that one is actually able to become a member of a different race. She attempts to make this connection using specific music in her performances. Morticia’s choice of songs to solidify her drag repertoire point out to the audience that she feels somehow well-versed in crossing boundaries – the most obvious, based on the music, is the boundary of sexuality. Both these songs invoke a hyper-sexualised performance of exaggerated femininity in Morticia’s performance. She takes lengthy strides, drops down low, creating emphasis on her behind, directing the audience’s attentive gaze to look at it when she is on the stage. Further, she opens her mouth widely, holding the microphone in front of it, invoking an image and idea of fellatio, and attempts to flirt with members of the audience in Crew Bar, getting up close to male members of the audience, who laugh and cheer her on. Many drag performers in Cape Town make use of the same music to sing live to, or lip sync to, but their interpretations of these songs differ. Drag performer Mary Scary also performs Nicki Minaj’s Anaconda live, to an audience, however, her approach and appearance differ vastly to that of Morticia LaValle’s. Mary Scary is tall, broad shouldered, wears her natural facial hair, prominently displays chest hair, and chest tattoos in low cut dresses that are short in length, displaying strong, hairy legs through ripped fishnet stockings. Mary Scary also interacts with her audience during her performance of Anaconda, yet, the audience response in Beefcakes, where she performs, is quite different to that of Morticia’s. The audience makeup of Beefcakes is often quite different to Crew Bar, that is a nightclub that is largely frequented by a somewhat mixed crowd of middle-class LGB (the emphasis on the G is intentional) people, while Beefcakes is a restaurant, where the audience is largely composed of people who are white, middle class, and heterosexual. On most nights, there is at least one bachelorette party taking place there. When Mary Scary slides a large hand onto the shoulder of a male patron, he visibly retracts his body, resembling a tortoise retracting into its

shell, laughing and grimacing at the same time, as she raps the lyrics: “my anaconda don’t want none, unless you’ve got buns hon” – an allusion of sexual contact between the two parties; the anaconda being the initiator’s penis; and the buns being the receptive parties’ buttocks. Using rap and hip-hop music, these performers mirror the perception of women of colour as hyper-sexualised beings in media and society. The ways in which both Mary Scary and Morticia make use of their bodies, and their interactions with the audience indicate both sexual availability and sexual assertiveness. In the media, these portrayals have been normalised with regards to famous women of colour. I use the term *women of colour* (WoC) in this instance to include Black women, “Coloured” women, and other ethnically diverse groups of women – as much of the media representation of these women focus on their appeal as holding some sort of “exotic” erotic potential. Whatever it is that makes them exotic, is what makes them appear “other” and open for objectification, making assumptions about their sexuality as being coloured by hyper-sexuality. Women of colour, as well as drag queens who are people of colour - are made other. That distance allows their images and the expectations of their performance to be easily consumable. The distance between the white man performing drag, and the hyper-sexualised image of the woman of colour in this instance asserts a form of objectification – and once this image is made object it becomes something that is available for their consumption, and to be used in their performances. The audience reaction to white men, performing hyper-femininely, and hyper-sexually inspires feelings of discomfort for some in the audience, as the distance between expectation and the reality are incongruous. This, type of reaction does however appear to be more likely and expected in spaces where there might be white heterosexual men in the audience, such as Beefcakes, mentioned above.

The reaction of visible discomfort, however is not unique to the South African context. Drag audiences in other cities and countries display these reactions of shock and potential rejection too. I became interested in seeing the ways in which drag performance can take a different form in places outside South Africa. I felt curious about ways in which they might be the same too. Lola, at times, travels internationally, to Thailand to perform drag at entertainment establishments there, thus, when I found myself traveling to Thailand during this research, I felt it would be useful to seek out drag performances there too, to understand drag’s influence in

relation to heteronormative masculine posturing. Both Thailand and Cape Town possess similarities in drag culture being used as a tourist attraction, though Cape Town differs due to its marketing as a “gay capital”. Performances of drag in Thailand are often marketed as “ladyboy” shows— a term that is used colloquially in Thailand, but with which I feel some discomfort using, as it is often used as a slur directed toward transgender women. Lola unfortunately would not be performing in Thailand during my brief visit there. I had heard from other travellers that the drag performances at Anusarn Night Market in Chiang Mai were among the best in the country, thus I made sure to attend one of their performances. Upon arriving at the busy night market, I spot the tent and bar where the performances would be taking place, as the performers were standing outside, attempting to lure potential audience members to watch the next show, which would take place at 8:30pm that evening. Upon purchasing my ticket, I approach two performers, asking them if they can ask their colleagues if I might be able to take photos and potentially write about their performances. After some discussion, they agree, though they do ask me to tip each performer – a common practice in Thailand, as drag performers charge attendees to take selfies with them after the show. I agree to their terms and return 30 minutes later to attend their show. During a performance of Rihanna’s “S&M” two performers select a male audience member and lead him to a chair on the stage, where they continue their lip-synched performance while giving the audience member a lap dance. At first, he appears hesitant to join them, and does not want to get up from his seat. Eventually he gets up, after the performer has tugged on his hand and arm and follows them as they lead him to the stage. Once on the stage, and the performers proceed to involve him in the performance, he grimaces, covers his face, and removes his hands swiftly after the performer takes a seat on his lap, and takes his hands and puts them on her hips.







The three images above are photographs that I took with the performers' permission at Anusarn Night Market in Chiang Mai during 2016. With the three examples in the images above, I wish to continue the discussion on liminality in drag, hyper-sexualised feminine performance in drag, as it relates to the music that is used, media imagery relating to performances and perceptions of women of colour in the media and the embodiment thereof in relation to drag performance. In the following sections I will also explore audience participation, and reaction, in relation to the re-inscription of heteronormative ideals and idealised behaviour, in relation to masculine and feminine performance, as well as the notion of stigma and shame as it relates to social control and expectation of seemingly gendered bodies, as they appear.

Brown bodies on stage, brown bodies on the magazine's page

"The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intensive, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling. Within commodity culture, ethnicity becomes spice, seasoning that can liven up the dull dish that is mainstream white culture. Cultural taboos around sexuality and desire are transgressive and made explicit as the media bombards folks with a message of difference no longer based on the white supremacist assumption that 'blondes have more fun'."

(hooks 1992, 21)

I am seated in the waiting room of my dentist's office, leafing through an old copy of GQ magazine, and eventually settle on an "article" and photo series of Rihanna, titled "Obsession of the Year." She is crouched down wearing panties and a pair of black sneakers, the side of her arm hides her breasts. I flip to the next page, and there she is again, lying face down on a brown leather couch, wearing only a pair of black panties. As I flip through the magazine, looking at the images on display, her butt stares up at me from the page, but not her face. I know that I am leafing through the pages of a men's magazine, but the male gaze is palpable. In this case it is not just the male gaze, but the racialised male gaze that dictates the ways in which the viewer will consume her image. Rihanna's sexual availability for the consumer is thrust onto the page, and into the public space. hooks' assertion of otherness in relation to women of colour's representations in the media posit that those who possess some modicum of racial ambiguity are

used in media as form of titillation for the viewing audience. They are different from the normative whiteness in the media, but they are not *that* different. They are just “exotic” enough to appear exciting, though not so “exotic” so as to result in disassociation from their physical beauty. Their beauty occupies a liminal space, one that makes experimentation seem possible – mainstream white audiences are thus allowed to see bi-racial and racially ambiguous as worthy of their energy and attention. Pop singer Rihanna provides a perfect example for this, as she is a light skinned black woman who presents a style beauty that is comparable to European beauty standards – she thus passes as an example of hooks’ racial ambiguity that is used to titillate and is objectified for her “exotic” look. This concept allows for a hyper sexualisation of their images, in the idea that “bi-racial women appear in sexualised images” (hooks 1992, 72). Media representations of women of colour bleed into drag interpretations of women of colour, as highly sexualised performances, that position women of colour as sexually available. This is visible in films, such as *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar*, where the actor, John Leguizamo’s character, Chi-Chi Rodriguez is viewed by some members of the town that they get stranded in, as the ultimate representation of sexiness, invoking both the idea of the “Latin lover,” as well as the brown woman as a “buxom babe,” who is sexually available.

These representations of perceived women of colour in film and other media sources plays into “the enduring stereotype that constructs black women as hyper-sexual beings” that in some ways plays the woman of colour against the “good girl” trope, ascribed to white, Christian, “puritan” femininity, where women’s “sexuality is not exposed in the public space” (Rahier 2016, 38-39). Shirley Anne Tate explains this form of objectification of women of colour – in the context of this research referring to both black and coloured women - as, “the history of the objectified black body is linked to the history of normative whiteness” (Tate 2013). That is not to say that white feminine performance is not and cannot be highly, or hyper-sexualised. It would however be tone-deaf to deny that there is a history of interpretation of Black women’s’ sexuality that is viewed as performatively hyper-sexualised in a mass media culture where “sex sells”, and if women of colour’s hyper-sexualised images lead to objectification, then they and their images are made easily consumable by being made object. Evelyn Hammonds argues that the sexuality of black women is constructed as “a binary opposition to that of white women: it is reduced,

simultaneously invisible, visible (exposed), hyper-visible, and pathologized in dominant discourses” (Hammonds 1999, 93). Black women’s sexuality then becomes easily consumable, because they are positioned in the role of *an other*. If whiteness functions as a social fact, and the sexuality of white women is tied to modesty as a means to demonstrate that they are acting as “good,” and “innocent,” at least in the representation that is available in public space, then the opposite of that is of the “bad girl,” who is freely sexually available and open to shaming through pathologizing the ways in which their sexuality is interpreted. These interpretations then become re-inscribed through the act of performance of black women’s sexualities in a certain manner, a manner that is focused on overt sexual performance.

Using mimesis as a tool, the performer acts out a parody by copying the character and the power of the original, though a copy is never really as effective as the real thing (Taussig 1993, xiii). When the drag performers who have participated in this research project perform reinterpretations of the music of women of colour, they do not veer too far from the performance of the brown woman as sexual/sexualised in the somewhat public space of the nightclub/barroom stage. While liminality functions as a “tool of potentiality” (Turner 1979, 466), meaning that it is used in experimentation, it is clear that drag performers use this liminal space to re-inscribe, and conform to the heterodominant ideas around some women’s sexuality. Mainstream drag performance is not producing subversive material from their time in the limen. Rather, to assimilate in the hyper-sexual environment of the nightclub, performers like Morticia lean into the sexuality of the space. Their interactions with the audience become far more overtly sexual, as they flirt with male audience members, sit on their laps, and touch them (sometimes unwantedly so), and even make use of the microphone as a tool to mimic the act of fellatio. Earlier, when describing Morticia’s performance, her poses and movements direct the audience’s attention to the movement of her hips, and the shape of her buttocks, mirroring the ways in which women of colour are portrayed in magazines and music videos. There is an importance in approaching the performance of drag from the perspective of race, and class categories, as we may consider it to be “not merely a gendered performance, drag also performs race, class, ethnicity, and all of the other axes around which identity is structured” (Rhyne 2004, 187). The performance of drag possesses the ability to re-inscribe mass media portrayals and

representations of prescribed femininity and performative womanhood. Drag informs us of the ways in which mass media representations regarding certain forms of femininity and womanhood may be absorbed and consumed. While Lola, as a person of colour, attempts to approach drag performance as performance that, while fun, also requires a certain level of respect to the performer, their appearance, and performance, performers such as Morticia and Mary Scary seemingly point drag in another direction – one that parodies this idea of respectability in lieu of a felicitious spectacle that oversexualises the inferred version of the persona and her performative “hip hop sensibilities.” This is indicative of the ways in which the performer understands and translates their reading of hyper-feminine, hyper-sexualised images of women of colour in the media. Like the ways in which comedians make use of how they hear an accent in order to portray a parodic impression, so do performers interpret certain behaviours and images in their understanding to create an impression thereof that is to be consumed by a captive audience, who may or may not accept what is being translated for them.

For heterosexual cisgender men in drag audiences, who sometimes find themselves as the target of the drag queen’s attention during the performance, there is often a discomfort with the interaction, and they do not fully allow themselves to be titillated by the interaction, and the performance. There are social regulations in place regarding the manner in which men may interact with one another, even if one of the parties appears femininely. “Drag ‘plays upon the distinction between the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed’ noting ‘three contingent dimensions of significant corporeality’ anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance.” (Carr 2013, 30). This incongruence has the ability to bolster discomfort among some who make up the viewing audience, and also possesses the potential to lead to the ascription of social stigma against the transgressive provocateur who thwarts gendered norms in their performance. The discomfort, and nervous laughter that sometimes accompanies heterosexual cisgender men’s interactions with drag performers invokes Bakhtin’s response to the carnivalesque space, that laughter is a response to fear, that the body that differs from the “official order” of heteronormative, cisgender ideals disrupts the norms of the “official order” and takes on the character of the grotesque, here meaning, that which is comically distorted. (Taylor 1995, 21). The act of drag performance then makes it all the more obvious that the body

is a site, in the act of becoming. This disrupts normative ideals of gender essentialism in gendered performance.

Mediated Masculinities

Erving Goffman describes social regulations and the mediation of social behaviours by stating that, “society establishes the means of categorizing persons and the complement of attributes felt to be ordinary and natural for members of these categories,” and that “social settings establish the categories of persons likely to be encountered there. The routines of social intercourse in established settings allows us to deal with anticipated others without special attention or thought” (Goffman 1990, 11-12). Where drag is concerned – participants in this research, who at the time of data collection expressly state that they are masculine identified/men who perform their drag characters - there is an incongruence for heteronormative societal expectations where the anticipation of presentation and performance are concerned. The men who perform as drag queens in this research are expected to perform certain masculine ideals, yet they perform and present themselves as feminine entities on stage, and in performance spaces. This starts to explain the discomfort that some individuals who buy into heteronormative idealised performance might express when being confronted with the drag performer, who presents one thing, *but is expected to be another*. My experience of this form of discomfort has been discussed in the introduction of this research paper. In my youth, I subscribed to heteronormative and homonormative ideals surrounding gender and sexuality. Deviation from this seemed strange to me, and I attached a stigma to these “deviant” bodies, because I did not want to be associated with *queers like that*. I pushed myself far away from that behaviour, I felt a deep sense of shame, because ultimately, I too was a *queer like that*. As far as I was aware at the time, *queers like that* were rejected by society, and faced a great deal of discrimination – this is true too -I was unable to embrace difference at the time because I did not understand it. For the male audience members who buy into heteronormative ideals, and express discomfort during the drag performance, we

can say that they do so because, the gendered norms that they expect to be performed by bodies that are sexed in a certain way, in relation to their appearance becomes less of an expectation, and more of a demand (Goffman 1990, 12). Those who are sexed as male, should perform as they – the cisgender, often heterosexual male in the audience – do. They express shame and impart stigma against those who appear incongruent in the act of expressing of the dominant heteronormative and cisnormative ideals regarding gender. To perform in drag is to appear like a woman, and appearing somehow like a woman, indicates a form of failure and weakness. The outer covering of a person is thus expected to reveal information about what is underneath those outer coverings– when this is incongruent to the expectation, some react in shock and attach a stigma to those who differ from their expectations. Yet it is apparent that the outer coverings, in the form of clothing, cover the genitals, yet infer the gender, or at very least the expectations of gender – though the ways in which bodies can be covered indicate that there is variety. What is expected is not all that there is, or ever will be. The outer coverings can be used to portray a variety of gender expressions and can be used in a playful manner. Just as clothing can be altered, so can the gender category, and in the ways in which people happen to clothing, by filling out their sleeves and bodies, so people happen to gender too, filling out what they mean in particular contexts. This is possible and plausible, though many in society aim to enact rigid rules surrounding gender expectation. Though the practice of playing with gender expectations and rules indicate that these rules are indeed not so rigid after all, and are able to be bent, and fashioned into something new that works for the individual making use of them in that moment. In terms of the social regulations, the category of a femininely presenting individual on stage, who interacts with the audience member may be in contravention to the anticipation and normative expectation that the person on stage who ticks all the “feminine boxes” ought to be a cisgender woman. When this is not the case, there may be outrage and even grimaced revulsion and retraction on the part of some of the audience members. There is also the idea that audience members who react in this fashion may also find themselves in a “gay panic.” This could happen while viewing a femininely presented and performing individual, who does not meet his expectations regarding bodily and gendered presentation. It is stigmatising to go against heteronormative prescriptions of bodily and gendered performance. This is a result of the woman’s body being a site of fantasy, ruse, and illusion, her costuming created to elicit sexualised responses rather than provide detailed information about physical body (Bordo 1999,

26). The audience member who feels discomfort viewing the drag performer/performance, does so due to a projection of sexual fantasy on the femininely shaped, femininely dressed individual whose identity outside of the performance differs from what they present on stage.

Heteronormative expectations place the performance of drag in the realm of stigmatised behaviour, and purport that shame should be asserted upon these individuals for not fitting into their perceived neat little categorical boxes. Their response to this may be expressed in violent laughter, or internalised shame for being “duped” into expressing interest or attraction to those whom society tells them not to be attracted to. This can result in the exertion of violence against those who they feel have “duped” them, and social rejection of those who do not conform to the regulatory ideal. This sense of shame can become internalised, or exerted on drag performers by the following understanding, as “shame becomes a central possibility, arising from the individual’s perception of one of his own attributes as being a defiling thing to possess, and one he can readily see himself as not possessing” (Goffman 1990, 18), further, “for many people the antiquity of sexual norms is a reason to obey them” (Warner 1999, 6). Sexuality and sexual behaviour in this context then, is assumed to follow a specific heteronormative script. Homosexuality already directly opposes this heteronormative script and is met with an exertion of shame placed upon the sexual lives of those who are not heterosexual.

One Saturday afternoon, after an interview, Mark and I are seated in his on-campus office – a large, dimly lit space that is shared with other people who are away from work for the weekend. He has made us each a cup of coffee, and we are sharing a plastic tray of slightly stale supermarket donuts. He stares at his phone, periodically showing me the men who he finds attractive on Grindr – a gay dating/hook-up smartphone application – who he is considering messaging. Still staring at his phone, he tells me that, “I like to take control of the situation, I like to top, I like to be the man.” Inferring that the one who bottoms does not possess control over the situation and is thus not considered to be “the man.” In this interaction, I become aware of the ways in which my physical presence mediates interactions in some ways, as I present as physically more masculine. My presentation of a more masculine identity could be read as disruptive, and further results in the need to prove performatively masculine identity ideals to

me. Mark is not the first drag performer who has offered up this information to me without any prior questioning on the subject. There is shame attached to certain sexual roles. In this context, while gendered performance ideals are subverted, sex roles appear to be normative, where “tops,” refer to the sexual roles of assertive/dominant vs the passive/submissive role of the “bottoms”. Mark’s assertion that he has to be “the man” highlights the stigma attached to being a receptive sexual partner. Some of the drag performers at Crew Bar openly mock one of the other performers for being a “bottom”. Shame and stigma as attached to bottoming is not unique to drag performers nor is it unique to the South African context. Susan Bordo asserts that “in many Latin cultures (as well as other cultural contexts, and in South Africa, where machismo is asserted and celebrated) it’s not disgraceful to sleep with other men, so long as one is *active* (or *machista*) – the penetrator rather than the penetratee. To be *pasivo*, on the other hand is socially stigmatised,” as “these hierarchies date back to the ancient Greeks, who believe that passivity, receptivity, penetrability were the marks of inferior feminine being” (Bordo 1999, 190). While drag performers do not interpret the appearance of femininity as being inferior, or shame-inducing, being perceived as less of the man that they identify themselves as being is shameful. In these instances, the projection and prescriptions of heteronormative and heterosexist femininity and masculinity are re-inscribed through social control and mediation, and through the assertion that certain behaviours are deemed too feminine in nature. In the appearance of drag to those who buy into heteronormative ideals, masculine subjectivity disappears in a similar way that the masculine nature towards possessiveness disappears when related to passive sexual roles are deemed as too feminine. The passive sexual role somehow makes one appear to be *more* gay. Cheryl Potgieter’s work with coloured gay hairdressers confirms this bias, where the receptive/passive partners are positioned as *girls/meisies* and as gay, where the insertive/active partners are constructed as straight, and as “*butch*” – a real man (Potgieter 2006). Even in drag, one is unable to escape from internalised homophobia and the stigma attached to being gay or being perceived as being effeminate.

Pageant Beauty, Stage Beauty

I've rushed to reach the Baxter theatre after struggling to find parking. I need to make it in time to meet Morticia as she has my ticket to the 2015 showing of the annual Miss Gay Western Cape pageant, a drag pageant where most of the participants and performers are people of colour, from Cape Town and the surrounding areas. This is one of the most important drag events of the year, and is jointly organised by Manila von Teez's manager. Every year, the best of the best drag performers put on their best performances for the sold-out event. These performances take place between pageant breaks during which contestants change into the costumes and prepare for the next round of competition. Finally, I reach the theatre. I reach for my phone to check if Morticia has messaged me. She has, she tells me that she is standing in the area close to the bar, waiting for my arrival. I look around the room, but it takes me quite some time to find her, as there are many people who have come out to support the night's event in their best drag attire. Finally, I spot her. She is wearing a long, straight, black wig, and a form fitting black dress.



Morticia, outside the Baxter theatre as we wait to be called inside to attend Miss Gay Western Cape (2015).

Some time passes as we have a conversation. Eventually, an announcement is made over the faint speakers in the theatre. I can barely hear it over the chatter of the hundreds of people in the room who are all waiting for the commencement of the pageant. It is the 5minute call before they will close the doors to the theatre hall. Morticia and I head over to the doors of the theatre to find our seats. We find our seats, and on each one is a black canvas bag that displays the words “Pink Tongue.” It would appear that the bags have been sponsored by the free LGBTQ newspaper, the “Pink Tongue,” and inside we each find a copy of the newspaper, a local gay magazine, a toothbrush, and a safe sex package containing condoms, lubricant, and a safer sex guide. The pageant is about to begin, and the hosts come forward to introduce themselves and to announce that the pageant is about to begin. Loud music starts to play from the auditorium’s speakers as all the contestants for the evening bound onto the stage, to perform a choreographed group dance.



A group dance performance at Miss Gay Western Cape (2015).

The group dance performance ends, and the hosts come forward once more. This time, one of the hosts is dressed in an elaborate costume, and the other host attempts to entertain the audience by making jokes in a mix of English and Afrikaans, using slang that is associated with “Cape coloured” people. A loud voice shouts something about the host’s breasts, and the host tells the disruptive woman that she is welcome to come up to the stage to touch them, as she insists that they are real. Once this interlude passes, and the woman from the audience has fulfilled the hosts’ request, they introduce each judge for the evening, and then Manila von Teez as the next performer. She is dressed in a large costume that is reminiscent of the Autobots in Transformers, as she is carried out by two large, muscular men. Manila’s petite, but commanding frame is thus flanked by large, imposing images of muscular masculinity in the presence of her backup dancers, as well as the presence of the images of the Transformers, which has become representative of jocular masculine representation in film. Manila’s feminine appearance here becomes heightened by the inclusion of these elements. As the song starts, she slowly starts to

shed her Transformer costume, and backup dancers arrive at the stage, to accompany her choreographed performance. It is not lost on me that Manila's performance as a Transformer plays with and pays homage to the transformation that she undertakes to become Manila von Teez. There is an obvious relation to liminality here, as Manila occupies a space between man and woman in drag, and between human and machine in this specific performance – in fact she becomes physically transformed on stage in this performance, highlighting her liminal on stage for the viewing audience.





Above: a woman grabs one of the hosts' breasts (2015).

Below: Manila von Teez performs at Miss Gay Western Cape (2015)





After Manila’s performance, it is time for the competitive portion of the pageant to begin. Cape Town has a long-running history of drag pageantry, particularly taking place in coloured communities, often taking place in school and community halls. The pageants generally follow the same pattern, and are modelled on traditional televised beauty pageants, as, in essence, these drag pageants also serve as beauty pageants as most pageants do. Ochoa writes that “beauty pageants work as a form of glamour which creates a platform on which many kinds of women and gay men can practice temporary authority” (Ochoa 2014, 104-105). At Miss Gay Western Cape, this authority takes the form of contestants’ ability to demonstrate their adeptness in the transformation of feminine beauty, and their ability to command the crowd and get them on “their side,” to demonstrate to the judges that they are the most convincing queen, worthy of the title of “Queen” of the year. Those who are able to most convincingly portray feminine ideas of beauty are usually most successful. For Ochoa, “it could be argued that ridiculing people sexed male at birth when they fail to accomplish femininity re-inscribes hegemonic notions of femininity, but this would not account for the social legibility and (marginal) legitimacy centred

on successful participants” (Ochoa 2014, 108-109). While participants at Miss Gay Western Cape are not ridiculed for a failure to perform femininity in particular ways, a lack of audience response, and near silence can be devastating to the participant who is at centre stage at that time. While most participants in pageants such as Miss Gay Western Cape adopt physical fashions that can be interpreted as aspiring to white forms of femininity – drawing inspiration from famous women in the media, such as Kim Kardashian, and a variety of beauty queens who participate in pageants such as Miss South Africa, Miss World, and Miss Universe, it is important to note that when white contestants enter drag pageants that are dominated by people of colour, they fail to place in any position – rarely even making it into the top ten, or top five contestants. So, it could be understood that successfully performing the aspirational form of femininity is more important and influential than simply being white in this context.

Pageants, such as Miss Gay Western Cape follow the script of more well-known pageants. First, all the contestants appear on stage in their swimwear, following this, they take to the stage in their theme wear (based on the theme of each edition of Miss Gay Western Cape), after this all contestants will gather on stage in their finest evening attire for the announcement of the top 5 contestants, who will then field questions from the judges. After the judges’ deliberation, and another performance, the top three queens are then announced in their ascending order to the crown.



Above: Miss Gay Western Cape pageant contestants showing off their competition swimwear. The Gay Flag of South Africa, displayed in the background (2015).

Below: A contestant shows off her fantasy theme wear (2015).





Above: The top 5 contestants are announced in their evening wear (2015).

Below: Miss Gay Western Cape 2015 is crowned. She is greeted by the previous year's winner as well as a fellow contestant (2015).



The performance of femininity that is presented during drag pageants relies heavily, and is informed by conventional beauty standards, where physical attractiveness is a prized commodity.

“Physical attractiveness dominates the plethora of dimensions that define the appearance of a person. It impacts every individual throughout every community...across the world. All people inherit and alter their physical attractiveness, and complex interdependent factors, physical and non-physical, determine physical attractiveness. Hidden and not-so-hidden values drive thoughts and actions that, when unchecked, produce significant consequences and realities whereby higher physical attractiveness is overwhelmingly beneficial and lower physical attractiveness is overwhelmingly detrimental.” (Patzer 2006, 17)

Pageantry, whether in drag or not, highlights social constructions of physical attractiveness. At Miss Gay Western Cape, the audience tends to cheer the loudest for the contestants who appear to be the most attractive, physically and stereotypically femininely so. What is read as attractive can be interpreted as socially mandated through media representations of what individuals *ought* to find attractive in femininely performed presentation., as “ drag pageant *gurls* are typically defined as “female impersonators,” who model themselves (or seek to model themselves) on standards of beauty in contexts such as Miss World, and Miss Universe” (Matthyse 2017, 178). Where pageantry is concerned, visual cues tell the story of what the individual who presents themselves for surveillance and judgement wishes to portray, as well as the effort (physical, monetary, creatively) that each individual has employed to get to that moment, on stage, as “few features about a person are as abundantly readily accessible as physical attractiveness, which accounts for a sizeable portion of why people consistently use physical attractiveness as an informational cue” (Patzer 2006, 26). Considering drag pageantry in contrast to some intimations of staged drag performance, drag pageantry says, “look how beautiful I can present myself, within the bounds of standardized socially mandated ideas of feminine beauty”, while drag performance can make the statement, “look how adept I am at performing drag as a drag performer”. The beauty ideals in presentation differ vastly between pageant drag, and staged drag performance. While the makeup and costuming used in pageant drag is used in such a manner that the illusion of womanly beauty is projected, the makeup and costuming used in drag performance is directed towards the assertion that the individual is performing drag. While some drag performers may appear to successfully apply feminine beauty ideals, their use of makeup

and costuming is still far harsher and does not attempt to appear as “natural,” and/or necessarily “womanly.” The performative illusion of drag presentation allows the practitioners thereof to get away with far more risqué uses of makeup, dress, and physical/bodily movement. Stage performers are thus allowed to toe the line between socially accepted behaviour for women, and the performance on stage that affords them the attention of those who view them on stage, essentially providing a platform for performances that take place in the realm of fantasy, and fantasized performativity.

Naomi Wolf’s asserts that “beauty is a currency system, like the gold standard” (Wolf 2002, 12), what does this assert about those drag performers who fail at perceived beauty standards, and reject these purported beauty standards? What is their currency? The failure to perform and present beauty standards effectively functions within a capitalist society that Jack Halberstam describes as a means “to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline, and so forms a critique” (Halberstam 2011, 88). For those, such as Morticia LaValle, and Mary Scary, it would appear that their currency would be the ability to entertain, and to elicit laughter from their audiences. Yet, as indicated in the beginning of this chapter, relating to Lola Fine’s assertion that drag queens aren’t clowns to be laughed at, exactly what are they laughing at? Are they laughing because they are being entertained? Or is their laughter tied to something far more sinister, coming from a place of fear and revulsion? In some ways, we could understand this ability to elicit laughter as a means of critiquing dominant heteronormative ideals towards the ways in which femininely presenting and performing individuals are designated to perform and present appropriately within the standards of mass media representations of the ways in which they are meant to perform and present themselves appropriately. Performance in this case is “twice-behaved behaviour,” to quote Richard Schechner’s understanding of performance. Here, normative standards of behaviour and presentation are considered, and made malleable into a new sort of thing, in order to critique socially mandated behaviour through a carefully constructed performance. Drag can then be considered to be twice-performed performance. Drag is able to function on a variety of levels, in one way, drag performance indicates a re-inscription of dominant, socially mediated ideals related to masculine and feminine behaviours and appearances. Drag performance also possesses the ability to destabilize the dominant ideals of

the status quo, thereby challenging individuals who buy into dominant gendered ideals regarding the behaviour, presentation, and performance of gendered individuals to think differently about how they are deemed to perform and present themselves appropriately in a society that mediates these behaviours. Drag performance is thus able to open a line of questioning that asks whether or not socially mandated behaviour, with regards to the genres of gender and sexuality, ought to be as it is prescribed.

This chapter touches on a number of themes, that of feminine performance, hyperfeminine expression, liminality, embodiment, and stigma. These themes are used to demonstrate the effect that the gaze, and ensuing judgments based on this gaze may have when enacted upon the drag performer. Early on in this chapter I interrogate the concepts of shame and stigma as they present in relation to the performance and presence of drag, using Lola's experience regarding ridicule, and how her aspiration toward perfection in her feminine performance informs the way in which she combats feelings of shame and vulnerability as someone who is femininely identified and performing in Cape Town. In this chapter, I argue that the stigma attached to these kinds of feminine performance affect the ability of certain audience members to enjoy the performances on stage and the audience interaction – masculine prescriptions interrupt the ability to be completely taken in by the performance. The performance of drag occupies a liminal space, I argue, in this chapter, I attempt to walk the reader through the worlds of fantasy and reality as occupied by the performer. Lastly, in this chapter I unpack the idea of beauty, related to drag performance, and in particular, during the performance of pageantry. I demonstrate that the type of drag that is performed on stage for an audience seeking entertainment, and the type of drag performed at pageants are markedly different. The former relies on a mask that requires recognition of a performance, while the latter gains authentication through success and recognition for being able to adequately perform beauty ideals. Beauty ideals are not essential to the performance of drag, as drag does not necessarily refer to ideas of womanhood – instead the performance of drag is an allusion toward the performance of excess in some way – and this excess can get the performer into trouble in some situations as the gaze becomes public, though who does the looking in public gazing may not always react in the desired way.

Chapter 5 – Performing the Feminine Mask at the Rouge Revue

After building the worlds of performance for drag and neo-burlesque performers and introducing the themes of the gaze as well as the mask, it is my aim with the final two chapters of this research to ultimately understand the ways in which the gaze might authenticate the content provided by the mask. I am interested in a number of questions: how do we see?; What way do we as an audience look at performing bodies as things?; and, what is the effect that this has on the expectation of gendered bodies performing a gender expression? Performers appear to make use of a form of gender parody to illustrate to the audience that there is a potentially unequal/superior status during the performance. What does this mean for gender parity on and off stage? Do we as audience and performers look at each other equally?

The mask, in this research is heavily influenced by Carl Jung's concept of *persona*. The Latin term, *persona* refers to the mask of an actor, which Jung suggests actors made use of in order to indicate the role that they were playing at a point in time (Jung 1966, 216). Jung goes on to say that the mask is an element of the "collective psyche, a mask that *feigns individuality*, making others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks" (Jung 1966, 216). Following this way of understanding the mask, I conceive of the feminine mask as a response to neo-burlesque performance. Due to the collective identity associated with performance troupes, I attempt to uncover the collective psyche of the feminine mask in a group performance setting and posit that supposed mask of the inner self, of individual intent has no place in these performances, that rather it is up to the values within the group that dictate what the feminine mask may look like and how it may function.

Showtime at the *Rouge Revue* – a peak behind the glittered veil



Glitter floats through the air at a neo-burlesque performance at Truth as a precursor to the fantastical, glamorous events that the night's performances hold.

The Rouge Revue was established in 2010 by Lady Magnolia/Lisa³⁶, who started learning and performing neo-burlesque with the troupe, Black Orchid Burlesque. After leaving Black Orchid Burlesque, Lisa decided to teach belly dancing, and neo-burlesque on a full-time basis from her home studio that is situated in Salt River, an area that is a few minutes' drive from Cape Town's city centre. Salt River is situated next to Woodstock in Cape Town – these areas are fast seeing the effects of gentrification upon the working-class residents. Salt River has long been a working-class community that housed many “Coloured” people, as well as a large Muslim

³⁶ Pseudonym

community. Thus, Lady Magnolia's presence as a white woman teaching belly dancing, a traditionally Middle Eastern dance form, to other middle class white women entering the area, in a space that is unaffordable for the residents of the area, is not lost on me.

The Rouge Revue started with a handful of students and has grown to 27 performing members at the end of 2016. Lady Magnolia teaches neo-burlesque technique and choreography to her students in the evenings on weeknights, taking a break from classes, only at the end of each year. She and her partner – who performs duties as the sound engineer and DJ at neo-burlesque events and performances – produce a student showcase every 3 months, where members of The Rouge Revue (beginner, intermediate, and professional troupe) participate in solo and group performances. This allows students to build an idea of what a neo-burlesque performance should look like. Two or three times a year they also produce shows where the professional troupe, *The Rouettes* perform. In August of 2015, they also produced the first annual Grand Burlesque Exhibition, at the Hope Street Market hall, where most neo-burlesque performers in Cape Town were invited to perform, raising funds from the profits for Rape Crisis, a non-profit organisation that is based in Cape Town. The space that Lisa provides at the Rouge Revue functions as a teaching and learning environment, where the performance technique of neo-burlesque and choreography is taught. It also functions as a space for the construction of a community of performers. Often troupe members and students will socialise in her home/studio after classes have ended and will build relationships with one another outside of the classes and showcases. Lady Magnolia fulfils the role of teacher, leader, and manager for members of The Rouge Revue. She says, “I feel that there's great value in being part of a troupe, because...not everybody is a natural leader. Not everybody has the time, energy, inclination, to do the groundwork, required to...you know like...so I feel like my students...and my troupe have...like, they're, they're in a really great situation, because I do the work, to supply a relatively constant stream of performance opportunity for them.” While some of her students view her as a role model in their burlesque training and performance, Lady Magnolia views her position as the leader of a troupe as a benefit to her students and troupe members, as a means for gaining performance opportunities, in student showcases, as well as private functions, such as (minor) corporate

events, bachelorette parties, and neo-burlesque workshops and performances at parties in and around Cape Town.

“So...when did you decide to become such a powerful feminine force?”

Lisa laughs as she tells me a story where an audience member came up to her after a performance and asked her, “so Lisa, when did you decide to become such a powerful feminine force?” I was like, “pardon?” Lisa tells me that she had never considered describing herself in such a manner, yet for her, her performances are rooted in her expression of femininity, and what she describes as feminine energy. This perceived feminine energy is what Lisa harnesses in her attempts at the control of the gaze during her performances. She attempts to control and direct where the audience’s attention should go to during her performances. If she is successful in controlling the gaze of the audience through her performance, then she successfully engages in Marcia Ochoa’s felicitous spectacle. The result of the successful engagement with the felicitous spectacle provides Lisa, as Lady Magnolia the type of attention that she desires. In order to achieve this, she requires an audience that understands the type of performance that she does that will recognise the intention of her performance. Lisa constructs a form of feminine performance for Lady Magnolia – a mask, a persona that she can project toward the audience - that expresses an aspired-to form of femininity that Lisa wishes to also possess and express in her daily life. This mask that Lady Magnolia has adopted is a mask of authority, authority that she has adopted from her experience as a neo-burlesque troupe leader. The admiration of her students and people like woman who ask her about her being a “powerful feminine force” have assisted in the creation of a feminine mask where Lady Magnolia is an authority figure in both stage performance, as well as to her troupe. These qualities attributed to the mask of Lady Magnolia may be used by Lisa to work towards a more confident self-off-stage persona. In an interview we discuss what neo-burlesque performance is, in her understanding, Lisa goes on to describe neo-burlesque performance in the following manner:

“I think that burlesque is a form of self-expression...in my world, mainly for women. It provides a platform for women to express their sensuality, their sexuality, their self-love, their self-worth...through performance, whether it be in a cute fashion, a very demure fashion, very elegant, very trashy, it's, like it has lots of elements, but the thing, the common thread for me, is that it does incorporate striptease”.

(Interview segment, Lady Magnolia, 2015)

Ideas and ideals of femininity and feminine performance are a recurring theme in my conversations with Lady Magnolia/Lisa. In her practice of neo-burlesque, it is a performance style shared among a community of women. Her focus on femininity and feminine energy in her neo-burlesque space suggests that she has created a community that possesses an ideology regarding who is allowed to participate in her community. While there are a very small number of neo-burlesque performers who are cisgender men, in Cape Town, and in South Africa, the performance of neo-burlesque is mainly performed by femininely identified individuals. Lisa goes on to describe neo-burlesque as a platform that incorporates elements of striptease, to express their sexuality in a safe environment, where they are totally in control. Though, I would argue that it is not Lisa who is in control, when she performs an expression of sexuality, but Lady Magnolia. The practice of performance in this context is hinged on her feminine performance being read as a mask – and through this mask she is able to project her understanding of an idealised feminine performance. The performer in this setting invites the audience to gaze upon their performance, and their body, as it moves in a particular way, thus allowing for a sense of agency for the performer in inviting the audience to view their body in a particular way, as well as allowing for a space where those who have not been typically allowed to gaze, are permitted to do so. In describing the character of Lady Magnolia, Lisa goes on to say that, “(I’ve had people) experience Lady Magnolia as carrying quite a strong *goddess* energy relating to, and quite a...strong feminine energy, and I think, a feminine power,” relating to a spiritual aspect to feminine performance and power in this setting. The goddess energy that she refers to here, is not that of an untouchable deity – though no one is allowed to touch neo-burlesque performers during their performances – rather she refers to a woman who is admired for her command of her own form of beauty, in such a way that she becomes untouchable in her performance. Lady Magnolia is preoccupied with feminine performance in neo-burlesque, as her

troupe excludes male performers. Though feminine performance in Lady Magnolia's intimation is a practice of sameness and similarity, as there is near uniformity in the appearance of performers, barring a few outliers. For Lady Magnolia, the performance of femininity lies at the heart of neo-burlesque performance, and the feminine power that she alludes to through the use of her physical appeal as a means to enact a controlled directional gaze upon the audience who looks upon her when she takes to the stage. Cherry Lesque, a member of the troupe, The Rouge Revue, and The Rougettes, echoes Lady Magnolia's sentiments:

"...how I see it in burlesque, it's just basically from what I feel is that you're giving permission to people to look at you, obviously. And then it's almost like this power which is then given from that. And I find like, femininity quite a powerful thing. But obviously within your female body, and that's how I see it. It's almost like you have like this power and control about how people perceive you. And how um...you have control over how you're perceived by the world basically - when you do your performances and that. And you can obviously play up, and you know be way more...you know...confident than you normally would. So, for me it's not necessarily about the boobs and ass and all of that. But it's also about the way that yourself, and you have this power to be anything you want to be. And because I believe femininity...we're quite like diverse creatures...you know...we've got a lot going for us. We can be strong. We can be very endearing. And we can be cute. And we be silly. There's so many things that we're given. Like, men obviously allowed, like in society's standards, they're not allowed to be cute. And it's like a bad thing if they're cute. So, obviously I'm playing within the social norms too. I almost feel like, that for me, femininity, is taking the power into your own hands, and being who you want to be on stage. And obviously enjoying the parts of your body that you really like. And you can show what you wanna show. And what you're proud of. And still...you obviously have all the glitz and glam, which you can cover pieces up with too. But mainly for me it's the power that you have. And you have the power to not show them something. Or take something off in a certain way. And you can be cute one night, and you can be a little more sultry, and the next time, cheeky. And the people appreciate it. And like I said, you also have the control to show them what you wanna show them. So that's kinda...that's for me the main...which is a weird...I don't know if you get it? Burlesque is femininity, but like, on steroids...and kind of like, making us really powerful and strong, and having the control."

(Cherry Lesque, interview segment, 2015)

This idea of control is a recurring one in my discussion with neo-burlesque performers. Of course objectification may occur in any performance circumstance, Lady Magnolia, Cherry Lesque, and other performers possess a keen interest in working against active objectification. E. Ann Kaplan describes objectification through the gaze as almost bearable if “women were simply eroticised and objectified,” as “objectification may be an inherent component of both female and male eroticism” (Kaplan 2010, 210). Objectification is almost inevitable in erotic display, though the type of objectification that may take place as a result of the male gaze can be far more troubling for the one who experiences it. Kaplan continues, “men do not simply look; their gaze carries with it the power of action and possession that is lacking in the female gaze...women receive and return a gaze, but cannot act on it” (Kaplan 2010, 210). Thus, there is potential violence in the ways in which men may objectify women through possession. In Kaplan’s argument however, those who have the gaze enacted upon them cannot act against it. Berger holds similar sentiments, stating that “a woman must continually watch herself,” as, “she is almost continually accompanied by her own image of herself” (Berger, Blomberg and Fox 1972, 46), implying that women’s objectification is simply inevitable. I disagree with this conclusion, as the mask may be used as a tool to challenge the gaze of objectification. The mask helps both the performer and the audience look beyond their own gazes and face forward into the projected performance. In neo-burlesque performance, participants gain access to a mask of femininity that may be used in conjunction with the qualities of the projected persona/character, who becomes a member of the performing group. This mask of femininity provides the wearer with a projection of a positive self-image, depending on the type of gaze that is enacted upon the performer. Though, how does the performer create this mask of positive self-image that they may eventually project during performance? For Lady Magnolia, and Cherry Lesque, femininity, and the performance of femininity in neo-burlesque provides a site where femininity is performed actively. In this realm, and on the neo-burlesque stage, they describe their feminine performance as a means for asserting power, and feeling in control of their feminine performance, while displaying it on stage for an audience. This feminine performance is rooted in an understanding of a particular form of gender. Invoking the work of Judith Butler, we can understand that “‘construction’ is not an activity, but an act, one which happens once and whose effects are firmly fixed” (Butler 1993, 9). For most, gender is not built upon, instead, it is assumed and fulfilled through conforming to the norms or the learned regulatory ideal as social fact. Gender is

thus something individuals *ought* to display in a specific set of ways. Through the acts of performance on stage, particularly in drag and neo-burlesque performance, gender becomes something that is not strictly fixed. It is alluded to in performance, and it is toyed with, played with, and shown to be malleable, when the limits of what masculine and feminine performance is meant to be, is stretched. Performers of drag and neo-burlesque enact a performance of *hyper-femininity*, a concept that Ochoa understands as being created as the object of an imagined masculine gaze. Though, this hyper-feminine performance is necessary to both drag and neo-burlesque as a way to indicate that something special is taking place – that the performance is taking place. The performance that is taking place here is focused on spectacular femininities and includes conventional gender formations as a starting point (Ochoa 2014, 208). I agree with Ochoa when she states that hyper-femininity is the object of an imagined masculine gaze – as is the *scopophilic* convention – I do not consider hyper-femininity to be a conventional gender formation however. Hyper-femininity exists within the realm of performance, whether on stage or screen – hyper-feminine performance is adopted with an audience in mind. This indicates that what drag and neo-burlesque performers are doing when they perform hyper-femininely, they are acting in a way that is outside of the conceived norms of feminine behaviour and presentation. *Hyper-femininity* is femininity in quotation marks – it is femininity and feminine performance taken to the extreme. The bounds of feminine performance have been stretched in these circumstances. It is femininity in its parodic form that is only slightly rooted in reality – the rest exists in a playful imaginary. Hyper-femininity thus becomes like *Jessica Rabbit*, in the film, *Who Framed Roger Rabbit*, but cartoonish and blown out of proportion in its performance and appearance. The performance of neo-burlesque can be used as a means to subvert masculine dominance, and feminine subjectivity, as “female subjectivity is trained and subordinated by the everyday bodily requirements and vulnerability of “femininity” (Bordo 1993, 19). In this sense, the performance of neo-burlesque, at least for Cherry Lesque, and Lady Magnolia, provides a means for the individual who performs to assert their self-hood as a feminine identifying individual on stage, which in turn may affect the way they view themselves outside of the neo-burlesque stage. The performance of neo-burlesque in this instance may allow for a greater sense of positive self-image in relation to the femininely identified self as member of the group.

Luce Irigaray posits that “being a woman is equated with not being a man” (Irigaray 2007, 64). From that we can infer that to be feminine is to not be masculine, that is to say that “the feminine has become, in our language, the non-masculine, that is to say an abstract non-existent reality” (Irigaray 2007, 12). In this circumstance to be feminine also means to not be in possession of the male gaze, meaning that the access to, and power over the performance does not truly belong to the feminine performer. Gender, in this sense is constructed through a means of exclusion. In *Bodies that Matter*, Butler reveals to the reader that bodies are not as fixed as they are assumed to be. To her, if gender was purely performative, then it can be put on or taken off as needed, like items of clothing, or a costume. To Butler, the individual’s existence is decided by gender in advance as people are assigned a sex at birth that determines a particular set of gender roles and ideals that they are meant to fulfil as part of the social roles ascribed to them. “...which bodies come to matter, and why?” (Butler 1993, xi), Butler poses. Referring to Foucault, Butler posits that sex is a normative category, taking into consideration of a “regulatory ideal,” ideals that are learned and are ascribed to all bodies that exist within a societal context. In this realm of understanding, physical, anatomical sex functions as a norm, as long as it practices its role within the framework of the “regulatory ideal.” Sex is an unstable category, even though it is popularly used to construct the binary ideas surrounding what it means to be categorised as a “man” or a “woman,” inferring that which is “masculine” and “feminine”. In Butler’s writing, “sex” becomes an ideal construct which is forcibly materialised through time. Sex, as a concept is one of the norms in which we become human and are allowed to function within a society. I am led to wonder, is gender in fact that which allows us as individuals in the world to become more human? Are we human only because we have an ability to communicate certain information that allows others to understand who we are, and what our roles in society might be through the performance of expectations related to the norms of our learned regulatory ideals? For Butler, these performances indicate a “reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (Butler 1993, 2). There are elements of performing in presenting gender for a viewer, as the citations of what is familiar allows the viewer to understand what is alluded to in certain forms of gesture, dress, and the ways of inserting and asserting oneself into the surrounding world. The performances of neo-burlesque (as well as the performance of femininity in drag) do not take the form of a non-existent reality, for the performance of femininity is not imagined, as the performer, as well as the spectator is able to easily identify these performances

as taking on feminine characteristics. Sara Ahmed compares the dominance of whiteness to the dominance of masculinity, where she defines the two comparatively as “an ongoing and unfinished history which orientates bodies in a specific direction, affecting how they “take up” space, and what they ‘can do’” (Ahmed 2007, 149). Femininity, and the ways in which femininity is expected to be performed then is shaped by hetero-dominant patriarchal ideals, where the performance of femininity is affected by interaction with masculine domination. Women appear and are expected to perform in a mediated feminine manner by their interactions with men and masculine patriarchal ideals. Yet, the performance of femininity in neo-burlesque and drag to some extent, indicates that, as Butler asserts, “the very subject of women is no longer understood in stable or abiding terms” (Butler 1990, 1). Femininity, and that which indicates an idea of what a woman is, or could be, is thus difficult to define, as these indicators and the meanings thereof are constantly in flux. Butler asserts that, “for de Beauvoir, gender is ‘constructed’ but implied in her formulation is an agent, *a cogito*, who somehow takes on or appropriates that gender and could, in principle take on another gender” (Butler 1990, 80). The performance of femininity for individuals such as Lady Magnolia, and Cherry Lesque, and certainly for others, is constructed, and well thought out, in order to highlight the aspects of that which is feminine to them, in their hyper-feminine performance on stage, for the spectator. The mask, like the performance is also constructed. The mask however, is constructed as a companion to, and for the performance, and is constructed as a response to outside sources such as objectification and feelings of insecurity. In this research I focus on the mask that is used during and with the performance, however the projected persona that the mask refers to is always present in varying ways to be used in particular circumstances. The mask used in performance however takes on the exaggerated quality that is aligned with on-stage hyper-performance. Femininity, and other gendered performance is not a given, but something that is learned in order to be presented for *an other*. They take on that which we understand to infer femininity, and highlight that in their performance, as “once the gender category is given the attributes of the person are also gendered...whatever a ‘woman’ is has to be ‘female’” (Lorber 1993, 569). While Lorber’s assertions to refer to essentialism and biological determinism, this does assist in how performers and spectators alike read into what could be defined as that which is read as feminine in the performance that is taking place on both the neo-burlesque and drag stage, but, like Butler she agrees that the categories of what is viewed as masculine or feminine is not a pure, binary

category, and is constantly in flux. Where the category of feminine, is ascribed, reading into de Beauvoir while thinking of the social implications of the performance of neo-burlesque, we find that, while neo-burlesque performance highlights hyper-femininity, it also pushes back against idealised feminine behaviour. She posits that, “when one fails to adhere to an accepted code, one becomes an insurgent. A woman who dresses in an outlandish manner lies when she affirms it with an air of simplicity that she dresses to suit herself, nothing more. She knows perfectly well that to suit herself is to be outlandish” (de Beauvoir 1997, 692). Yet, those who perform neo-burlesque know that they are dressing in an outlandish manner, they do so for the performance that is viewed by the audience, thus they knowingly commit insurgency against the perceived category of a femininely performing woman, as well as the baggage that comes with that, and further “scandalise” the category by doing so with the aim of being looked at – not only by men, who place their desires upon them, but also by women and queer people who view their performances, as “woman...knows that when she is looked at she is not considered apart from her appearance: she is judged, respected, desired by and through her toilette” (de Beauvoir 1997, 693). It is assumed that they are defined by that which is understood through the gaze that is enacted upon them. The gaze carries societal baggage and expects the one who has it directed upon them to comply and unpack it in neat and compartmentalised ways.

Lady Magnolia and Cherry Lesque both assert that their performance of neo-burlesque is a form of self-expression that empowers them, the social pressure related to the manner in which femininity *ought* to be performed and presented in lieu of the pressures of the gaze, affects the manner in which they eventually engage with the world around them, in different contexts – they are compelled, socially, to perform differently in different contexts. Thus they are compelled to don different masks for different situations. Though these masks have to be appropriate for the specific situation. On stage, as their respective characters, Lady Magnolia and Cherry Lesque are able to avoid putting on shame, as the mask of the character and the context of the performance space protects them from feelings of shame due to their projection of confidence and support of their group, when applying and making use of the mask. They are transformed. They are transformed through the act of becoming their persona, through the act of putting on their respective masks – even if it is only for a few moments on stage. When they return to their day-

to-day self, they have to pack away the performance mask, the mask that makes them comfortable standing in a room full of people, stripped down to their underwear (a common recurring nightmare for many people). And at the end of the day they must return to the mask of daily life, that mask of mundanity, that only thinly veils insecurity in most. This is the mask performers must put on when interacting with the ordinary world around them. The mask that makes those around them comfortable. This is a different kind of costume – one of normative feminine performance in daily life experience. This mask is that of the daily persona, and her identity in some ways is crafted by society’s influence and regulation. This mask is dependent on the way the wearer and other is society *ought* to perform. Ridding oneself of this mask is not impossible, rather it is an improbable action as the mask wearer still wishes or has to participate in society.

The sisterhood goes on tour

“My girls have arrived!” exclaims Lisa as we arrive at the front of the real estate office in Sedgefield where we will be staying for the duration of the neo-burlesque tour of the Garden Route in the Western Cape. She rushes out to greet and hug every person as we get out of the two cars that have been travelling from Cape Town from the morning. I am unloading luggage and bags filled with other performer’s costumes, and she envelops me in a hug. We’re led into the office, which appears to have been a house at one point in time, and we’re shown around. There is a small entrance area, where a bed has been set up. Sydney³⁷, Lisa’s partner instructs me to help her carry some mattresses from the only private room in the building. This is where she and Lisa will be staying. As we lay the mattresses down, Lisa tells me that my designated space is the one behind the long desk. She tells me that this will provide me with some privacy. Here, I am still part of the group, but I have a separate space to myself. *I am part of the group for the tour, but I am not part of the group as I am not a performer* - I am able to gain access to the

³⁷ Pseudonym

group through my interest in the performance, as well as through essentialised ideas surrounding my body and gender identity. The rest of the group take turns calling “dibs” on who gets to use the bathroom first for a shower after the hours long journey from Cape Town to Sedgefield, and what order this will be in. We’re told that we have an hour to get ready before we head to Lisa’s sister’s home in Sedgefield for a welcoming dinner party. The bottles of sparkling wine that we were told to bring along are placed in the freezer to chill, while we all shower and get ready for the evening.

Once everyone has showered and gotten dressed, we pile into the cars that are parked outside, and follow Lisa and Sydney’s car as we drive to Lisa’s sister’s house. It is a spacious double story, in what appears to be an upmarket suburb in Sedgefield. We park our cars along the driveway of the leafy suburban home. Upon arrival, we’re led to the tree-lined patio, where snacks have been set up, and Sydney fires up the gas grill. Lisa’s younger sister announces that her husband has been “banished” for the night, and that this event would be a “girls only” affair. As the night continues, Sydney keeps herself busy at the grill, smoking hand rolled cigarettes, and sipping on beer. Inside, Lisa and her sister ready snacks and salads. Every so often, I hear sparkling wine bottle corks pop, and they walk around the patio, refilling everyone’s glasses. Eventually dinner is ready, and Sydney finally takes a break, and joins some of the women inside who are dancing in the spacious living room that is decorated in white. As the sparkling wine continues to flow, Lisa’s sister announces that she’s turned on the hot tub to get warm, and that we’re all invited to the upstairs deck, to join in a group hot tub session. I help to carry some bottles of sparkling wine upstairs, and already there are 5 women in the hot tub, some dressed in bathing suits, some in their underwear bottoms, most are topless at this point. I take a seat on the couch/daybed that is placed on the corner of the deck and continue conversation with some of the other performers in the troupe, who have not gotten into the hot tub. The conversation from the hot tub turns to sex, sexuality, and bodies. Eventually Lisa shouts that we should play “the situation game.” I don’t understand what this is. The situation game, it would appear is Lisa’s way of attempting to bond with the members of the professional neo-burlesque troupe on tour, and to create some sense of community by getting to know one another intimately, as neo-burlesque performance involves intimate bodily performance among those who are in the

performance group. The woman seated next to me tells Lisa that I (Lindy-Lee) probably would not participate in the situation game. The next day I discover that the situation game entails Lisa investigating what your “situation” is, “down there,” meaning that she is interested in the state of one’s pubic hair grooming and whether it conforms to the ideal of hairlessness that is attached to femininely appearing bodies. Sydney walks up to the patio carrying a very large bottle of sparkling wine – a magnum – that was given to them the night before by a friend. She pops the cork to the magnum, and refills everyone’s glasses. Once the magnum is done, we discover that we have run out of sparkling wine. Lisa’s sister suggests that we open up one of the bottles of tequila that she has chilling in the freezer. At that point, one of the performers who has come on tour says that she is tired, and that she would like to head back to our lodgings. Another performer and I ask if we can head back with her, and we leave most of the party to go back to the real estate office, to get some much-needed sleep, as the next day will include the first performance of the tour.

The sisterhood and the social world of neo-burlesque performance

Lisa asserts that neo-burlesque performance, at least for her, is a form of performance that is concerned with feminine performance. To her it is a world where feminine performance and aspects of womanhood are at the fore. It is a world where women are able to express their femininity, sexuality and sensuality in a space that they feel are safe. Though, it would appear that there is safety in sameness, as most performers express very similar forms of glamorized white femininity, harkening back to the pin up figure described earlier in this research. In other social situations these outward expressions of sexuality are often not as possible, as those who express their sexuality and sensuality in a more public setting become bounded by social regulation and disruption of these social regulations lead to judgement and social exclusion due to perceived “improper” behaviour. This “improper” behaviour affected Cherry Lesque in an incident involving a situation where a former partner expresses judgement at her desire to learn and perform neo-burlesque, by inferring that doing so would require her to do something that is considered amoral, by exposing her physical body to an audience through the act of performance. The former partner describes Cherry Lesque’s desire to learn and perform neo-burlesque as

“slutty,” implying that her participation in this activity will render her undesirable by those who participate in a “moral” society. Further, these moral judgements around the prescriptions of women’s performance becomes more apparent in Cherry Lesque’s everyday life, where she informs those whom she interacts with through her work that she performs cabaret when they enquire what type of dancing she engages in in the evenings and over the weekends. She uses cabaret as a euphemism that puts the other party at ease. Cherry Lesque works in the egg donation field, thus she becomes apprehensive at the possibility of providing more detail to the types of performance that she participates in, as this could lead to a loss of wages due to the potential judgement of those whom she provides donor eggs for. She assumes that they do not want their potential future child to be associated with perceived “obscene” performances – that they don’t want their potential future daughter to become a stripper, because they share biological material with someone who does. These moralistic judgements are deeply entrenched in social regulation, and the ways in which women are perceived as having *ought* to perform and present themselves. This assumes that women *ought not to* perform for an audience, and they *ought not to* remove their clothing when doing so. There are social implications for being involved in public erotic performance, and somehow it makes those who participate in it perceived “bad people.” Openly participating in the performance of women’s sexuality is rooted in shame – shame that asserts itself on women based on the social regulations related to the ways in which women ought to behave. Women’s sexuality is simultaneously hyper-visible and exposing, and invisible. Their bodies become sites of desire and regulation all at once. The willing participation in openly displaying sexuality and sensuality as it takes place in neo-burlesque performance possesses the possibility to disrupt the social regulations asserted on women’s sexuality. Lady Magnolia, and her neo-burlesque troupe, foster a social situation where women who participate in the group are able to build a new world, where the regulations of the world outside becomes a less oppressive force on their performances and presentations. This social group dictates what feminine performance within their group is allowed to look like - a form of collective feminine identity that serves their ideals as a group. John Searle writes that “there are portions of the real world, objective facts in the world, that are only facts by human agreement. In a sense there are things that exist only because we believe them to exist” (Searle 1995, 1). He goes on to say that, “institutional facts are so called because they require human institutions for their existence” (Searle 1995, 2). Dominant society functions as an institution in

the sense that the dominant group agrees upon a particular set of rules and regulations and makes use of these in order to assert external pressure on the beliefs and behaviours upon those who live within the dominant society by means of internalising the ways in which one ought to behave and present oneself to the world outside. The belief in particular behaviours becomes collective belief and behaviour through individual action, as well as the regulations placed upon the actions of others. Because women, people of colour and LGBTQ people are usually not the dominant ideological majority in society, much of the institutional facts that are enacted upon them take the form of oppressive regulatory ideals. These regulatory ideals provide information and rules regarding how they should be behaving. This leads to the belief in compulsory heterosexuality, compulsory sexual identities, compulsory sexual identity and performances, and regulatory ideals regarding agency and polite performance. While the structures of institutional fact are certainly felt by those who participate in the dominant society, these structures are often invisible, unless they are fused into the particular laws of a country. As an example, though much of the legislature relating to oppression of LGBTQ people, freedom of expression, and obscenity laws have been amended in the South African constitution, there is still social pressure attached to their related regulatory concepts in practice.

While Lady Magnolia and the neo-burlesque troupe exist within the greater, dominant society, there is still potential for the group to take the form of a separate social world/community – one that exists within the dominant culture, but possesses different values, social, and institutional facts to the dominant society – a subculture if you will. While neo-burlesque functions within the realm of the subculture, the formation of a group presents the opportunity for the creation of a new social world for those who participate within the group as a type of “collective” group that possesses their own set of collective beliefs. In Lady Magnolia’s belief this collective group is for women, and those who perform femininely. Their belief system functions in much the same way that institutional facts do as they exist in a “systematic relation to other facts” (Searle 1995, 35).

Those in the group draw inspiration from outside, from the dominant ideal in order to create the rules for a new collective identity. This new collective identity and institutional facts of the group allow those who participate in the group to combat stigma, and shame, through creative performance, in response to the dominant social ideals. Lady Magnolia and the participants of the group provide support and guidance for those who participate, thus functioning as a type of family for those who engage in neo-burlesque performance as part of their group. Though this leads to a collective identity that results in potential sameness – this results in a familial mask, where there is the potential for most of Lady Magnolia’s performers to adopt a similar script for femininity, feminine expression, and feminine performance.

Henri Lefebvre understands the family as follows: “the family is affirmed not only as a micro-centre of consumption and occupation of a small local space (a place) but as an affective group reinforced for a sense of solidarity” (Lefebvre 2002, 51). The neo-burlesque group functions as a form of family – one that allows performers who participate in the group to produce their own social space through their collective belief and understandings of the form of performance as well as their collective belief in relation to the production of feminine performance in the group that is expressed outwardly. In this group, women are encouraged to perform their sensuality and sexuality, they are invited to expose their bodies in ways that they normally would not in other settings, and they are encouraged to engage with positivity in relation to their sexuality and their bodies alike. This works in response to dominant regulatory ideals in the outside society, where these ideals and performances are suppressed through judgement and social sanctions. Yet, just because the neo-burlesque troupe encourages certain freedoms does not mean that there are no institutional facts that play a functional role in their social world. Lady Magnolia considers her performers to be “her girls,” but they can only continue to be “her girls,” so long as they conform to the ideals and behaviours of the group. Deviation from this can lead to forms of exclusion, and restrictions regarding the ways in which a neo-burlesque performer ought to perform their acts of hyperfeminine performance in the realm of the neo-burlesque group, and the performance stage for a viewing audience.

Feeling “sexy” for staged performance – body hair removal, and taking care of your body

What’s so funny about body hair?

Fiona, who performs with The Rouge Revue as Poppy Fields and La Belle Pique, is getting ready for The Rouge Revue’s first performance at The House of Machines in my one bedroom flat. She will be performing her duties as a stage kitten tonight as Poppy Fields. As I cook a light dinner for us, she excuses herself as she wishes to shave her legs prior to the performance. When she returns from the bathroom, the conversation turns to body hair. I mention that many neo-burlesque performers also participate and perform in Naked Girls Reading³⁸, and that some of my friends have commented in the past, on the body hair choices of many of the performers, who are almost uniformly lacking in body hair. “I know what you mean,” says Fiona. “One day I would like to perform for Naked Girls Reading, just to show that women do have body hair.” I note to her that she has just announced that she needed to shave her legs prior to tonight’s performance, and then proceeded to get dressed, putting on two pairs of stockings. Fiona responds, “I just need to feel sexy before I perform or get on stage. I don’t feel sexy if I have body hair exposed.” In shaving her body hair, and wearing multiple pairs of stockings at a time, Fiona participates in the practices of the group/troupe in which she participates. Her actions become informed by their ideals.

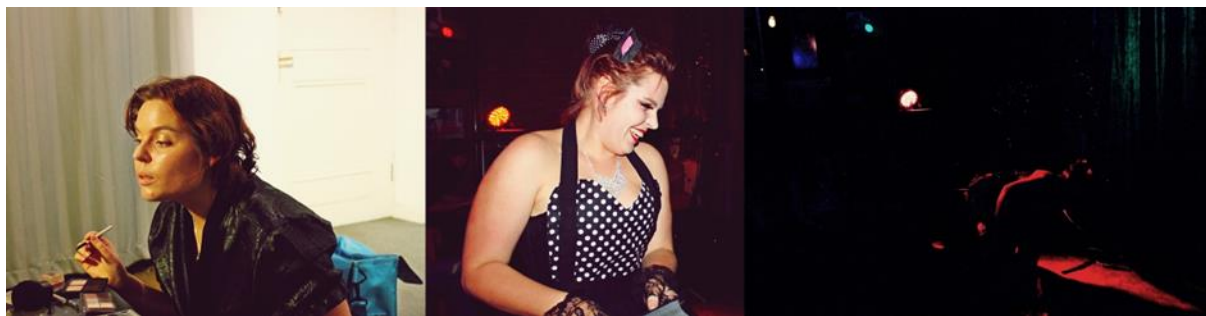


Image 1: Fiona/Poppy Fields, getting ready to stage kitten at The House of Machines (2014).

Image 2 and 3: Poppy Fields, performing as stage kitten, at The House of Machines (2014)

“...there is strong evidence of a widespread symbolic association between body hair – or its absence – and ideal gender: to have a hairy body is a sign of masculinity, to have a hairless one is a sign of femininity.”

(Torien, Wilkenson and Choi 2005, 399)

Apart from one neo-burlesque performer, every neo-burlesque performer who performs with The Rouge Revue displays an image of a hairless body. Lisa assures me that this is at the discretion of each performer, and that she does not dictate the body hair style/choices of the performers in her troupe. Yet, hairlessness in this context, just as it is in many Western influenced societies, is the norm. In fact, there has only been one performer/performance, who highlights the display of excessive, albeit fake, body hair – to the tune of The Troggs’ Wild Thing – while costumed in faux fur armpit hair, and a large, bushy merkin/pubic wig. While this performance displays a variant way of performing femininity, the presence of excessive fake body hair appears to be done so for laughs – with a great audience response that laugh and cheer at the reveal of her large, bushy, faux fur merkin. The excessive, fake body hair provides an unexpected and ridiculous element to the performance, as it is not an element that is currently associated with the ideals of feminine beauty. Natural body hair can sometimes be looked at with revulsion, while the excessive fake body hair is purposefully shocking, and the audience laughs at the unexpected reveal of prominent, bushy, pubic hair. In fact, there is no complete nudity included in the performance of neo-burlesque. When the performer removes her bottoms, she at first reveals a naked hip that implies that she is not wearing underwear. This increases the tension to the moment in her performance, as the audience realises that they may in fact see a performer’s naked pubic region. The tension is released in laughter as the audience realises that it was in fact a ruse – but that the ruse ended in the display of something that becomes comedically grotesque – that the incongruous expectation of a hairless, feminine body in fact possesses characteristics that are associated with perceived masculinity. The performance of neo-burlesque takes place in

the realm of fantasy as performance, however, much like the merkin that represents a feminine ideal from days gone by, that is marked by its fakeness, so the fantasy of staged feminine performance is also marked by it, situated in unreality. While Lisa prides herself in the variety of feminine body types on display at The Rouge Revue, stating, “I think that burlesque creates...provides the audience with an experience of what is beautiful, rather than a 2-dimensional image that we get in magazines, and the media.” She continues, “So I think burlesque has the ability to widen people’s perceptions of what is beautiful, what is attractive, what is sexy...and because they’ve had that experience of seeing it in someone else, hopefully, they can actually look at themselves, and go ‘well if she can do that, then I can,’ you know, not necessarily that everyone wants to become a burlesque performer, but, they totally see that if that woman is sexy, and I’m responding to her like that, then I totally have that. And I can totally own it when I walk down the street.” Lisa goes on to describe herself, and the performers of The Rouge Revue – apart from one performer – as being voluptuous. She says that all the performers who form part of the Rouge Revue display a bodily presentation that is not made visible in media sources, such as television and magazines, yet there are some ways in which the uniform bodily presentation of performers continue to perpetuate the norms related to feminine bodily performance and presentation. Performers of neo-burlesque perpetuate these norms by conforming to bodily size and shape through diet and exercise, further, normative presentation prevails when one looks at the members of the troupe, who largely include white women and a few light-skinned women of colour. Women of colour, and in particular, black women, are underrepresented in neo-burlesque. Considering body hair once more, there is a definite uniformity regarding the lack of body hair on display during performance and on those who perform. When the performance of common neo-burlesque themes are juxtaposed with the themes and actions in the performance of “Wild Thing,” described above, or even the drag performance by Mary Scary – a drag performer, who performs with a glitter decorated moustache and visible body hair – both are performed with comedy, and the response of laughter in mind that is associated with the perceived incongruous nature of the appearance of thick, masculine body hair, in relation to the hyperfeminine dress code and makeup. The former, displaying excessive body hair that does not fall in line with the contemporary codes of feminine performance, while the latter displays that the performer, while performing a feminine persona, is a *really* a man in feminine attire, performing stand-up comedy, and musical performance, in

drag. Mary Scary's performance and physical presentation refers to the *ruse* that drag often situates itself in. She has no desire to be portrayed as explicitly or especially feminine. Her body hair is displayed as garish, and is meant to stand out, but why is this? Mary Scary, while performing in perhaps the *most mainstream* drag venue in Cape Town, is somehow able to elude the normative standards of drag performance as Lola Fine wishes to establish. While Mary Scary performs regularly at Beefcakes, she is somehow not a part of a group of performers – she performs alone and appears to not spend very much time with other drag performers, as such her performance looks vastly different to that of some other performers. This lack of connection to a group leaves Mary Scary to her own devices and provides insight into why her drag might look so different from other performers. There are no regulations regarding how hairy she is, so long as she performs her set that hasn't changed in over two years and entertains the restaurant guests.



Mary Scary performing at Beefcakes restaurant, throwing her hair back, displaying her hairy, tattooed chest (2014).

What is it about body hair that is so funny to a viewing audience then? In neo-burlesque performance the audience is there to view a highly stylised feminine performance. Yet, the

performance of femininity in this context is wrapped up in a form of socially acceptable femininity. While it may be out of the ordinary for many, when viewing day to day performances of femininity, to encounter those who disrobe, and perform the art of strip-tease, hairlessness in feminine performance and presentation falls firmly in line with the expectations placed upon femininely performing bodies, in society's hegemonic perceptions of the ways in which feminine bodies ought to perform. This hairlessness as a uniform script for femininity allows the viewer to imagine the performer in the objectifying terms of the gaze. When the potential for objectification is disrupted by unexpected body hair, they are taken aback and may feel discomfort. The tension of this discomfort is met with laughter, as through the male gaze it is initially expected that the bearer of this gaze should derive scopophilic pleasure in looking at potentially desirable feminine performance – only to be met with an image that is unexpected and uncomfortable for the one who is doing the looking.

*“...women's practices of depilation – the work required to produce themselves as hairless – may be understood as one means of **transforming** the body that it more closely resembles the feminine ideal.”*

(Torien, Wilkenson and Choi 2005, 400)

The transformation that is alluded to in the quote above is present in both the performances of neo-burlesque and drag. Those who perform in drag and neo-burlesque make use of the ideals related to femininity and womanhood and exaggerate them to the degree that is effective for their respective performances. In both cases, elements of depilation take place, or at least an attempt at masking body hair with makeup and hosiery. The mask then, for performers of neo-burlesque and drag then alludes to a socially perceived feminine ideal – if you can't have the ideal, you've got to fake the ideal by effectively using your characterised mask in interactions and performance. This notion of the feminine ideal permeates the performance of neo-burlesque. While Lady Magnolia/Lisa asserts that the performance of neo-burlesque works towards showing the audience that the bodies of real, corporeal, femininely performing individuals are also valid for their interest and attraction, the norms of what is viewed as feminine, and the beauty standards for femininely performing bodies, provided by societal expectation and media

representation, still stand firm, and hold true. The fantasy that is created and performed on stage is still limited by what is designated by the ways that feminine bodies *ought* to perform, and present themselves in public, aligning with socially acceptable femininity. The fantasy which is operated through the lens of the gaze is prescribed by dominant social norms. Diverting from this is seen as out of the ordinary, becomes unsightly, and when the dominant social norm is subverted, in obvious, and excessive fashion for a staged performance, this is done so for comedic impression. A variety of feminine performance is aimed for in neo-burlesque performance, yet it is still performed within the restrictions of dominant social norms. I understand this phenomenon as a response to the collective familial identity adopted by the group. Because they are operating from a position of sameness within their group, they also come to adopt a collective projected persona – thus they wear their sameness in thought, in performance ideal, beauty ideal, and bodily idea by applying their familial mask. Thus, making it easy to identify when a performer from this group/family performs, even if they perform outside of their group performances.

I need to feel healthy – bodily perception and stage performance

“What I do try and do though, before, if I know I have a show, I do try, for at least two weeks before, just to...like, obviously not diet, but what I mean is, like stay healthy. Don’t have late nights. Don’t drink a lot. Because I know that if I do...I’m gonna feel ‘eewy’, and then that’s gonna make me feel ‘eewy’ on the night. And I don’t want that. So, I always try and think about that. Obviously I fail sometimes, because, you know? Life happens. But, especially for the bigger shows, especially when I’m doing new material, I try and like...so, I tell all my friends, like two weekends before,, I’m probably gonna go out. And if I do, it’s probably just going to be for a drink or two. I probably won’t do shots. I need to feel healthy.”

(Interview segment – Cherry Lesque/Kathryn, 2015)

Kathryn and I are seated at a dark brown wooden table, outside a coffee shop close to her home, it’s a cool, almost cold, breezy day, and we are discussing the process which she goes through when formulating a new solo performance piece, for performance with The Rouge Revue. She is dressed in black, as she so often is, and her formerly dyed black hair has now been coloured to a

shade of bright purple. She tells me that it seems that many of her performances contain elements of food, and sweets. Her favourite performance piece, she mentions, is her performance of Birthday – set to Katy Perry’s song of the same name. In this performance, she presents herself on stage, costumed in a large birthday cake, where she proceeds to remove the layers of the birthday cake during the course of the performance, which concludes with her popping balloons with a pin, that she hides in her hair, clad only in heavy rubber nipple pasties that resemble swirls of whipped cream, topped with cherries, as well as heavy rubber underwear that also resemble swirls of whipped cream.



Image 1: Cherry Lesque enters the stage, the birthday cake covered

Image 2: Cherry Lesque performs Birthday, the three tiers of the cake, on display



Cherry Lesque performing Birthday, at the Grand Burlesque Exhibition, August 2015

Many of Cherry Lesque's solo performances with The Rouge Revue display a preoccupation with food – notably her performances display an interaction with sweets and confectionary items. Even her character name – Cherry Lesque – alludes to an interest in food and confectionary items in particular. This is not an entirely unique occurrence though, there are a number of other neo-burlesque performers who also refer to food and sweet treats in their character names. Although in the case of Cherry Lesque's performances, performances that include the use of cakes and other sweets, these are the food items that Kathryn avoids consuming while she prepares herself for her performances with The Rouge Revue. We discuss one of her newer solo performance pieces that she has only performed twice. She tells me that she formulates her solo performance pieces around music, and that if she cannot find appropriate musical accompaniment, she will not perform a solo at the studio showcases that are produced every three months. Upon being told that the theme of a studio showcase would be "Baz Lures 'em," a play on the name of the film director, Baz Lurhmann³⁹, she spent a lengthy period attempting to find an appropriate piece of music that she felt she could work with. She spent time researching his films, attempting to avoid the obvious musical choices from films such as *Moulin Rouge*, and remembered that as a child she was quite fond of the film *Strictly Ballroom*. The film is set in early 1990s Australia and achieved modest popularity in South Africa after its release. In the film, a cover version of the song, *Perhaps Perhaps Perhaps* – popularised by film actress and singer, Doris Day, as well as the Spanish language version, made popular by classic jazz pianist and singer Nat King Cole (*Quizás Quizás Quizás*) – features prominently in a scene where the two protagonists proceed to finally show their desire for one another, to each other. In the scene, the protagonists are interrupted by members of the cast who are shocked by the pairing and assert that they are inappropriate partners for one another (in dance, and romantically). The music and cultural references that are made use of in neo-burlesque performance are usually situated globally, rather than a reference to local events, music, and film. This is due to neo-burlesque performance being a performance style that is very new/recent in South Africa, but is also indicative of a preoccupation with Western culture and media among large groups of South Africans. There is not much to look back on, locally when it comes to South African neo-burlesque, as the history is far too recent. Nostalgia for the time when burlesque was a popular

³⁹ Baz Lurhmann is a film director who co-wrote, co-produced, and directed the 2001 film, *Moulin Rouge*, that's content sparked renewed interest in the performance of neo-burlesque.

performance style in the rest of the world is tenuous when attempting to refer it to South Africa's past, as that would require interrogation into themes of colonialism, segregation, and apartheid – challenging task for a group of mostly white women, attempting to perform for a commonly mostly white audience. These time periods cannot be romanticized when considering South African history as it relates to the violence of colonialism and apartheid. It is easier to disassociate from the South African history, and present time, to look further away, to a faraway land and time. There is comfort in distance. This mask of romanticism creates a barrier between what seems familiar when considering the fantasy-world, and what feels all too real in memory and experience of all those in attendance – including performers and potential audience members. The audience is familiar with the references that are inspired by distant lands as they exist in the cultural landscape of the Western focused media that is so popular - so performers look outward when constructing their performances.

Kathryn and I continue our conversation about the *Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps* piece. She tells me about the initial idea that she had regarding the performance, in choreography, and props. Her aim was to have Cherry Lesque drawing a bath for herself, attempting to relax in her most intimate space, yet she would keep going back to the bath, to check if it was ready. However, at a practical level, this idea could not come to fruition, as she soon realised that the props that she wished to create were impractical for the stage setting. So, she set out to think of new ideas to put the performance together:

“I wanted to play with the ‘perhaps’ thing, of me wanting something and not necessarily hav[ing] it. So it was like that thing, like the bath water, again. I wanted to keep testing and be like it's still not warm enough. Or cold enough. And waiting, and waiting, and waiting. I was on a hectic like sweet vibe, like no sweets. And then that kind of hit me too. I was like it would be really funny if I did something like that. And then slowly but surely the ‘perhaps’ thing became about that. And then, I wanted to make it longer. So, I thought, okay cool, let's work on this. We've got the whole, Cherry wants to eat this, but can't eat it. And then she kind of gives in and has like this love affair with the sweets. And then I thought...I was thinking of sugar songs, because then I need to actually give in. And then I thought what would be better than like the cheesiest stripper song you could ever think of. What would be better than that? So I just knew that I had to just do that. And for some reason it just worked. The moment just worked, and that's how I came up with it. So, it started with a bathtub.”

(Interview segment, Cherry Lesque/Kathryn, 2015)

She continues:

*“I went through the bath idea, and that didn't work. And then I thought of the sweet thing, and I was like “yes!” that could definitely work. So, she's reading this book, trying to curb sugar, or whatever it says, or like, “cut out sugar.” So, I had that book in front. And then I was like, great, I've got a sweet jar. And then it suddenly hit me...I've just done a cake dance. It's really really pink. And you know, sugary. And now I'm doing more sweets. And I was like I can't be that person who's like, every single dance is the same. So then I thought that...because originally I was gonna do like, candy. You know, like pink candy, and all of that. And then it just really bugged me that it was too similar to the pink cake. I didn't want to be that person who was always in pink, and always like doing this candy...pastel colours...you know...dance. So then, obviously when I chose *Pour Some Sugar on Me*, I was like that's a little bit darker, and you know, more rock n roll.”*

(Interview segment, Cherry Lesque/Kathryn, 2015)

Eventually, the performance of *Perhaps Perhaps Perhaps*, became a combination of two songs as Cherry Lesque's ideas grew, and came together, as Kathryn later included the use of Def Leppard's *Pour Some Sugar On Me*, which is often cited as a stereotypical/clichéd 1980s song in the filmed display of stripping, and strip clubs, in films from the 1980s and early 1990s. Kathryn worried about Cherry Lesque being typecast, and always presenting performances that focused on food and confectionary items, yet this performance of *Perhaps Perhaps Perhaps/Pour Some Sugar On Me*, speaks to a preoccupation with food and confectionary items, and in particular her control of these items in her diet in preparation for her performances. In the performance, she

holds up a magazine that has the headline, “8 Ways to Stop Sugar Cravings,” but she keeps looking over to her jar of sweets, and eventually gives in. The performance displays an aspiration toward control. Whether it is control of what her body does, or control over what goes into her body. She eventually gives in to desire and that which would give her pleasure, and this is when she proceeds to “let loose” to the tune of *Pour Some Sugar on Me*. This is where her movements become less restrained, and she appears to be enjoying her performance more, tossing sweets into the crowd as she disrobes, as if to say “give yourself over to pleasure, and join me.”



Cherry Lesque performs *Perhaps Perhaps Perhaps/Pour Some Sugar on Me* at The House of Machines, reaching for a sweet from the jar, while reading a magazine that is titled “8 Ways to Stop Sugar Cravings.” (2014)

Lisa echoes these statements of bodily control, related to the preparation for stage performances, saying that:

*“When it comes to show-time, I’m just somebody whose weight fluctuates a lot, depending on the season, depending if I’m happy or unhappy, my weight is up and down by 5 or 6 kilograms, all the time. And...I definitely feel better, and happy with my body when it’s gone (the extra weight).. There have been numerous occasions, where despite the fact that this is what I do, this is what I preach, this is what I imbue to other people, it will come to like a week before show-time, and I’ll start going... ‘I think I’m not...I think I won’t do a solo this show...the programme’s already quite full, and you know, I should just give the students a chance...’ and all of that, is just because I feel **fat**, I’m actually just looking for an excuse to not go on stage, and not show myself that way. There’s always a point, at which, luckily, I catch myself, and I see what I’m doing, and I go...no, that’s not okay. Like, tough luck if you’re uncomfortable. Tough luck if you don’t feel...amazing. You get on that stage, and you freaking...you be the person that you are, to all of these people. You are the one who tells them it’s okay. **If you don’t do this, you’re a fat liar, and you’re letting down yourself and everybody who’s ever learned anything from you.** You know. So there’s that moment, where I feel like I do actually have to catch myself, and go...be authentic. Going on stage when you’re feeling at your absolute best, and your hair’s perfect, and your skin’s perfect, and like...that’s easy. Go on the stage when you’re not feeling great. That’s when you really have to do it.”*

(Interview segment, Lady Magnolia/Lisa, 2015)

Both Lisa and Kathryn place a focus on feeling good/healthy, by subscribing to the diet culture that influences women who have access to mass media globally, prior to a staged performance, yet Lisa’s position as teacher and troupe leader of The Rouge Revue, places her in a different position regarding control. Lisa desires control over not only her diet and physical appearance, but also the environment in which she may perform. She displays concern regarding how she feels within her body, and this affects her desire to perform on stage. She is able to dictate whether or not she will perform at all, at studio showcases or other events, yet she feels pressure to not allow herself to be affected by her own feelings of bodily inadequacy in these instances. She views herself as a role-model in showing her students, and the members of her troupe that it is possible to perform on stage, for an audience, even when she is not feeling at her most confident in her body. Even though Lisa speaks of neo-burlesque as being an arena where women of all bodily shapes and sizes are welcome, when she speaks about her own body, and her own relationship with food and diet culture, she demonizes “fat” in her speech. The body positivity posited and praised in neo-burlesque performance applies to other people, and in turn, the uniformity of body type and shape is all the more present. All bodies have fat. Performers will have fat too, but not too much, as this is indicative of a societal perception of a lack of control when referring to fat people. In part, the element of control that is asserted by both

Kathryn and Lisa in their performances of Cherry Lesque, and Lady Magnolia respectively display a sense of control regarding what they wish to be seen, perceived, and read on-stage during their performances – a sense of control that is absent in their day-to-day lived experiences. These performances are rehearsed, staged performance, that includes specific lighting and a specific soundtrack. Not one of us has this available to us in daily life. Performers have the opportunity to control their environment, and what is seen by the viewer in their environment to some extent when they are in their performance space and presenting themselves as the character that they have created. There is an attempt to bend what is visible, into something that is imagined, and desired – if only the viewer allows their imagination to be suspended too.

Understanding bodies in society and bodies on stage

The performing identity becomes like a bodily canvas – *a mask*, if you will – where the choreographed bodily performance takes its shape, based on physical actions, and what is displayed on stage for an audience to see, and translated after the physical and psychic evidence is brought to light on stage. The performing body takes on “the shape of the very contact they have with objects and others” (Ahmed 2014, 1). Accordingly, the performers of neo-burlesque attempt to control the contact that they have with the audience, not only do they attempt to control the gaze by challenging how the audience may look at them, they also assert a form of dominance through the control of their bodily image and display, as a means for shaping and controlling what is viewed by the audience during their performances. Performers of neo-burlesque thus fashion their bodies in a way that might satisfy their needs in order to gain the validation they require through the audience response – thus completing the felicitious spectacle in their performances. The performance becomes a translation with crib notes scribbled into the margins, to make the performance more palatable and easy to understand for the viewing audience. The body, on stage in this case, is the site of transformative performance, and the performance enacts the experience which the performer wishes to portray for the viewing

audience, while “the reality of the lived female experience in a female body may only be perceived through social constructions, but is nevertheless real” (Jeffries 2007, xi). These social constructions in this instance, are shaped by the situation in which both the audience as well as the performer find themselves – that of the performance space, where staged, choreographed, neo-burlesque performance is to take place.

The performance of femininity is shaped by the way in which it is consumed after it is constructed among the group. In this sense, drag can be accepted as a performance of an understanding of femininity if it is consumed as such. The performance of neo-burlesque on stage is not so much an advertisement of what femininity is, or what it *ought* to be, though it is shaped by societal norms, constructions, and ideals, not just the ideals of mass media and society, but the ideals within the performance group, and among other performers of neo-burlesque. Thus, feminine performance here perpetuates what femininity *ought* to be in some ways, if we consider Baudrillard’s assertion that “if we consume the product as product, we consume its meaning through advertising” (Baudrillard 1988, 10). What it says on the label is taken at face value and consumed as such. Further, in discussing these forms of consumption, Baudrillard goes on to say that, “consumption, in so far as it is meaningful, is *a systematic act of the manipulation of body image, self-esteem*” (Baudrillard 1988, 22). The audience views the performance on stage, by the neo-burlesque performer within the understanding of what feminine performance *ought* to be, as scripted by their interaction with the media and societal norms and ideals, yet they also view this feminine performance through what the performer on stage views what feminine performance *is* and *ought* to be, through the reading of their choreographed, staged performance. The reading of these performances is thus two-fold yet is still translated through the lens of what is made available for the understanding of feminine performance through media assertion and understanding. Once more, we return to the notion of bodily norms that are asserted in relation to femininity, as, “these norms are constantly being reinforced by the media, especially with the prevalence of ultra-thin models, the multi-million dollar diet industry, and women’s magazines that prey of female anxieties” (Molloy and Herzberger 1998, 632). That Lisa’s urge to perform is affected by her feelings of “feeling fat,” or that Kathryn limits her consumption of confectionary items to such a degree that it becomes the

theme of her performance might not be a mere coincidence, but an attribution of their lived experience that is affected by the dominant ideals of a hegemonic society.

Idealised feminine performance at the Rouge Revue

“For me, burlesque is...first and foremost, about the art of striptease, and that's what I really love about burlesque, I love that it gives women a platform to express their sexuality, in a safe environment, where they are totally in control”

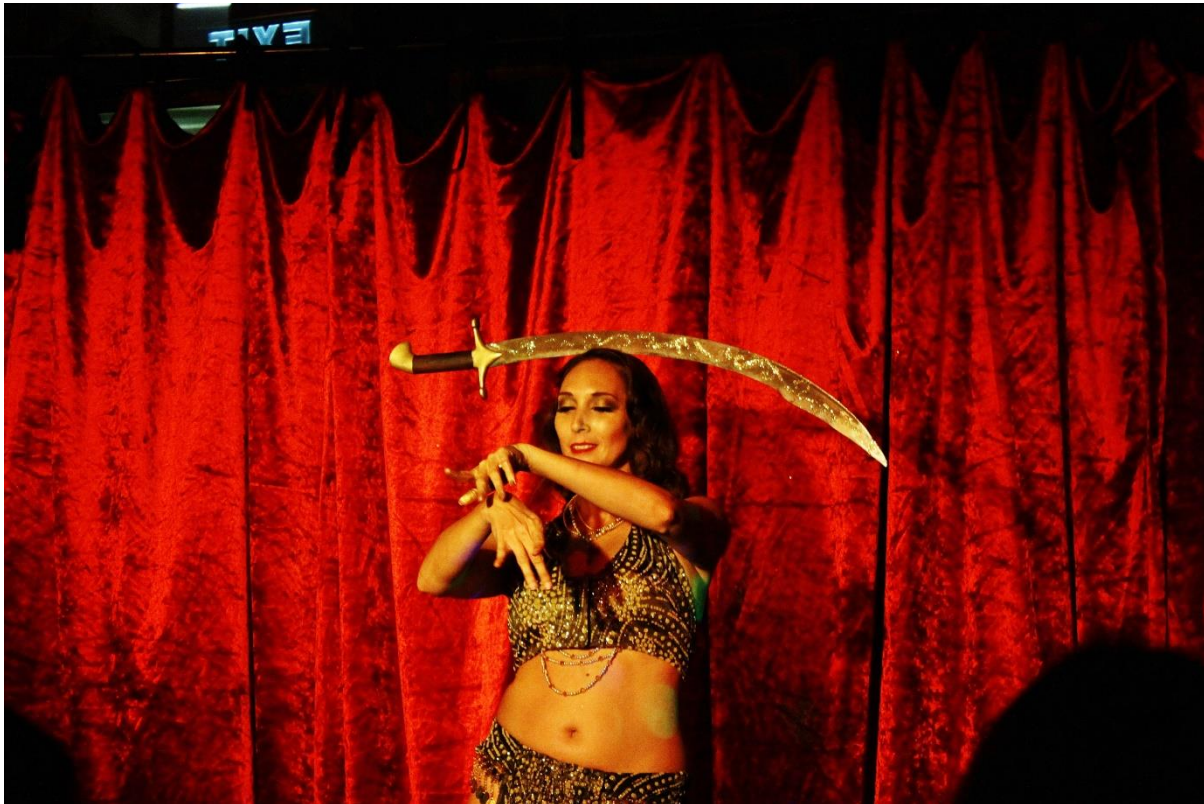
(Interview segment, Lady Magnolia/Lisa, 2015)

The neo-burlesque character of Lady Magnolia was born out of Lisa's experience of performing and teaching belly dance. Lisa is discussing her progression into performing neo-burlesque, and her desire to perform her sexuality, and not just her sensuality, as a femininely identified performer. Whether or not she performs sensually rather than sexually, there will be those who will sexualise her and her performance. By performing in a way that expresses her sexuality, in an environment that she feels she has some control over, she takes ownership of her sexualised performance. It is consumed by others, but it is owned by her. She notes that for a long time, those in the belly dance community viewed her performance of burlesque, as being too risqué, yet she views the two forms of performance as being related to one another. She states that:

“It's like they say that belly dancing and burlesque are twins. Or cousins, you know, and burlesque is the naughty cousin. But essentially, it's the same principle, in terms of, loving your body, self-acceptance, connecting with your sensuality, or your sexuality, although belly dancers like to pretend there's no sexuality in it. I feel like I did that for a long time. Like, it's sensual, not sexual. But the fact is, you're working your base chakra (she says, gesturing toward her diaphragm with both hands, pointed down, and her palms cupped), you're working this, that's where it's coming from. And you're kind of in denial if you wanna just point blank refuse to acknowledge that there's definitely an element of sexuality. Not necessarily your intention to put it out there, but it's definitely part of the package. So, having belly danced for all that time. Having gone through the body stuff. Learned to not cancel a gig, cuz I was feeling a few kilograms heavier in winter than I was in summer when you're not wanting to put on your belly dance costume, and go out and shake around, you know, when you're not feeling positive, but knowing that, that this is what I do. You know. And doing it anyway. So I guess, all of those things

contributed getting to a point where I felt a little bit restricted by that sensual, sexual boundary. And had enough of it. And I didn't want to have to play on this side of the fence always. And I wanted to go and be a little bit naughty and be more provocative.”

(Interview segment, Lady Magnolia/Lisa, 2015)



Lady Magnolia performs a belly dance inspired neo-burlesque performance (2015).

For Lisa, her performance of femininity through Lady Magnolia gives her the opportunity to perform her idealised feminine form. Her idealised feminine form is associated with societal expectations toward the feminine ideal, but it is not a direct copy of it. Her performance is shaped through a desire to perform femininity as a means for asserting both strength, and provocation, where she is able to perform for an audience, while inviting them to look at her, and her performance. The act of performing with the intention to be looked at is seen to be provocative. To her, the performance of neo-burlesque is intrinsically tied to the art of striptease,

giving her the opportunity to gain the audience's attention and play with their ideas surrounding the ways in which femininely performing bodies *ought* to perform. These ways in which feminine bodies ought to perform allude to the societal mask that prescribes the ways in which people may behave, or how they ought to perform when they are out in public. The performance of striptease is an element that takes the feminine performing body outside of its generally asserted idealised performance in society, as the performance of sexuality in this manner is often viewed as outside of the norm of the manner in which women *ought* to perform their femininity, sexuality, and sensuality in their daily lives. The performance of femininity in this instance takes shape within the realm of fantasy – fantasy for the performer, and fantasy for the viewing audience. Considering Jung's idea's regarding fantasy, he says that "fantasies are no substitute for living, they are fruits of the spirits which fall to him who pass his tribute to life" (Jung 1966, 307). Less poetically, Butler considers fantasy to be that which "allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise" (Butler 2004, 216). Further, she persists that "fantasy is what establishes the possible excess of the real, it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home" (Butler 2004, 217). This "elsewhere that is brought home" does not have to contain any personal experience for the individual who performs (though sometimes it does) – that individual wears the mask of performance. Fantasy is able to "bring home" that which is "experienced" and is constructed in the imaginary, for many, into fruition. Both drag and neo-burlesque performance work in the mode of fantasy, and allows for the interrogation of the ways in which that which is considered to be reality is made real. If we consider that gender is what makes the human more human, then the playfulness and malleability of gender that is displayed through the act of performance, whether drag or neo-burlesque, that bends the limitations of gendered performances and presentation, then I understand, and assert that to be human is not just one single thing. It is a constant process of translation, of transformation, of becoming.

The performance of striptease in neo-burlesque performance, particularly at The Rouge Revue, is often done so at close range. Thus, the feminine performance that takes place on stage becomes accessible to the audience who views it. The fantasy becomes close-up magic. That the performers interact with the members of the audience once the performance has concluded, further reduces the idea that the performer is distanced, and entirely inaccessible. The neo-

burlesque performer is not psychologically distanced from the audience in their performance of femininely performed fantasy on stage. Thus, the idealised feminine performance that the neo-burlesque performer asserts on stage is open for reading, and interpretation, in a world that is tangible and corporeal. The performance of femininity becomes a site for those who view it, to take in the content, and seek to apply it to their experience of feminine performance on the neo-burlesque stage, as well as outside of it. Thus, “the stripper splits into the ‘lived’ body of the self and the ‘object’ body seen by the other” (Schweitzer 2001, 74).

If somebody walks away from a burlesque performance and all they saw was the strip...they’ve kind of missed the show

“Sydney always says that she feels if somebody walks away from a burlesque performance, and all they saw was the strip, that they’ve kind of missed the show,” Lisa tells me, laughing as she takes a sip from her teacup, stroking the cat that is curled up on her lap. For Lisa, the performance of neo-burlesque, apart from providing a platform for her to perform on stage, also provides her with the opportunity to create a performance for an audience, that displays her ideas of feminine power. One of Lisa’s favourite performances, one that shows off her mask of authority, in the performance of *9 to 5/Bossy*, where she juxtaposes a bored, and uninspired “secretary character,” performed to Dolly Parton’s *9 to 5*, with an empowered, and sexually charged performance to Kelis’ *Bossy*.



Lady Magnolia performing *9 to 5/Bossy* (2014)

In performances such as this one, Lady Magnolia seeks to assert that the performance of femininity is not one that is powerless and looked upon. As Kelis' lyrics state: "*You don't have to love me. You don't even have to like me. But you **will** respect me. You know why? Cuz I'm a **boss!***" and in this instance of performance, Lady Magnolia is just that – a boss, and she is in charge, and in control of what the viewer is allowed to see during her performance. She has moved on from the bored, passive existence, performing as an assistant to a boss, and has become *the* boss. It is also fitting in this instance, that she is the leader of the troupe, The Rouge Revue, as she asserts herself as a dominant figure, a leader in this instance.

The performance of Lady Magnolia, by Lisa also affects the perceptions of feminine performance of her students who form the membership of her troupe. Kathryn goes on to say, in a conversation that we are having regarding feminine performance in neo-burlesque:

"I think again every single girl is different because that would have to do with their upbringing. Like, how the female people in their lives...and I guess the men too...influenced them, and made them feel about themselves, and femininity. And then obviously your teachers. So, whoever teaches you, their ideas. So, obviously Lisa's quite a strong character...which is great. Because we have a different concept within ourselves. But I also feel like you have to be careful though, because some of the burlesque teachers might have more of a stripping background. And I feel like that does show in their dances. Because those girls...it's more again for the audience. Whereas Lisa teaches us to do it more for ourselves. And what makes us feel sexy. And where I've seen it in other troupes, where I don't necessarily enjoy the dances because I feel that the girls are doing it for the crowd. And that I guess is also in itself the whole power thing. What are you doing it for? Obviously, you want to please the crowd. Like, that's not what I'm saying but there's still something that's a massive part of it. I'm doing this move because I really really, really like my boobs. And I feel like that makes me look good. And I feel good doing that. Whereas I feel with other dancers it's kinda like, 'I'm gonna do this, because guys like it when I do that.' And...and for me, that's not burlesque. I can't look at that. And when people say they've seen certain troupes or something, I'm almost a little embarrassed. I'm like 'no, no, no...that's not what I...' you know? Which is

obviously horrible. I don't want to be too judgemental. So, I feel that obviously someone with more of a stripping background...or even pole-dancing...I mean, that's a touchy one. Some girls do it amazingly, and it's nothing sexual at all strangely. But a lot of it is sexual. So, I find that those teachers do um...obviously influence their children...I mean, not children, but pretty much their children. Their children a lot, pretty much. Whereas we've got Lisa. And I feel like Lisa really has influenced us, and I feel that Lisa thinks she thinks more like the international burlesque dancers do about burlesque. Because obviously it's a hard thing, because it was brought here by a few people. And that would obviously influence the way that we all perceived it. I feel like Lisa is more like our thinking....and she's more...if you had to invite like, an international burlesque dancer to come here, you'd find that her and Lisa probably have the same concepts and the same thinking. So that's kind of how I see it."

(Interview segment, Cherry Lesque/Kathryn, 2015)

While Kathryn does express concern, and even disdain, for some other forms of feminine performance in neo-burlesque and a stigmatised perception of the relation of some performance to that of stripping, she highlights the role of Lisa as a prominent influence upon her understanding of performing femininity in neo-burlesque. The social structure of the troupe that she is a member of thus influences her understanding of her performance of an acceptable femininity within the neo-burlesque community that only includes two neo-burlesque troupes in Cape Town.

The social life of the neo-burlesque performer takes shape within the neo-burlesque troupe, as this structure, while performative, is required for their "material needs" to be met. The social structure of the group provides its members with a feeling of psychological and social security and collective identity, as they provide support for one another in a variety of ways within the group. For Kathryn/Cherry Lesque, the performative nature of feminine empowerment raises important aspects regarding how she wishes to perform and be perceived by those who view neo-burlesque performance. Kathryn's performance of Cherry Lesque thus becomes symbolic of what she aims to assert her views of feminine performance to be, while she performs as Cherry Lesque, her performance of an idealised feminine self takes shape in a manner in which "the self is the agency through which individuals experience themselves in relation to others" (Elliot

2010, 32). Lisa/Lady Magnolia highlights the achievements of feminine performance in encouraging her students and troupe members to celebrate the performance of their femininity, through the creative outlet of neo-burlesque performance. Often, the themes of the solo performances by her students highlight this. One such solo performance is that of Cherry Lesque's performance, celebrating Amelia Earhart, set to Peaches' electroclash song, *Boys Wanna Be Her*.



Cherry Lesque performing *Boys Wanna Be Her* (2015).

In the performance of *Boys Wanna Be Her*, Cherry Lesque performs a fictionalised account of Amelia Earhart's achievements as an aviation pioneer. Throughout the act, she parodically mimes a performance of a pilot, whose aircraft suddenly runs into mechanical trouble. The performance culminates with her fixing the aircraft herself, with the aid of her trusty wrench, and oil can, and she takes flight once more. The performance is an adaptation of the popular "girl power" trope, that both Cherry Lesque and I grew up with in the mid-1990s, once the girl group, The Spice Girls became popular across the world, and in South Africa. The performance echoes the message of the poster of "Rosie the Riveter," that proclaims, "We (Women) Can Do It!". Though Amelia Earhart's disappearance happened in 1937, while the poster of Rosie the Riveter

was only created in 1943, the performance of a nostalgia that has no roots in South African society continues as individuals who perform ingest media information from outside. Cherry Lesque is not alone in acting out this sense of nostalgia. Much of neo-burlesque performance looks back at the time in which burlesque was first popularised and applies those whitened conventions through an imagined lens – the lens of film and other forms of media that keep that “old Hollywood” and Pin-Up Girl nostalgia, and the history alive. Looking at the idea of “girl power,” in Cherry Lesque’s performance, we begin to understand her desire to be part of the structured group. The membership of the troupe, and the ideas around the mask that are shared among those in the troupe, particularly with Lisa/Lady Magnolia at the helm, provides members such as Cherry Lesque with the tools with which they are able to construct a feminine performance that meets their needs to raise themselves, and view their feminine performance up as powerful, even if the dominant society in which they experience their daily lives may assert forces upon them that attempt to prescribe the manner in which femininely identified individuals *ought* to perform. Within this group, and in their performances, they are allowed to assert their own ideas regarding how they *wish* to perform femininely, and how they *wish* to be perceived, when performing their ideas around feminine performance and identity

In this chapter, I ask, what is the meaning and purpose of the mask, when working through feminine and hyper-feminine means? Here, I dive into the collective psyche as it may work in among a group of women as a means to create a mask that, in Jung’s terms, feigns individuality. This is used to understand the feminine mask as a response to neo-burlesque performance, and also its role in group ideas around femininity. In this chapter, I hope to bring to light that the supposed mask of the inner-self, of individual intent has no true place in these performances, and that rather it is up to the values coming from within or outside the group that dictate what the feminine mask may look like and how it may function.

Chapter 6 – Exceptions and Slippages

I arrive at Alexander bar, near the city centre of Cape Town it is a Thursday night in December, one week before Christmas. I purchased a ticket to the show as soon as I heard that “Boylesque” was returning to Cape Town for another week-long run. The bar, and the outside seating area is full, people are milling about. I find a woman holding a clip-board, and tell her my name, to receive my ticket from her. I wait at the bar, to order something chilled to drink, as it is a balmy evening. As I receive my drink, music plays over the speakers in the bar to indicate that the show is about to start, and that we should head upstairs to take our seats. I join the queue at the bottom of the stairs, to find my way to a seat in the theatre. Once upstairs, a young woman in a black shirt-dress takes my ticket and points me into the darkened theatre. I find a seat in the front row next to a man with a shaved head, dressed in black, who proceeds to spread his legs in such a way that he encroaches on my personal space in my seat. While there is still some light in the theatre, I look around the room to see who is in the theatre tonight. The audience tonight is largely made up of middle-aged white men. At the back of the theatre, there is a small group of young black men, they appear to be talking excitedly among themselves, while in the middle of the small theatre, near the aisle, there is an older white couple, potentially a husband and wife, who sit sternly next to one another, not talking, the male half of the couple has his arms crossed over his expansive belly. Eventually the lights die down, and music starts playing, and Easy Dora saunters onto the stage, stumbling slightly, appearing inebriated. She is dressed in a French maid’s costume, a pair of ripped fishnet stockings, and her garish makeup is smeared across her somewhat lightly bearded face. She carries a feather duster, and lazily points it towards the audience when she starts to address us. She introduces the first act, who is a muscular ballet dancer, who drops items of clothing as his act progresses. Once he leaves the stage, Easy Dora reappears on stage, picking up the discarded clothing items in an unenthusiastic manner. Her actions contrast the enthusiasm for which the audience displayed when the previous performer removed each item of clothing. He has made a mess, and she is left to clean it up, on her hands and knees, dressed in ripped fishnet stockings. She continues the act of introducing each new act, and picking up clothing afterwards, acting as the “stage kitten” and host of the performance. Boylesque is a variety performance, made up of 5 performers who perform singing and dancing

acts throughout the show. The production is made up of 3 male dancers, one drag performer in Easy Dora, and one female neo-burlesque performer who sings and dances. As the show draws to a close, Easy Dora reappears on stage, only this time, he is not in Easy Dora's costume, but wears jeans, a flatbill cap, and a colourful oversized t-shirt, and tells the crowd how much he loves Justin Bieber. So much so that he went to his concert in Johannesburg, even though he might have been the oldest person there who was not someone's parent. He proceeds to tell the audience that he wishes to pay homage to his young idol in song, as the opening bars to Justin Bieber's "Baby" starts to play. He sings the song, and a third of the way through the song, he attempts to invite someone from the audience to join him in song. The first person he attempts to bring on stage, by shoving a microphone into his face, vehemently declines the offer. The second person however grabs the microphone and joins him on stage, singing every word, and every line of the song with perfect pitch and phrasing. As the song ends, the young man who joined Easy Dora on stage, returns to his seat. Easy Dora heads back stage, and the final song for the evening plays, as each member of the cast comes on stage for their final hoorah and bow, which is greeted with applause from much of the audience. While each cast member receives applause, the greatest amount of applause and cheer, appears when the muscular ballet dancer takes centre stage, to address the audience with a curtsey, and a cheeky smile. The show ends, and I wait downstairs to speak to the neo-burlesque performer from tonight's performance. She has promised to introduce me to Easy Dora. Around 20 minutes pass, and the bar is still full, looking around the bar, it appears that most members of the audience have decided to stick around for another drink or more. Eventually, the individual who performed as Easy Dora makes his descent from the theatre, and the neo-burlesque performer introduces me to him. We talk briefly about my research project, as he sips on a beer, and exchange numbers, as we arrange to meet the following day.

It is a sunny Friday afternoon in December, the morning after the previous night's performance of *Boylesque* at Alexander bar in Strand street in Cape Town, and I have organised to meet with *Shaun*⁴⁰, the producer-cum-director-cum-host of the small production. He is shorter than me, with a slight build, and scruffy facial hair. He is dressed very differently from last night, in a t-

⁴⁰ Name changed

shirt and jeans. As Easy Dora, Shaun spends most of the evening costumed in an un-brushed bobbed wig, a French maid's uniform/costume, sneakers, and a pair of ripped fishnet stockings. As Easy Dora, Shaun also wears garish makeup smeared across his face. Today, however, there is not a trace of last night's performance left on his appearance. We have decided to meet in Seapoint, close to where he is staying, at the Spur that is attached to the Protea hotel. It is already quite warm outside, it's only the late morning, and as I find Shaun seated at a table, he is drinking a draught beer. After a brief greeting, I take a seat across from him and order a black coffee. We spend some time discussing my research, and eventually I ask him how he would describe "Boylesque". "Can I recap it for you?" he starts: "It was not intended to be a burlesque show, I just tried to come up with a new word, "*boylesque*" I thought it sounded like an interesting title for a show. And the venue which commissioned our first, sort of production...insisted that there be some drag in the performance. So, I donated myself. But I insisted on doing "bad" drag, because I don't...I can't relate to the other drag. And decided to, in my own...do you use the word "act?" In my own act, to tribute a dear, and dead friend, Sharon Bowen, from Johannesburg." He probes whether I wish for him to continue, I indicate that I do. Shaun continues his story of how "Boylesque" came into fruition, "I'm just giving you the background of literally what happened. We were unemployed. That's how it came about. And we didn't know that we were not gonna make any money from this. We thought potentially it could be some mixture of shekels. We call it, in our company...in our house, in our crew, it's called shekels. Um, so...I created my character, Easy Dora, obviously using that gay language (Dora meaning drink, to drink, or be drunk) and... then the show grew, because I said, no... we can't *not* have a woman. We need to include everybody. And then, we thought, but for commercial value...we need also a muscle man, you know, cuz the gays will buy the tickets, if we have the muscle man on the poster. So, we ended up like...this little, like this...like sweet, fantastic company...combination of people of the hot Asian guy, the beautiful Italian girl, the Zulu guy, and Easy Dora, whatever that is. The ugly sister. That pantomime person. And we started building the show around that...just around ourselves, and our numbers...mostly my ideas. I don't mind saying that *Sifiso*⁴¹ in the beginning wanted to say it's his ideas." I ask him how he handled that situation, and he responds that, "It was mine! It's always somebody else's idea! So, um, and then, and then, because we did need the work, I pushed...even though I'd never produced a

⁴¹ Name changed

theatre show, but I knew that there was a circuit of smaller, more experimental. There's a whole lot of venues where you can try something at, gay, straight, whatever.” “So, does that push for inclusivity...having the range of people performing with the group influence the appeal that you have in the neo-burlesque or theatre worlds, respectively?” I ask Shaun. He ponders for a moment, and starts to speak slower this time, “For the longest time...we almost fought our...I wanna say gay, but I also can say queer, we fought our...no we didn't fight it, we were just confused about it, cuz we didn't wanna label ourselves, because it was really...a packet of different colour crackers, and, and the burlesque, sort of head-girl...in Johannesburg, Miss Oh...the biggest activist for burlesque, Miss Oh⁴² started coming to our shows. But coming like 8 times. And she said, “you guys are doing it *really really, really, REALLY* right. And like only afterwards, when I started reading up, I realised that we are doing, we are **DOING** the burlesque. We are, and we are a cohesive one hour. Not an act of 5 minutes. So...it's become less and less cohesive, like what you saw last night is a bit...but before it was, we were very militant about our...” I note that that was an element that I noticed in the previous year's performance of “Boylesque” at Alexander bar, that there appeared to be some sort of thread running through the show, that assisted in keeping the audience's attention at all times. Shaun smiles, and continues, “Ja, there is a journey: Because we're all from theatre backgrounds, and trained...um...we like...in many ways we differ from the other burlesque performers, for example, keeping cohesion. It's a variety show, sure, but you can't stop and start, because it's boring for an audience, I'm not calling the others boring, I'm talking about what I do.” The group of performers who perform “Boylesque” with Easy Dora, appear to function in relation to a collective belief system, similar to that of the Rouge Revue with Lady Magnolia. The group appears to have their own system of language use, and functions supportively with one another in the structure a family aspires to. They function through the use and creation of institutional facts that suit their ideology. Similarly to Henri Lefebvre's conception of the family, where he states that: “the family is affirmed not only as a micro-centre of consumption and occupation of a small local space (a place) but as an affective group reinforced for a sense of solidarity” (Lefebvre 2002, 51), the performing group creates a space where collective beliefs and social solidarity are put together, creating a sense of home for those who participate in the group. Each member is different, and represents for the audience something different, often stripped down to

⁴² A well known neo-burlesque performer from Johannesburg

their essentialising characteristics that are to be consumed by the audience who views the performance. The consumption of characters through their essentialising elements infers that these characters and performers then mirror the expectations of the dominant hegemonic society. While they may be making the world strange through their performance, they do so by holding a mirror up to the viewer in the audience. The audience thus sees something familiar, something they can understand, something that they can easily make object, and consume. Though the audience one-sidedly objectifies through the gaze, performances such as Easy Dora's challenges this gaze, by looking back at them with disdain – both parties are then led to question what they are looking at.

For a boylesque performer, such as Dear James, who performs with the neo-burlesque troupe, Black Orchid Burlesque, his journey into neo-burlesque did not take shape through the theatre or variety performance. He found his way into neo-burlesque by assisting friends who were performing in a neo-burlesque showcase. To him, it looked like something enjoyable, which led him to taking classes with the first neo-burlesque troupe that was established in Cape Town. Fortunately for Dear James, another boylesque performer had already been performing with Black Orchid Burlesque, and this allowed him to find a space in Cape Town's neo-burlesque performance community at the time. Yet, for Dear James, the performance of boylesque is not a means to make money, as he operates in the neo-burlesque world which does not necessarily possess the crossover appeal of a production like "Boylesque", and he usually tries to get booked through the neo-burlesque performance alongside other members of Black Orchid Burlesque. In Dear James's performing world, to perform neo-burlesque costs him more than he receives in return.

Dear James also adopts a mask for performance that is not that unlike the mask of feminine performance that members of the Rouge Revue apply. Except this is not a mask of femininity as Dear James does not perform femininely, neither does he perform with overt masculinity. His mask is that of hyper-performance – a performance that produces confidence when Dear James adopts his mask. What he gains is confidence in himself, through the use of highly stylised, character driven performances. By giving the audience permission to look at his performance,

and by extension, his body, he gains a greater sense of confidence with regards to his body through the projected bodily performance that is neo-burlesque. When on stage, he is allowed to be sexy, a characteristic that is stereotypically not aimed at men as an aspiration – particularly not for men who do not look like or aspire to look like the shirtless fitness models on the cover of Men’s Health magazine. Dear James states: “For me it’s, it’s a way to...appreciate myself. And appreciate how other people view me, and themselves...being comfortable with who you are. And embracing that. Like, most women do it, because they wanna feel sexy, I do it, because I wanna feel like...I can still be who I am and be appreciated.” This desire to be appreciated is similar to Honeybun’s revelation that performing neo-burlesque makes her feel like she has substance. At the Grand Burlesque Exhibition, Dear James performs “Mr Cellophane, a musical number from the popular stage and screen musical, “Chicago.” The lyrics of the chorus read:

“Cellophane, Mister Cellophane

should have been my name, Mister Cellophane

'cause you can look right through me

Walk right by me and never know I'm there”

Dear James is the only male neo-burlesque performer in Cape Town. Male stage performance is not commonly associated with neo-burlesque performance in Cape Town. This means that Dear James is an outlier. Instead of making him a commodity for being an outlier in this performance style, it makes him an anomaly of sorts, and he is often overlooked for performances outside of studio showcase events, as most corporate events only want to hire female performers. He becomes like “Mr Cellophane” in the neo-burlesque world in Cape Town. He is there, but people don’t really know that he is there. Yet, he continues to perform as he craves that feeling of being appreciated. When there is the opportunity to perform, Dear James brings out his best so that he may receive the adoration and appreciation that he desires as a response to his performances. Dear James is never reduced to a merely performing body though – because he performs a form

of masculine performance, his performances are not scrutinized and stripped away, he always has access to agency and as such has control over the way his image may be portrayed.

Shaun's idea of "Boylesque" highlights performance, and theatrical engagement. While Shaun himself may not be doing the theatrically stylised striptease performance that neo-burlesque is known for, he bridges the gap between a perceived sexy striptease, and camp, by his inclusion of intentionally "bad" drag by performing as Easy Dora, who as the MC for the performance easily gains the most time on stage. The idea of "bad" drag here refers to an act of performance of imperfection. "Bad" drag operates within the mode of the intentionally failed performance, as discussed in chapter 2. In this chapter, the intentionally failed performance is demonstrated through Peekaboo Pointe's Lazy Stripper routine, where she reduces her performance of burlesque down to the absurdity of an act that is most often watched with an air of wonder. The wonder is stripped away. So too, does Easy Dora strip away the niceties and excess of the mainstream idea of the drag performer. This performance is not meant to convince the viewer that a performance of femininity or hyper-femininity is taking place, rather, the garishness of "bad" drag cuts the performance down to its base elements, and asks the audience to consider what they are looking at, when they look at certain performing bodies on stage. What Easy Dora is meant to convey is drag at its worst, unenviable, and least glamorous. Easy Dora's performance is seemingly unenthusiastic, and filled with disdain. It is almost as if she is asking the audience to *not* look at her – to not objectify her. Many drag performers are seeking some form of recognition through their performance, and through the attention and applause of the audience. They want the character to be seen for their convincing, successful performance – often an aspirational performance. Shaun's application of "bad" drag is an intentional act of failure. That his makeup, costume and wig is applied imperfectly, often appearing shabby, he appears on stage as the sad clown – initially provoking laughter through his performance of Easy Dora, but eventually demonstrating the sadness and mundanity of the character. Easy Dora is not spectacular, she is not flashy, there is no "glitz and glam" to her, as Lola Fine would look for. She is ordinary, morose even, and during the spectacular acts that take place on the neo-burlesque stage during "Boylesque," brings the viewer back down to earth, pulling the audience into a state of recognition of the mundanity of their own everyday lives. Like the neo-burlesque

performances that take place around Easy Dora's appearances, the audience's decision to attend the performance of "Boylesque" at the Alexander Bar theatre, breaks up the mundanity of their everyday actions. In Easy Dora's action, this is just made more obvious through the act of her performance. In effect, the mask of mundane performance that Easy Dora applies to her performance further highlights the mundane mask that the viewer wears during their everyday life performances. She sighs deeply on stage, looking through the audience in an act of boredom, just as the audience often does throughout the performance of everyday tasks.





Above: Dear James performs Mr Cellophane at the Grand Burlesque Exhibition (2015).

Shaun’s assertion that he is doing “bad” drag, as part of his performance of Easy Dora in “Boylesque” provides us with some inference that he is performing *drag*, rather than performing a representation of *femininity* or *womanhood*. While drag performance is related to some ideas of gendered performance, in this instance, it is indicated that what he is doing on stage is a form of drag, and not a written, or scripted representation of womanhood. The idea of gender in the performance of Easy Dora stretches the imagination of what gender should be and spits it out into a jumbled mish-mash of misshapen identity. Much of drag in popular media focuses on hyper-feminine representations of drag performance, known as “fishy”⁴³ in the drag world, as it appears to be the most shocking to the hetero-dominant viewing audience that someone who has been assigned male at birth should look so feminine in their appearance. These forms of drag performance operate within the order of social fact – providing an assurance that femininity

⁴³ The use of the term “fishy” implies that the individual appears to very much like, and is able to present as close to cisgender women, physically. This term is not without contestation though, as it is potentially insulting to both transgender and cisgender women.

ought to look and operate in a particular manner that is in accordance to the gender binary. This implies that “fishy queens” produce a look for a performance character that appears closer to hyper-feminine ideals, closely related to performative ideals related to womanhood, such as those that are found in beauty pageants. In South Africa, a greater proportion of those who model themselves as these “fishy queens,” participate in drag pageantry as well. On the other hand, there is also a push towards more *Avant Garde* styles of drag that pushes beyond the boundaries of the “fishy queen,” and hinges on the more obvious distinction that the performer is “doing drag,” so to speak. While there are elements that are often found from more popular forms of drag found in these performances that push the boundaries of drag’s history that is tied to hyper-feminine ideals, there are a number of performers who reject the ideals of the “fishy queen,” and perform a differently stylised form of drag. Such is the case of Easy Dora, and her assertions towards “bad drag.” Shaun makes it clear that he struggles to identify with the generally stereotyped ideals towards drag in popular culture and media today, and instead embraces what he calls “bad drag,” with garish, smeared makeup, visible body hair and facial hair, and a seemingly haphazard approach to costuming, that flies in the face of what is commonly understood of drag as female impersonation. The emphasis of “bad” drag, is on *the drag*, and the stripping away of that which implies the gender that the performing individual is perceived to possess, and instead focuses on the gendered performance, informed by drag, that they are doing on stage, for the viewing spectator. Similar to this approach, is the drag appearance and performance of Mary Scary, who performs drag with a full moustache, and proudly displays their body hair as part of their character’s appearance – though I would not consider Mary Scary to be doing “bad” drag, she appears to be more interested in a less mainstream form of drag performance, where she is able to play around with gender and feminine expression.

For Mary Scary, this idea of pushing boundaries towards the *Avant Garde*, particularly in drag performance situated outside of the mainstream, feels a bit easier than her experiences of performing outside of South Africa, in European countries. According to her, South African audiences tend to view drag performers from other countries as being *more* out there, and as being more *Avant Garde* than drag performers who perform locally. She disagrees with these audience assertions, as she believes that because the boundaries have not been pushed by as

many drag performers, in terms of what drag *can* be, those who *do* push the boundaries are merely viewed as being more visibly “*out there*.” Because there are fewer drag performers in a city like Cape Town than in some major cities in Europe or North America where drag is popular, drag performers who push the boundaries are able to garner more attention from their performances. While the character of Easy Dora is bound to a specific show, the rejection of certain physical ideals related to drag performance makes one sit up and notice her. It is not necessarily “bad drag” that is performed on the stage at “Boylesque,” but a different form of drag altogether, one that constantly reminds the audience that they are seeing something akin to drag, rather than the illusion of feminine performance and female impersonation that Lola Fine clings to. Either form of drag implies a looking to, and looking for specific elements within a performance. In bad drag, the audience looks for some idea related to realism, while in female impersonation, the audience seeks the feminine as fantasy.

Drag Looks

In the performance of “Boylesque,” we find something that is quite rare in South African neo-burlesque circles, in that there is a combination of both performances of drag and neo-burlesque taking place on the same stage in the same space. When we look to Laura Mulvey’s influence regarding gendered spectatorship, we find that there exists a possibility for the audience who views a performance to become an active participant in creating meaning regarding the performance (Sider 2012, 13). Drag and neo-burlesque performance, as it takes place on the barroom or club stage, takes place without the existence of a script for their performance. That the individual on stage is performing drag or neo-burlesque is hinged on the creation of what the performance is, and what it means, in conversation between the performer and their audience. The performer builds their performance on the audience’s understanding of what drag, and neo-burlesque is. When we look at Easy Dora’s performance in “Boylesque,” we are constantly reminded that the character on stage is housed in a masculine body, with very obvious indications for the audience that they are watching a masculine identified individual performing an attempt at feminine performance for the purpose of staged entertainment. Mary Scary’s performances similarly fall into this category of drag performance, where the audience is

supposed to be constantly reminded that they are watching a performance of drag, by her refusal to remove body hair, as well as her dropping her voice to a more masculine tone regularly during her staged performances. Though, where Easy Dora and Mary Scary differ is that Mary Scary often seeks out performances of glamour, indicating that in this performance there is still some sort of clinging toward perceived femininity. Both Mary Scary, and Easy Dora make use of the microphone on stage, and do not alter their voices in any way. Further, both of them indicate their performance of a stylised form of drag that hinges on the inclusion of masculine bodily features by exposing body hair and maintaining the use of facial hair in their performances of drag. This, in some ways provokes the audience into an encounter with their history (Jones 2011, 33), and understanding of what drag performance is, in order to interpret it as such.

Mass media representations of what drag performance is provides most audiences with what drag is meant to look like. This looks very different, at least on the surface from the form of drag that Mary Scary, and Easy Dora perform with strong allusions to their masculine bodies, though they achieve this in very different ways. Other drag performers go to great lengths to remove all traces of physical masculinity from their performance personas. Below, are some images of drag performance and presentation that focuses on a greater sense of feminine presentation. These performers, when it comes to their presentation are highly skilled in makeup artistry, so that they are able to achieve more feminine facial features, by attempting to hide stronger jawlines and stubble with makeup and contouring. Contouring as such can also reduce the visible size of the nose and Adam's apple when looking at performers straight on. While their makeup and costumes are certainly not what many women would wear on normal, day-to-day occurrences, their drag is studied, and perfected to their needs. Their makeup, and hair infers a feminine gendered performance, but just enough to indicate that they are performing drag, and not necessarily a female impersonation act. The audience is invited to look, but only the drag performer decides what they are allowed to see. Most commonly what the audience is allowed to see is the mask, and the gaze that is returned, preventing these performers to be completely taken in by those who gaze upon them – the audience may look at them, but will never be able to take them in, and take ownership of their perceived image.

In the images below, each performer displays a form of defiant strength. They know we as viewers are looking, and confront us with their own “look”. The “look” that looks back, penetrating the gaze of the viewer. The use of the mask is clear here, as these performers make use of the mask as a plot device to further perceptions that are based on the desired projection. As a viewer, the audience is asked to question what they see, in lieu of what they know based on what they are seeing. This, I argue depends on the audience’s willingness to take on and take in what is projected by the mask. This affects what we are able to see – and as such, know about the performance. For Manila in the first image, her face is strong, and she looks ready to attack. She spits the words of her lipsynch outward, demanding the viewer’s attention. She has control over the audience when she wears the mask of Manila, and the audience is mesmerised by her commanding nature. The second image is of Roxy Le Roux, presenting a daytime drag look. She has her chin up, and her eyes locked on the viewer of the image. She presents femininely in her makeup and attire, her crystal leading you to believe that she might be soft, though the toughness of her gaze displays the liminal nature of drag performance. In the final image, we see Vida Fantabisher. Her feet are placed little over hip width apart, an image that connotes strength – a pose that we often see associated with super heroes. Her hand is pointed upwards, which directs our attention to her well-made-up face. In this instance the viewer has their attention attracted to the beauty of her face. Her hand gesture, and the expression on her face, however tell a different story. For once she is not joking, the look she displays says, “try me.” The expression is confident and somewhat aggressive. It says, “look at me if you dare.”



Manila von Teez Performing at Zer021 (2014).



Roxy Le Roux, at the Claremont gardens (2014).



Vida Fantabisher performing at Zer021, her hand up, her face, animated, drawing our attention to her well made up face (2014).

To reiterate bell hooks' words, stating that there is power in looking, both the queer audiences who view drag, as well as the performers of drag gain the power to look defiantly in response to one another and as such possess the ability to validate one another through the thoughtful recognition associate with this act of looking.

Looking back at the drag performances of Manila von Teez, Morticia LaValle, Easy Dora, and everyone in between, there are similarities between different styles of drag performance and presentation. Enough so that the viewer will easily be able to identify the individual as a drag performer, the subtle differences indicate stylistic differences between them as an indication that there are different forms of drag that are taking place in Cape Town. There is no one way that drag should look like, or how drag *ought* to be presented, no matter what Lola Fine asserts regarding her aspiration toward a collective understanding of, and standardisation of drag presentation and performance.

Looked at, looking back

“Women, displayed as sexual object, is the light motif of erotic spectacle: from pin-ups to striptease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkley, she holds the look, plays on it, and signifies male desire. Mainstream film neatly combines spectacle and narrative. The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of a storyline; to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation”

(Mulvey 1975, 12)

Laura Mulvey writes about the male gaze, and scopophilia, or the pleasure in looking at another person as an erotic object, in the medium of film. Yet, her work can also be applied to the act of looking in a theatrical space. Drag and neo-burlesque performances take place in both theatrical spaces, as well as more informal restaurant and bar spaces. While the latter is more frequent, making use of theory related to the cinematic experience is useful as it deals with the act of looking, in this case, the act of looking at stylised performance that evokes some form of

feminine performance. For Mulvey, “the cinema offers a number of possible pleasures. One of these is scopophilia. There are circumstances in which looking is itself a source of pleasure” (Mulvey 1975, 9). This, I assert is not very different from the act of viewing a live performance of drag or neo-burlesque. In these cases, audiences view a performance because they derive a form of pleasure from watching the drag or neo-burlesque performance presented to them as a form of entertainment. Yet, for Mulvey, this pleasure in the act of looking is deeply affected by the sexual imbalance in the social world, where the pleasurable act of looking is “split between an active male and a passive female,” where “the determining male gaze projects its phantasy on the female figure, which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey 1975, 11). As I have discussed earlier in this research, it is evident that the audiences that make up drag and neo-burlesque viewership are not just those who are masculine identified, and that those who perform both drag and neo-burlesque are not just femininely identified. There is a conversation at play in the performance and viewing of drag and neo-burlesque, and this provides an indication that both the viewer and performer possess the ability to project upon one another. While the viewer does participate in creating meaning related to the performance, through active looking once they have been invited to look, the individual who performs is not strictly relegated to the object. Both drag, and neo-burlesque performances are interactive between performer and audience, thus, the performer possesses the capacity to look back, and engage with the audience, often to elicit some form of a desired response from the audience, and in this way resists the power that seeks to make them object – thereby going further than what the gaze wishes to imply upon their performances.

Selling the performance

The performance of “Boylesque” as a medium between drag and neo-burlesque is still fairly uncommon in South Africa. Shaun notes that there are some people who misinterpret the potential content of the show as some sort of “Chippendales” male strip show performance, and they are met with an unexpected performance in response to attendance. Due to this potential interpretation, Shaun attempts to make sure that audiences are satisfied in their perceptions, by casting the stereotypically handsome, muscular ballet dancer, *Hector*⁴⁴, who he also makes sure

⁴⁴ Name changed

to always put on the poster and promotional material, as he believes that they need to do that by “selling” what is deemed more stereotypically acceptably attractive to audiences, as sex, and apparent sexiness sells in these situations in his opinion. Yet, in this situation, the selling of sex, sexuality, and sexual attractiveness is hinged upon the gaze of men, and women, upon a largely masculine identified performance by male bodied individual performers. When I question him regarding the occurrence of masculine sexuality and sexiness taking place on stage at “Boylesque,” he notes that men in general are not really ever given the opportunity to be sexy, and by placing a more masculine sexuality and sexiness at the forefront of the performances here, the audience is capable of learning that it is okay for masculine identified individuals to be viewed as sexy, and that this is not just the domain of feminine sexualities, particularly on stage. By directing the audience’s attention towards masculine bodies in a certain manner, the audience’s potential for learning that the assertive attentive force that is put on a performer on stage is not strictly one that is only for a masculine viewer and a feminine performer who will be gazed upon, as Mulvey might assert. Towards the end of the night’s performance, a tall, very slender bearded performer comes on stage, his hair is wet, his slightly concave chest glistening in the light, focused on him, on stage. He wears a large towel, winking at the audience as he proceeds to attempt to seduce the audience during his striptease performance by dropping the first towel. The audience is silent at first, at the suggestion of his nudity, and the tension is broken by laughter and clapping as he reveals that he is wearing another slightly smaller towel underneath the first one. His game of “made you look” proceeds until he is only left holding onto a tiny hand towel that covers his genitals, and he hurries off stage before his game leaves him completely exposed. As the audience cheers the performance, with clapping and wolf whistling, Easy Dora reappears. She sighs audibly and complains about those who perform strip tease being messy. She bends over, with great effort and sighs, to pick up the discarded towels in such a way that we can see up her skirt, and we are greeted by Shaun’s bulging genitalia in the spotlight, not only forcing us to look, but also to consider the performance that we are looking at

Concluding Statements

Cape Town has a history of drag performance that has not been researched in great detail even though there is a long running tradition of drag pageantry that takes place in the communities where people of colour reside. On the Cape Flats, there is a pageant for nearly every occasion. This research however does not focus on drag pageantry – though this is a topic that warrants further exploration and research. This research provides insight into drag performance as it takes place in the nightclubs and bars in Cape Town. This research also explores neo-burlesque performance as a sister performance to drag performance – one that includes white, cis women as performers. Thus, while these performances might occupy similar psychic space, it is only on the rarest occasions that both of these types of performance will occupy the same physical space. The similarities surrounding both feminine and hyper-feminine performance in both drag and neo-burlesque performance resulted in my desire to research these forms of performance alongside one another.

The two main concepts discussed in this research are that of the gaze, and the mask.

The gaze is defined as follows, in *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* Laura Mulvey posits the idea of the male gaze in spectatorship, by highlighting the voyeuristic potential of viewing a performing body. If we are to compare the performance of neo-burlesque to the cinematic conventions that Mulvey discusses, “cinema builds the way she is to be looked at into the spectacle itself...cinematic codes create a gaze, a world, and an object, thereby producing an illusion cut to the measure of desire.” (Mulvey 1999, 843). Mulvey discusses what she considers to be “the male gaze” and the nature of objectification in the cinematic form. An example of this form of controlled gaze as a means for objectification (of the feminine form, and the feminine appearing form, in particular), is the convention to introduce feminine characters on the screen by forcing the viewer to look at them from the bottom up, whereby the screen direction pans from the feminine character’s feet, up to their legs, midsection, breasts, and finally, their face.

The mask is defined as follows, the mask, in this research is heavily influenced by Carl Jung's concept of persona. The Latin term, persona refers to the mask of an actor, which Jung suggests actors made use of in order to indicate the role that they were playing at a point in time (Jung 1966, 216). Jung goes on to say that the mask is an element of the "collective psyche, a mask that *feigns individuality*, making others and oneself believe that one is individual, whereas one is simply acting a role through which the collective psyche speaks" (Jung 1966, 216). The persona/mask acts as a "shield" for the ego from negative images and responses that are enacted upon the individual from outside.

In this research, I challenge the audience/reader by asking how do we see? What way do we as an audience look at and interpret performing bodies as "things" through the potential objectification. And, what is the effect that this has on the expectation of and on gendered bodies. Drag and neo-burlesque performers, through the act of performance, are to be looked at, and only sometimes speak on stage. This voicelessness leaves them open to objectification through the gaze. It is understood that the desire to look is considered a primal urge, validated through scopophilia. In this research, I attempt to understand what scopophilic pleasure is derived from watching hyper-feminine performing bodies, and in what ways might the audience derive pleasure from othering. I use the gaze in this research, starting from the work of Mulvey and E Ann Kaplan, and question the relevance and usefulness of the supposed "male gaze" in connection with Marcia Ochoa's understanding of felicitous spectacle, where the intention of the performance/performing is that which is used to validate the performance for both the spectator as well as the performer. How, then, does the adoption of the mask challenge and attempt to unseat these older/potentially dated ways of understanding performance through the gaze? Does the viewer come to possess the performance, and by extension, the perceived image of the performer? Or is the performer able to possess their own image? The mask thus only gives the illusion that they are something object, able to be passed on, and around, but the mask also protects the performer from audience projection by making use of the mask being projected into the audience. In this way the performer is able to move beyond the gaze by challenging the audience's ideas of what they are looking at. Through an emphasis of bodily movement, the

performer tells the viewer where their eyes should travel to, what they should be taking in, basically telling the viewer the story without them being entirely aware of the intricate mechanics thereof.

The mask and the gaze work together in way in which the performance is read. Mainly in this research I focus on the feminine mask, as the feminine mask is used in a way that confronts the violence and potential shaming from the male gaze. To be objectified through the male gaze is for the performer to allow themselves to be taken in and consumed by those who participate in the male gaze. The performer thus adopts a mask, usually the hyper-performing, or the hyper-feminine mask in order to challenge and attempt to unseat the gaze. Instead of admitting defeat, and allowing themselves to be taken in, performers use this mask in defiance, looking back, and rendering the interaction mutual. Performance of drag and neo-burlesque is never really one sided but exists to work against and with one another.

In this research, I question the ways in which the gaze affects the form the mask takes – though how is this done? Early on in the research the gaze is met with a mask that is understood to be an individual act of defiance, asserting that the individual who meets the gaze will not be objectified in their performance. Later in this research though, it is understood that not a single performance takes place on its own, and that Carl Jung’s collective psyche that works as a mask that “feigns individuality” is far more useful to this project, as it assists in demonstrating that the mask is really attached to the ways in which the group thinks, rather than the way in which the individual might think. In this research two types of masks exist. The first is the mask that relates to the dominant society, indicating the ways in which participants in the society ought to perform based on the type of gaze that is directed at them. The second is the mask of the secondary group to which an individual may subscribe to. In this research I discuss the secondary group and the familial mask and collective unconscious associated with subscribing to the secondary group. While the dominant society dictates that certain types of behaviours ought to be ascribed to individuals possessing certain types of bodies and expectations regarding the ways in which they are expected to perform, the secondary group allows for other, potentially more risqué behaviour.

The gaze and the mask are difficult to separate from one another, as when interpreting behaviour and expectation they become wrapped up in one another – one works for and against the other, and vice versa. Both the worlds of everyday life and the fantasy life of on-stage performance have access to the concept of the mask as a projected persona, though the mask of the everyday seeks to restrict the behaviour of the one who experiences its dominance, while the other possesses the ability to shield, and protect the user through the fantasy of the collective/group behaviour.

Future recommendations

This research is by no means an exhaustive account of the ways in which drag and neo-burlesque performance functions in Cape Town – it is a glimpse in understanding the social world through performers of drag and neo-burlesque in Cape Town. Both these forms of performance are under-studied in South African research, and my focus does not lie solely on the specifics of each performance style; thus it would be exciting to see where future research in the field will eventually lead to. In future research it would be useful and interesting to discover the ways in which do-it-yourself forms of performances are created from the ground up – this was a onetime aspiration of this research, though I realised that I was not the person to tell that particular story at this time, and that this would take even more years of fieldwork research to fully understand. Though there has been research into understanding beauty pageants, it would be of academic interest to investigate the influence of beauty pageants upon drag pageants in South Africa, and the ways in which this may influence individual and group understandings of beauty, femininity, self-worth, and aspirations toward fantasy and whiteness. Future research should attempt to understand the ways in which the dominant social structure is created, as “our culture does not arise spontaneously; it is manufactured” (Smith 1987, 19).

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