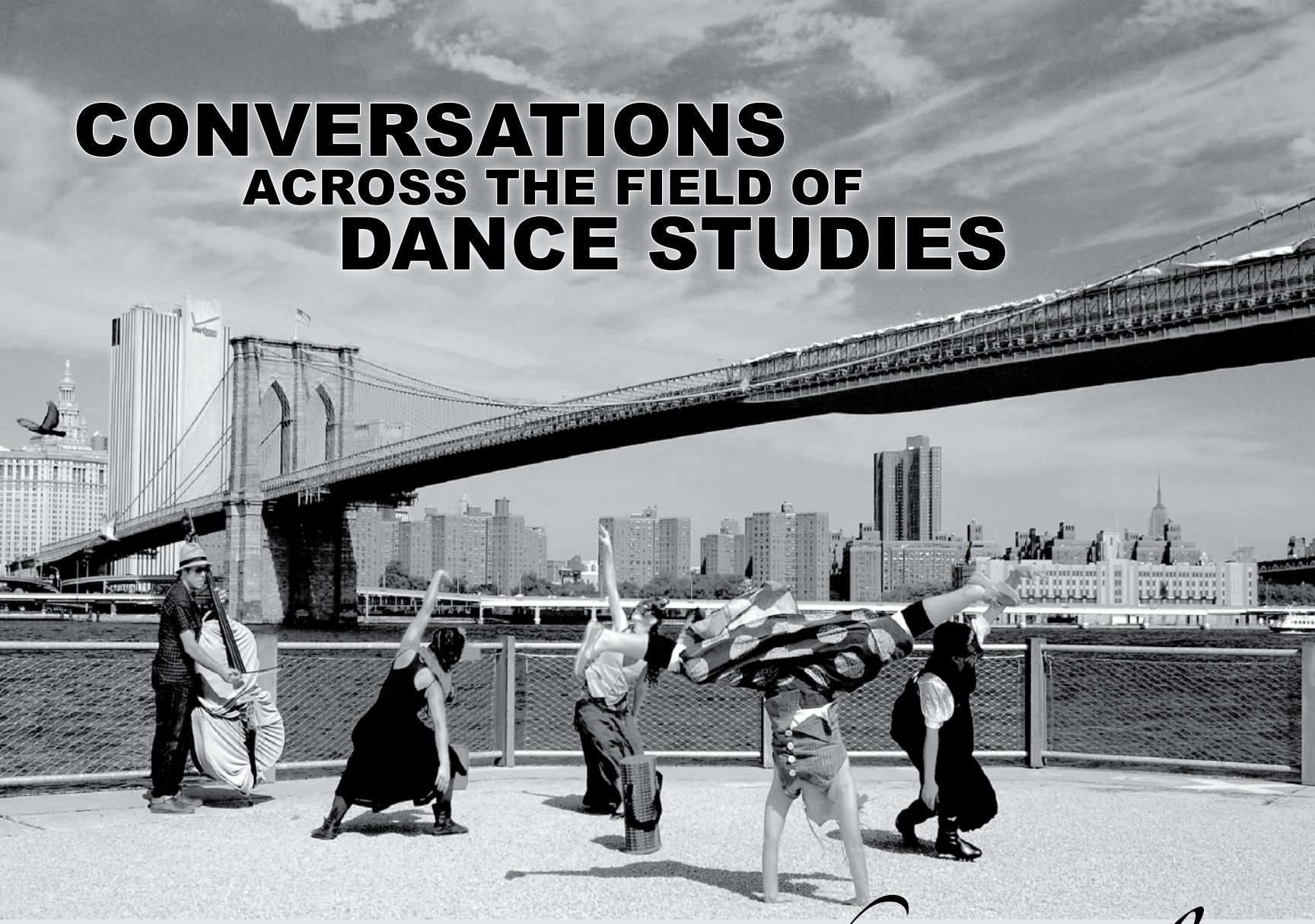
CONVERSATIONS ACROSS THE FIELD OF DANCE STUDIES



Dancing the Popular

Photo: "(For) Those We Left Behind"
Photo Credit: J. P.G.

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Table of Contents

A Word from the Guest Editor

Dear Reader,

Chances are that all of you have practiced popular dance at some point in your lives—whether in a neighborhood dance studio or in front of your own television; in the audience at a music performance or in an urban dance club. Given its prevalence and power, we have devoted a special issue of *Conversations* to explore the myriad ways in which popular dance might be conceptualized, experienced, and researched. We asked contributors:

> *Which dance is popular? Which is not? Why? Who decides?*
> *How do popular dance forms challenge established understandings of choreography and performance?*
> *How can we historicize and textualize popular dances so that they retain their improvisational qualities?*
> *What happens when popular dance forms become integrated into our conceptualizations of dance history?*
> *Why is popular dance relevant to the future of dance scholarship?*

I was surprised and pleased by the range of responses we received from around the world — from artists and scholars alike — as well as new graduate students and veteran researchers. I wish we could have included them all.

The only stone that remains unturned in this volume, for me, is non-Western understandings of the popular in dance. None of the essays received go far beyond Western-based understandings of this issue, which perhaps tells us much about this idea's reach at the present time in dance studies. Hopefully this will shift in the future.

The essays in this issue query the term "popular" from a variety of directions in relation to dance. Some are focused on research practices, others on a specific research project. Still others pursue the popular through more creative modes of expression. Taken as a whole, what is clear to me is that popular dance is more than a label for a discrete group of dances; it can also be a way of thinking about dance—one that stresses human experience, modes of production, mediation, and cultural politics. I hope that these pieces will inspire all of us to think with more depth and complexity about the nature of popular dance as a research and teaching focus, as well as a source for creative work and even a way of life.

Special thanks to the editorial board of SDHS for offering me the opportunity to guest edit this special issue and to the contributors who made my work a true pleasure.

Danielle Robinson, York University

A Manifesto for the Study of Popular Dance

Mary Fogarty

1. Popular dance, as a field of study, should be organized as a *methodological framework*, rather than as an attempt to justify which dance styles should belong to the popular dance category. Any dance can be popular or unpopular at various times in history.

2. Popular dance studies will keep the actual practice of dancing central to our scholarship. Theorization will come only after serious engagement with the world of participants. A devoted chapter of ethnographers and cultural historians is welcome, alongside self-identified 'dancers'.

3. Popular dance methodology will acknowledge that *situation* matters. The necessity of a historical context and situation for any theoretical framework is mandatory. Notions of art will be situated sociologically. Notions of aesthetics will be contextualized culturally.

4. Popular dance studies must necessarily consider as central to dance practices matters such as technological mediation, adaptations and the circulation of moving images. In particular, popular dance studies will acknowledge the centrality of music.

5. Distinctions of 'high' and 'low' art will continue to be challenged by a field that recognises, as Sarah Thornton (1995) did with club cultures, that all participants make distinctions, even in so-called 'popular' forms. No form of dance, however elevated, pompous or self-regarding, will be exempt from popular dance studies.

6. "YES" to a new generation of dance scholars that take 'street' dance styles seriously, and find it *incomprehensible* to imagine the field otherwise.

7. "NO"[1] to dance styles being dismissed for their perceived virtuosity or spectacular nature in the eyes of the beholder.

8. Popular dance studies will engage with sports psychology, and other contributions from the *physical* fields of study in various disciplines, including martial arts. Having said that, the spiritual beliefs of participants will not be ignored or omitted from studies.

9. Popular dance studies will consider pleasure and pain as integral to our practice. Humour is important as well.

10. As the previous points accrue, the revelation that popular dance studies must be centred on an *interdisciplinary* methodology, rather than on theoretical coherence or disciplinary boundaries, becomes evident. If this point does not seem profound or out of the ordinary in any way, recall how many studies are built on a limited list of theorists, rather than on the diversity of dance practices to engage with in the world, alongside the methods of investigating these practices that have yet to be imagined.

[1] This point and its predecessor are dedicated to Yvonne Rainer, whose "No Manifesto" of 1965 sets the tone for this piece. Rainer's interdisciplinary, practice-based approach to dance is an inspiring starting point for a field of popular dance research that embraces both ordinary movement and street dances that, although framed as spectacular, often take place in the most ordinary of settings.

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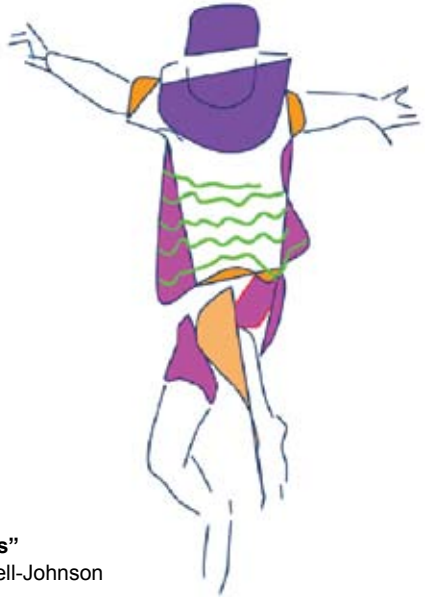
A Coming of Dance-Age

J.P.G.



"Ring My Bells"
by Jo-Ani Powell-Johnson

I. Mom Thought I'd Have No Rhythm

Off beat syncopated child
lifts feeble floppy body
hands grip playpen bars
a grandfather's delight
beaming baby bounces
her first favorite song
"Ring My Bell"[1] vibrates through
air waves
improvisation, staccato undulations
an awakening of kinetic potential

II. Dance vs. The Machine

DVR asphyxiation
mind of its own
deletes old episodes
So You Think You Can Dance[2]
Dancing With The Stars[3]
America's Best Dance Crew[4]
even Dance Your Ass Off[5]
it's an intervention
of my social dance dependency

"but the lifts in this one"
"that one has exciting floor work"
I plead with technology...
"I wanted to reference this one in class"

Bang the remote on the side of the couch
turn the cable off and on
wag finger at scheduled recordings
blurt out superfluous threats
something about water and tap shoes

But 1000 + channel contraption
has closed captioned
my future viewing menu
reality dance TV addiction
habit kicked by inanimate electronics

III. Snap, Crackle, Pop – The Locking Trio

I.

brute isolations

tense rhythmic apprehensions

muscles grope for air

II.

syncopated breaks

momentum ceased, held hostage

contracted action

III.

arrested breath trapped

frozen in corporal grips

hushed body silent

"Snap Crackle Pop"
by Jo-Ani Powell-Johnson

[1] Ward, A. (1979) Ring My Bell, On Songs of Love [Vynal, LP, Album]. Netherlands: TK Records.
[2] Fuller, S. (Producer) (2005). So You Think You Can Dance [Television series]. Los Angeles, CA: FOX Broadcasting Company.
[3] Green, C. (Producer) (2005) Dancing With The Stars [Television series]. Hollywood, CA: American Broadcasting Company.
[4] Jackson, R. (Producer) (2008). America's Best Dance Crew [Television series]. Burbank, CA: MTV.
[5] Hill, J. (Producer) (2009) Dance Your Ass Off [Television series]. Hollywood, CA: National Broadcasting Company.

Six Degrees of Separation: Researching Social and Popular Dance (or How I've Grown to Like the Internet)

Julie Malnig

This issue of "Conversations" set me thinking about what engages me most in studying social and popular dance. Certainly, the range and variety of styles the form encompasses, its improvisational nature, not to mention its protean quality and propensity to shift from street to stage to screen and back in a kind of endless loop of creative possibilities. But the enduring appeal seems to be its ability to propel me into another culture. Not that other forms of dance can't do this, but they don't in quite the same way. Social dance lends itself to a particularly rich type of analysis because, unlike concert dance, it is what the dance expresses and embodies, as much as how it is "performed," that commands our attention. Social dancing helps us see how dancing bodies are a part and parcel of their time—how they may galvanize social forces, defy social constraints, or animate personal expression. In this brief essay, in which I draw on my current research, I consider some of the challenges inherent in the study of social and popular dance and conclude with an appeal to establish a new social and popular dance "cyber infrastructure" that may promote greater and more accessible scholarly research and connect us more directly with our sources.

The social and popular dance researcher—whether investigating dances in ballrooms, nightclubs, discotheques, or TV—can be likened to a kind of *bricoleur*, fashioning together shards of documents and pieces of evidence to fashion the entire world in which the dance takes places. Somehow, the researcher must find a way to engage with that community through historical re-creation and imaginative re-construction, direct ethnographic engagement, or both. Rooted as it is in the materiality of everyday life, social dance asks the researcher to consider the dance as a ritual, rite of passage, shaper of identity, and means of pleasure. At the heart of our analytic enterprise is the attempt to make sense of mostly unspoken values, attitudes, and desires as well as capture the felt, sensate experience of the dance itself. If, as cultural theorist Angela McRobbie has written, social dance is "a way of speaking through the body," then it is a kind of performative language that the researcher must continually de-code (McRobbie 1997: 211).

In my previous research on social dance, class, and gender of the 1910s, for instance, I considered popular ballroom and ragtime dance as a social phenomenon. My questions were several: In an era of rapid economic and commercial expansion, how did both professional and recreational dancers *use* the dances in a quest to help elevate their social status? How did the concepts of progress and social mobility become absorbed into the very fabric of the dance practices themselves? How were consumerist appeals worked into the advertising for the dances and dance halls (Malnig 2001: 271-287)? To get at answers, I worked with primary sources and documents of many kinds—fragments of newspaper clippings; advertisements in mass subscription and women's magazines; photographs; sheet music covers; record company catalogues; investigative reports on dance halls, not to mention the theories of thinkers of the day such as Thorstein Veblen, William James, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. How to piece it all together? Perhaps most useful was to employ the frame of new historicist criticism that helped me analyze social dance as a cultural practice and make connections between the dance and what social theorist Raymond Williams has called people's "lived" behaviors (Williams 1975: 47).

Contemporary methodological tools and avenues of inquiry, drawn from the fields of anthropology, ethnography, transnational studies, race and gender theory—as well as new historicism and cultural studies, to name a few—have been a boon to social dance scholars. Not only have they given us the means to consider social dance as a partner in culture-making, they have also deepened our understanding of how a culture's aesthetic and behavioral codes alter movement and the body. Williams has argued that we can only reconstruct an historical era or phenomenon through examining the totality of social, cultural, and philosophical practices that govern a culture's belief system, "from poems to buildings to dress-fashions" (Williams 1975: 49). Hopefully our documentary or ethnographic analysis will fan out into social analysis that illustrates how these different practices are inter-related (Williams 1975: 53).[1] Moreover, what the dance historian brings to this analysis—and which until only recently the cultural studies field has ignored—is an ability to understand the perceived kinesthetic effects of the dance

on participants and spectators and how that physicality, in turn, articulates and shapes cultural ideologies.

Even though, as Williams reminds us, our ultimate analyses are always to an extent approximations or translations based on available materials, we try as we might to excavate beneath the surface details. My latest research project is televised teen dance programs (or "dance parties") of the 1950s and early 1960s and the intersections of new media, race, and rock and roll youth culture. One challenge has been to locate recordings of the shows themselves. Most of the programs aired live, but many were captured on a rather primitive form of tape known as the kinescope. To the dismay of researchers, though, most of the original kinescopes were either destroyed or copied over, with little concern about their future archival potential. Another challenge, too, has been to obtain first-hand accounts from the former hosts and amateur teen dancers themselves. Many of them are still alive, and I've yearned to ask them questions such as: What did the kids *actually* dance? Who taught them? What was the role of the DJ in recruiting and fostering the participation of the teen dancers?

In both cases, the Internet, to my surprise actually, has proven to be an incredibly rich source of information. Although the collections at the Paley Center for Media, in New York City, and the Jerome Robbins Dance Division of the New York Public Library house video footage of some of the most popular of these shows, the best source for obtaining (and purchasing) this material has been on archival and vintage video websites owned by nostalgia collectors and producers. During the mid to late fifties, the dance party programs were a ubiquitous feature of American popular culture—hundreds of these shows existed in most major cities in the U.S. and Canada. The vintage sites have provided substantial video clips (or in some cases entire half-hour broadcasts) from the lesser known local teen party shows, from NYC's *Studio Party* to Chicago's *Bandstand Matinee* to *Detroit Bandstand*, that may offer me a sense of the different regional variations of several fifties and early sixties dances. And while I had been reluctant to open a Facebook page, I have now done so in order to link to the numerous blogs, forums, and nostalgia sites created by many former teen dancers themselves. The connections I've established have already led to telephone interviews with former dancers and hosts who, in turn, have put me in touch with yet other dancers. I also placed a query note on the online *Detroit Memories* newsletter, which yielded more than half a dozen responses from former participants in *Detroit Bandstand*. The Internet, which allows users time to compose messages and adopt a specific mode of self-presentation, seems to lend itself to a greater sense of candor and freedom. In fact, the sense of sociability that the Internet fosters has prompted many of these participants to place queries in search of long-long partners or friends from the shows, thus leading to ever-widening concentric circles of communication.

One of the characteristics of social dance styles is that they are continually evolving and morphing into yet other styles as they are transmitted from one community to the next and mediated in the commercial sphere whether through dance manuals, dance schools, sound recordings, or TV. My online conversations and interviews reveal that there was a continual reinvention process for the televised dances; many of the dancers improvised steps and movements on the spot, or they brought to the airwaves versions of dances they had learned at local dance hops or teen nightclubs. My Internet exchanges, too, have offered refreshing accounts of the process by which the shows themselves became incorporated into the fabric of young people's lives; they fostered a sense of camaraderie, community, and familiarity, qualities that early TV was especially equipped to supply. By inserting myself into these dialogues, I am getting closer to what the teen programs may have meant to the aspirations of fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds, and perhaps closer to what Williams means by getting hold of the "felt sense of the quality of life at a particular time and place" (Williams 1975: 47).

Other such Internet sites exist for contemporary social dance practices. Ethnomusicologist Eric Usner, for instance, has tracked the swing dance community in southern California via the Internet and listservs, and as a result he has been able to explain how young, white, middle-class social dancers connect swing (or "neo swing") to an imagined time of greater social cohesion (Usner 2001/2: 87-101). Dance historian Sheenagh Pietrobruno has studied how Latin diasporic dances, Salsa in particular, are disseminated and learned over the Internet. She describes how what was originally an oral means of transmission has become one of hypertext, as steps, styles, and instructions for the dances are posted online. Pietrobruno argues that as users discover and download videos from youtube and Google, they are in fact developing a self-generating digital archive of moving dance images (Pietroibruno 2007). Her point is that the Internet has become a medium through which many users learn the dances and become socialized into Salsa culture.

Clearly, these sites hold multiple possibilities. To facilitate further research in the field, I would like to propose that we establish some kind of computerized index, a virtual "library" containing hyperlinks to a variety of social and popular dance-related sites and open sources. While in the digital age this may seem like an obvious thing to do, no one has done it yet for the social and popular dance field.[2] This online library, or directory, might exist in three parts, the first a bibliography/index of links to relevant social and popular dance sources connected to formal institutions including museums, libraries, universities, local historical societies, dance preservation sites, and private archives. An interested researcher, for instance, could link directly to specific primary source collections such as the social dance manual collection of the American Memory Project at The Library of Congress; the George Washington Project for early-American social dance at the Florida State University; and the Ralph Page Collection of contra dance essays housed at the Carson-Brierly Dance Library at the University of Denver—to give just a sample. This section, too, might contain links to relevant online books and articles, dissertations, formal bibliographies, and booksellers and dealers with social and popular-dance related holdings. The second might be a "non-academic," popular culture-related index with links to nostalgia sites, fan clubs, blogs and discussion groups, and social network sites (such as Facebook), similar to those referred to earlier. And, finally, a third category might contain links to individuals, and personal web pages for social and popular dancers, instructors, musicians, DJs—the list goes on. It would make sense also to have a directory/address site for researchers in the field.

An archive of this sort would have several advantages. For one, it would provide an index (organized alphabetically or by subject area) of readily available sites located in one place; spur further research efforts; provide teaching materials; and, not least, connect a greater number of social and popular dance researchers and scholars working in similar areas. Perhaps it might stimulate group research projects. We might also establish a blogspot for the exchange of ideas, queries, and scholarly sources. Although on first blush the idea may seem formidable, this could be viewed as a long-term project, expandable bit by bit, and eventually managed by a curator or librarian. If there is enough interest, perhaps a consortium such as the Popular, Social and Vernacular Dance Working Group of SDHS might want to spearhead such a project.

The lure of the Internet is its accessibility and the promise of discovery. There can be dead ends and false leads, for sure, but the Internet holds the possibility of locating certain kinds of sources—and individuals—that in the past might have taken us months, instead of days, to track down. In my own case, the theory of "six degrees of separation" is proving to be a reality, as I witness one former dancer find another dancer who finds another in this chain of acquaintances who generally welcome being "found" and are eager to tell their stories. As a result, I've gotten deeper into a sub-culture that seems to expand with each new stroke of a key.

[1] "Documentary" and "social" analysis are Williams's terms to refer to the different processes by which we can make sense of a given culture or society.

[2] My ideas for this Internet project have been inspired by the AWOL site (Ancient World Online). For more information on the project, see an essay written by the site's manager and librarian C.E. Jones (2010).

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Transcending the Spoken: Popular Dance in Commercial Narrative Cinema

Marisa C. Hayes

As a creator of screendance, choreography made specifically for the camera that doesn't necessarily rely on narrative structures or conventional filmmaking methods, the world of Hollywood blockbusters has often felt distant, or even contradictory, to my own artistic practice. Yet analyzing commercial cinema is essential to understanding cultural, socio-political and aesthetic tendencies in contemporary society. For dance scholars and artists, mainstream films are particularly revealing regarding cultural attitudes about dance and the body, and it is popular dance forms that appear on multiplex screens with the most regularity.

Like commercial films accessible to millions of viewers, popular dance forms are often mistakenly overlooked and undervalued in the West, perhaps due to their familiarity or their deceptive simplicity. Screendance scholarship has largely ignored the role of popular dance in commercial narrative films, a motif that recurs with great frequency and during every era of cinematic history. Aside from musicals and films immersed in dance, such as *Dirty Dancing*, commercial cinema boasts hundreds of other films in which popular dance puts in a brief appearance, often outside the context of what one would consider a normal dance setting, i.e. a nightclub, a school dance, or a ballroom. What is it about dance, specifically popular forms of dance, that inspires a director to shift tactics from the narrative-driven nature of a commercial film and implement a short movement sequence? For the purposes of this essay, the focus will remain on these encounters, moments when popular dance and music overtake spoken dialogue for a fleeting instant to express something about a character or the plot that the script could not achieve through verbal communication alone.

One of the most common examples of popular dance in commercial films is centered around the act of cleaning or other menial tasks. These are scenes during which actors perform a lovable free style dance while completing a chore, most often performed to a power-rock tune. Such moments, thanks to dance and music, help render what would otherwise be boring to watch, entertaining and fast-paced. Beyond this practical purpose, however, there are several noteworthy points of interest. The type of dance performed in these scenes is almost always a popular style of movement that one might imitate at a rock concert or a night club, therefore the motions are universally recognized. In terms of filmic language, the frenzied pace of chores accompanied by social dance have come to act as a code for the imminent arrival of an important event or visit. Why are the actors cleaning or cooking as if their life depended on it? In *Mrs. Doubtfire* (1993), Robin Williams disguises himself as an elderly female nanny to gain access to his ex-wife's home in order to spend time with his estranged children. While dancing to Aerosmith, the father dressed as Mrs. Doubtfire cleans the house from top to bottom in the hope that the effort will impress his ex-wife upon her return home. Completing his task within a limited time frame, the character's quick-paced movements remind the viewer of the nervous anticipation that the character experiences. Similarly, Cate Blanchett peels vegetables with aplomb in *Bandits* (2001) as if she were dancing on MTV, while the camera cuts to show her soon-to-be guest driving down the road making his way towards her. The desire to impress, to complete a task in order to fulfill a goal can only be expressed through dance in these situations to allow the audience to physically experience the tension felt in the bodies of the characters. While film acts principally as a visual and auditory medium, in these instances, dance on screen adds another sensory layer. The movements accompanying the preparative tasks actors complete stand in for the mental eagerness with which they await the future. In these scenes the body's capacity for tension and release is exemplified within the context of social relationships and timing, themes central to popular dance itself.

Chris Columbus' *Mrs. Doubtfire,* © 20th Century Fox

If popular dance styles display tension on screen, they can easily go further to become true forms of troubled escapism. In the opening sequence of David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Naomi Watts, acting the dual roles of Betty and Diane, dances in a jitterbug competition. The psychedelic lighting and color scheme, framed by dark shadows of the dancers on the wall, are a far cry from the vintage movements performed for the camera. Flanked by older family members and dancing couples, Watts' character is alone, possibly a reference to the abuse she suffered at the hands of her grandmother's male companion. She goes on to win the jitterbug competition solo and is drowned in the spotlight, surrounded by the admiring faces of her family and fellow dancers. In this constructed dream world, the character of Betty/Diane is a star. An independent dancer on her own, she escapes the abuse that taunts her in real life, though it is through the physical association of dance in her fantasy that we are reminded of it in the first place.

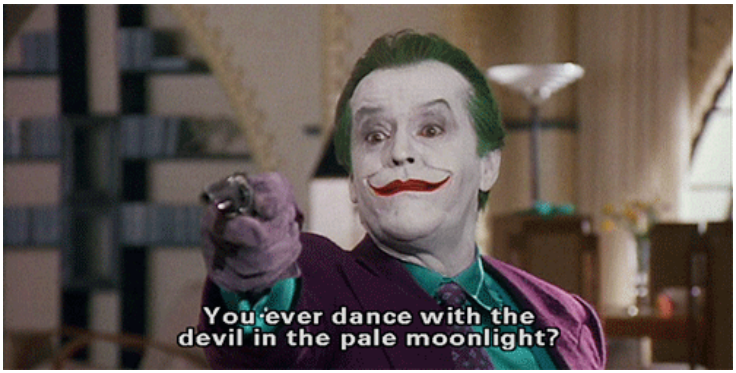
David Lynch's *Mulholland Drive,* © Asymmetrical Productions / Les Films Alain Sarde

Popular dance, once widely viewed with disdain for its overt sexuality, is still negatively represented today (unintentionally or not) in the juxtaposition of light-hearted popular movements that accompany acts of aggression. In Stanley Kubrick's cult classic, *A Clockwork Orange* (1971), the character of Alex (Malcolm McDowell) commits violent acts of rape, murder and torture. During one scene, when he and a band of hooligans enter the wealthy home of their targeted victims, they do so dancing to the melody of "Singin' in the Rain" as their feet spin and lightly tread, all the while brutally assaulting their victims. Quentin Tarantino's *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) features an infamous torture scene in which the actor Michael Madsen demonstrates the sadistic nature of his character, Mr. Blonde. As Stealers Wheel's "Stuck in the Middle with You" plays on the radio, Mr. Blonde dances calmly and proceeds to cut the ear of his victim off with a straight razor. The cool and collected nature of the music and the actor's smooth dance moves act as a counterpoint to the grotesque violence that unfolds. In this vein, the casual qualities of popular dance associated with amusement illustrate the psychotic aspects of a criminal mind that finds no moral dilemma in committing violent acts. At the same time, in modern-day societies that continue to struggle to define their relationship to sexuality and the body, the link between popular dance and a person's dark side exhibit the discomfort that the body still inspires. The promiscuity that is sometimes linked to those who dance regularly at nightclubs or in couples not only imposes a negative vision of sexuality, but implies overall moral debauchery as well. As the Joker in Tim Burton's *Batman* (1989) says, "Oh, little song, little dance. Batman's head on a lance", joining his love of dance and his appetite for destruction. The Joker's dancing is reprised several times throughout the film, most memorably when he wreaks havoc in Gotham City's art museum, while the soundtrack blasts the music of Prince. As paintings are destroyed, the Joker and his cronies gyrate and spin around the museum as if it were a dance floor.

Stanley Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange,* © Warner Bros. Pictures

These various examples of how popular dance is used in mainstream cinema illustrate that contemporary society's relationship to popular dance, while not as taboo as it once was, remains conflicted. On one hand, popular dance is shown as something vital and universal. If not, it would not be so widely understood and used with regularity to stand

in for verbal communication. Despite this common practice, however, physicality and sexuality are clearly still gray areas that society, particularly in North America, has trouble addressing. Like the scenes described above, dance is consistently linked to violence, often sexual aggression, on screen in American commercial films. This discomfort with the body and sensuality often results in a negative portrayal of dance, particularly popular dance. Despite the context, however, popular dance scenes on screen fulfill a function that spoken language cannot. They connect our bodies physically to the tensions, hopes or acts of senseless violence in a film, transforming the experience into one of living, breathing matter beyond the scope of verbal comprehension. The use of popular dance forms in this way both ensures a broad accessibility to the material and embeds the movements with targeted associations.



Tim Burton's *Batman,* © Warner Bros. Pictures

For dance artists and scholars, representations of popular dance in film then raise a number of diverse questions linked to how dance is used for communication in contemporary American popular culture. Is the representation of social dance in narrative cinema truly reflective of mainstream society's attitude towards dance in general? Do dance artists and scholars feel they have a role to play in changing attitudes about the body and movement within mainstream culture? Where do screendance makers position themselves in terms of representational cinema and its use of dance (both content and aesthetics)? While many dance artists and screendance makers may feel far removed from the trends of commercial narrative cinema and its use of dance, analyzing their role in contemporary culture is significant for the study and understanding of social dance and its place in screendance-based media.

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Gripped Tension / Suspended Release

J.P.G.

"Las Madres," Tango Influenced Rehearsal: Movement of the People Dance Company

Company members rehearse the partnering section of their repertoire piece, "Las Madres." This modern dance/tango-influenced composition is based on the history of the socio-political organization, Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo, a group of women whose family members had "disappeared" during the military dictatorship in Argentina. These women took action by protesting in the Plaza de Mayo against the federal government's cruelty, and since then have continued to bring justice and humanity to Argentina. This piece addresses the perils of a military regime and the strength of unity. In rehearsal of the first section, the dancers look to explore the tension of joined bodies physically working in tandem yet with vying convictions.

I. A.Complicated.Step II. Separate.But.Together III. Lunge.Thrust

Dancers: Danielle Guidi* & Jillian Perkins, 2010

**A student at The Center for Dance, Movement, and Somatic Learning at Stony Brook University*

“(For) Those We Left Behind”
Movement of the People Dance Company
White Wave’s DUMBO Dance Festival,
Site-Specific Performance, 2010

Set to the backdrop of the East River, Manhattan skyline and the Brooklyn Bridge, dancers performed their collaborative site-specific piece “(For) Those We Left Behind.” The landscape and rich history of Brooklyn’s immigrant populations were muses for the choreography. The work looks at how immigrants have carried the baggage of their homelands, struggles, and guilt of not being able to take entire families across oceans to a better life. Dancers embodied ghost-like, siren-inspired characters as if they had emerged from the East River to tell of the harsh conditions they had been living in. The wistful, circular, and inverted movements mirror the recognition of our vulnerability and perpetual morphing transformation.

I. Purple.Flutter II. Sirens.By.A.Bridge III. Upside.Down

Dancers: Britney Falcon, Morgan Gelinas*, Danielle Guidi*, Julie Miller*, Adia Wilson; Bassist: Michael Thurber, 2010

**Students at The Center for Dance, Movement, and Somatic Learning at Stony Brook University*

Defining Reality: Commercial Voyeurism in *Dancing with the Stars*

Melissa A. Croushorn

With the prevalence and popular success of reality television programming, mainstream expressions of dance are now often rooted in the developmental journey of the dancer-in-the-making/struggling artist. From ABC's *Dancing with the Stars* (*DWTS*) to Fox's *So You Think You Can Dance* (*SYTYCD*) and MTV's *America's Best Dance Crew* (*ABDC*), audiences are exposed to an array of dance styles steeped in the trials and tribulations each dancer faces. Through the redemptive act of dancing, participants seek personal and professional victory. *DWTS*, in particular, utilizes social dance to bring pleasure and power to both the performer and the participating audience through its idealized fantasies of vindication and romance. Such representations of dance lack grounding in dance traditions and histories—it is the individual and the emotional journey that matter above all else.

Reality television shows like *DWTS* are redefining mainstream conceptualizations of social dancing and resituating its primary mode of participation from embodiment to voyeurism. Their isolated viewers likely limit their own dance practice to the television screen. What was a vehicle for bodily pleasure has been reframed as a powerful vehicle for celebrity.

Undoubtedly, reality television is helping to re-popularize social dancing, but at what cost? For example, what happens when televised versions of popular dances shift public conceptualizations of dance and dance history? A critical engagement with *DWTS* and its peers is long overdue. But, what methodologies might best bridge the gap between mainstream and critical perspectives? The following explores some possibilities through a brief media analysis of *DWTS*, which emphasizes reception.

Although unacknowledged, *DWTS*, in particular, owes its existence not only to the rise of reality television, but also the history of exhibition ballroom dancing. Its genealogy can be traced through several key performers and practices: Vernon and Irene Castle and the animal dances of the ragtime era; Harlem's Savoy Ballroom and lindy hoppers like Frankie Manning and George "Shorty" Snowden; the Hollywood musicals of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers; and the formation of DanceSport, with its complicated network of competitions, dancers, and regulations.

(Dis)(Em)Powered Pleasure

The DWTS dancers and celebrities, and to some extent, the viewers, base their relationship to the show on "opportunity." For the professional dancers and judges, *DWTS* represents stable commercial dance work that allows a mass-media dimension of performing experience. For the celebrities, *DWTS* offers a chance to protect, nurture, or regain their celebrity status. For the viewers, *DWTS* provides opportunities to gain insight into the lives of otherwise unreachable stars. Further, viewers also experience the rush of participating in the competitive process by voting for their favorites.

None of these experiences and opportunities could exist without spectatorship or individuals willing to engage in it. Voyeurism, a fundamental premise in the majority of reality television, increasingly attracts viewers eager to probe the lives of others (Baruh 2009: 190). *DWTS* presents dance with tiers of participants — judges, performers, or viewers — each of whom grasps his/her opportunity for influence, redemption, and inclusion in an elite group. Viewers become fully embedded spectators in a constructed reality.

Like reality television more broadly, *DWTS* offers viewers an alternate reality, allowing them to visualize themselves in an arena of fame, fortune, and competition. On *DWTS*, such visualization is stimulated by dancing bodies. Participation, however, does not offer a physical dancing experience to all involved. Instead, the show provides a safe vantage point for viewers to passively consider pursuing any inclinations they may have to dance.

In *DWTS* rehearsal footage, viewers see the dancers fretting over inventive choreography that will prove emotionally moving to others. Such tensions are consistent with the extreme narratives and characters so common in reality television, perhaps because of the need to constantly provide spectators with experiences with which they can identify (Andrejevic 2004: 178).

Television allows entertainers to reach the masses. While widespread availability would seem to be in line with American democratic ideals, it can actually reduce the value of leisure activities (such as social

dancing) to mere consumption (Robinson 1978: 207). Whereas social dancing would normally be considered a valued leisure experience, on television it becomes a consumable product that requires little bodily engagement. And yet, as I will evidence, some viewers devise novel methods of participation on their own in order to provide themselves with more agency as viewers in this arena of reality television.

The Sofa Judge

Jane Burciar, a friend of my grandmother and a former Arthur Murray dance instructor from the 1950s, regularly watches each season of *DWTS*. Since Burciar has her own professional experience with social dance, she feels capable of not only evaluating for herself each performance but also dialoguing with herself about the judges regarding their evaluation of each couple. Burciar has become so invested in this viewer-as-judge process that her daughter has made her numbered paddles so she can assert her own scores. Her daughter Kim Hill, in describing her mother's fixation with *DWTS*, writes:

> Mom uses her own "judging" system on a notepad, and compares things week to week, as if she is on the panel. She generally agrees with Len most of the time. When she was ill and in the hospital last fall, the semis or finals were going on so we … put a sign on her door for the nurses, letting them know they had a judge on the floor and not to disturb her during the competition… (Hill 2010).

Here, Mrs. Burciar literally acts as a fourth judge, from behind the fourth wall. As a highly qualified spectator, Mrs. Burciar exacts her own voyeuristic pleasure by granting herself a sense of power in the judging process. She achieves a sense of agency by expressing her opinions freely and in the same manner as the selected judges, albeit in a more remote environment.

Since *DWTS* and other reality shows offer viewers voting privileges, it reinforces and mimics the American democratic system and elective process. It cajoles viewers to vote for their favorite candidate. *DWTS* grooms the viewers to be a governing body that can reinforce or counter the reigning judges' decisions. This clever strategy can, in effect, grant viewers the illusion of power over competition, which affords tremendous pleasure.

Moreover, through its representations of social dancing, *DWTS* projects the comforts of democracy, equality, and opportunity. Yet, on *DWTS*, social dance ceases to be a leisure practice for anyone involved. The stars utilize dancing to reinvent themselves and their careers. Shown in its professional form, the dancing on *DWTS* is actually inaccessible to the average American, who nonetheless is able to feel a rush of pleasure via the stars' superior dancing bodies. Conversely, the awkward or stiff movement that stars sometimes emanate may give the viewer at home a sense of superiority, or a chance to view celebrities in a more human, relatable way.

The power of dance to rejuvenate the body and restore fortunes on *DWTS* is rarely linked with processes of dance training or technique. Surely there is much for dance scholars to discuss regarding the *adaptation* each dance style undergoes for television and the *appropriation* of non-traditional exhibition ballroom dancing moves utilized for choreographic impact—not to mention the dances' complex relationships with community dance practices around the world via official and unofficial colonization practices. In a manner of speaking, the way in which commercial reality television (like *DWTS*) has usurped ballroom dancing further contributes to these 'adapting' and 'appropriating' procedures, and proves even more problematic given the wide reach of its medium.

DWTS' breezy waltz into the spotlight is implicated in transforming American popular dance into a mass-marketed, mainstream, glamour-filled spectacle. In this show, the focus shifts to the individual performing the dance and his/her efforts to improve, rather than displaying the precise elementary concepts of each dance. The resulting understanding of dance is indelibly linked to personal triumph and commercial appeal rather than dance history and cultural heritage. Indeed, *DWTS* delivers a fantasy experience for both dancers and non-dancers based on the nostalgic intimacies of couple dancing.

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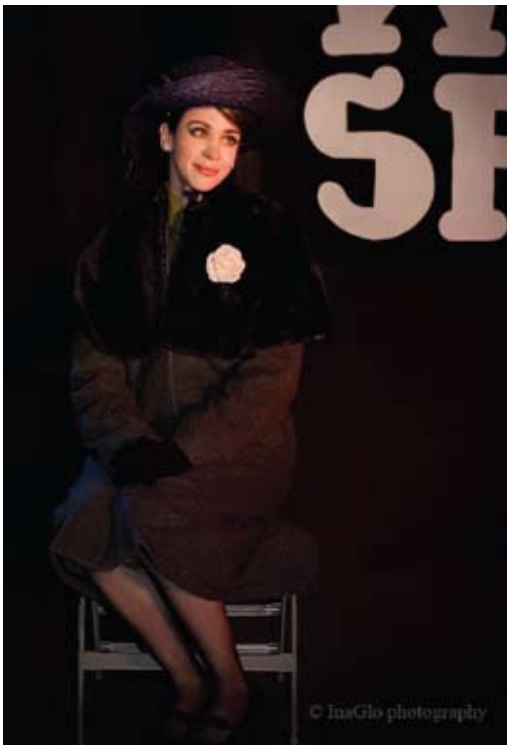
Popular Past, Popular Present, Post-Popular?

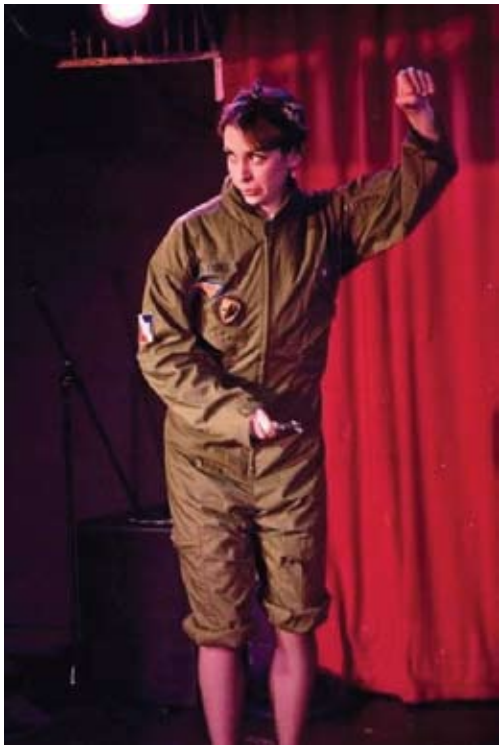
Clare Parfitt-Brown



InaGlo Photography, photographer Glo Mason

An inconspicuous Victorian door on a backstreet off Bethnal Green Road leads into a dimly lit room. Wartime band music tinkles through the speakers, as men in uniform arrive accompanied by women with hairdos sprayed into perfect waves and barrel curls. They buy beer and wine from the bar, and sit at small tables around a central space. The crowd grows and soon the tables are full. As the music fades, an M.C. emerges from behind a curtain. He seduces the audience with promises of astonishing spectacle, hair-raising feats and beautiful bodies, peppering his patter liberally with innuendo. A woman in a vintage coat and hat takes the stage. She sits demurely, listening to a male voice describe the ideal qualities of women. But as the voice lists "the roles for which [women] were intended: the mother, the wife, the hostess", she grows increasingly agitated. She stands, paces up and down and removes her gloves….

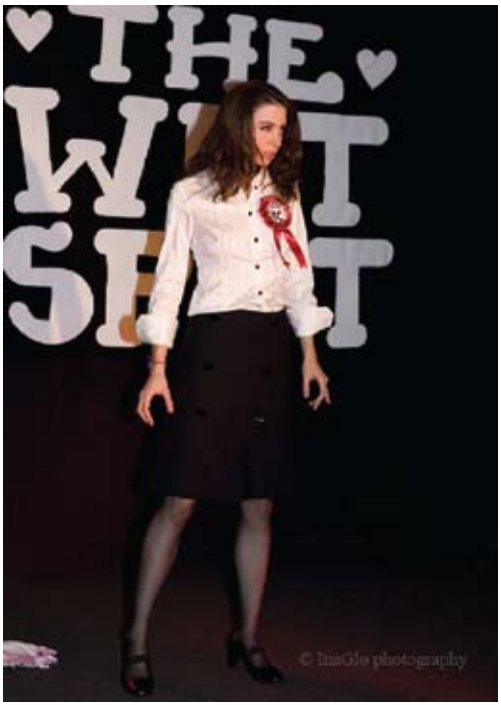
The performer, Audacity Chutzpah, deftly peels off layered costumes representing Western female archetypes of the twentieth century: the suffragette, the wartime worker, the hippy, and the secretary. Between each layer of fabric, the jarring sound of a needle scratching a record makes audible the grating of one historical period against another. A mobile phone rings and she cautiously puts her ear to a 'brick'-style antique. Her office outfit is then teasingly removed to reveal an image of femininity whose historicity is ambiguous: the burlesque performer in black knickers, suspenders and pasties. The audience members cheer, and then queue to buy sushi from the kiosk in the corner during the interval.[1]



Finger in the Pie Photography, photographer Sam McMorran

At the Popular Music and Dance Matters Symposium at University of Surrey in 2008, I gave a paper on changing definitions of 'the popular' in the last two centuries (Parfitt: 2008). In the nineteenth century, performances such as the cancan in France and music hall in Britain were popular in the sense that they were considered to be 'of the people'. Whether 'the people' were defined by their class or national status was often a point of contention, giving these performances

political potency. Popular performance of the twenty-first century frequently refers back to or even re-embodies nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular forms and identity politics. Neo-burlesque performance and Argentine tango, for example, are contemporary practices defined at least partially by their relationship to a popular past. Nevertheless, the markers of popularity in the twenty-first century are not the same as those of the nineteenth. Popular performances are now channeled through social and technological networks that transgress boundaries of class and nation, particularly the Internet. Even local popular dance practices, such as tango and capoeira classes, are often tied into transnational networks of communication and travel. 'The people' who define the popular today are defined less by class and nation than by international imagined communities of practice, who may collectively negotiate narratives of their relation to a popular past. At the end of my paper, Dr. Sherril Dodds, the convener of the conference asked me, "So should we still call it 'popular'?".



InaGlo Photography, photographer Glo Mason

This question has played on my mind over the last two years, particularly on my regular forays into the London neo-burlesque scene. Watching burlesque is an activity haunted by historical juxtapositions, such as those described in my opening paragraphs. Spectators participate in this complex performance through vintage clothing styles and a mode of spectatorship that straddles historical and contemporary performance expectations. Performers often embody past burlesque routines, conventions, costumes and archetypes, particularly those of the 1930s, '40s and '50s, while signaling their historical distance from the originals through parody, vocal commentary, and physical/sexual difference.

The spiritual home of London's neo-burlesque scene is the retro/vintage subculture that has blossomed in East London in the last decade. In an area beyond the old city boundaries, where French Huguenot silks, Jewish bagels, and Bangladeshi curries—among other foreign foods and delights—have for several hundred years fuelled a local economy in constant threat of absorption into the City. Where art students, immigrant communities and property developers mark and re-mark constantly shifting territories, the daily struggle between past and present takes artistic and commercial form in a pervasive vintage aesthetic. Converted Huguenot villas, vintage clothes, markets of ephemera, vintage gift shops and tea emporia provide the architectural, imaginative and economic framework for burlesque's embodiment of the past in the present.

While shaped by local histories and aesthetics, London burlesque is also inseparable from national and transnational webs of influence. Urban centers in Britain, Europe, the United States and Australia (e.g. Brighton, Berlin, New York and Sydney) form interconnected hubs of burlesque activity. These are shaped both by local performance histories, and by live and online encounters with international burlesque practices, past and present.

Finger in the Pie Photography, photographer Sam McMorran

Burlesque's network of localized urban scenes and online communities allows performers and spectators to consume and creatively reproduce the popular burlesque past. Historical costumes (corsets, suspender belts, gloves), props (feather fans, balloons) and choreographies of bodily revelation and concealment are invoked in order to revive, challenge and complicate recognizable archetypes of femininity, masculinity, heterosexuality and homosexuality. Like their nineteenth- and early twentieth-century precursors, neo-burlesque performers weave contemporary class, national and racial politics through their overt performances of gender and sexuality. Unlike earlier burlesque practices, however, neo-burlesque is explicitly energized by a tension between the present and its own popular past. While all performances play with the past to some degree, through their negotiation with conventions of genre or style, in neo-burlesque the relationship between past and present is foregrounded, giving its performance of identity politics a specifically historical dimension.

In Audacity Chutzpah's performance of *Women Through the Ages* (2009), for example, the history of women's liberation in the twentieth century becomes one long burlesque strip. As consecutive layers of feminine clothing are shed, women's increasing political liberty is symbolized by their freedom from body-covering clothing. This historical narrative serves to reclaim the (near) naked female body as a product of women's progressive assertion of political rights, rather than a vulnerable construct of the male gaze. Yet, Chutzpah also acknowledges that this narrative might not be as straightforward as it appears: her attempt to burn her bra is thwarted by contemporary health and safety regulations, and in her most politically powerful incarnation as 'President Chutzpah', she nevertheless gets sexually harassed. In its final, 'liberated' form, Chutzpah's body still bears the complex markers of women's historical negotiation between physical liberation and enslavement to the male gaze: a suspender belt and stockings.

Neo-burlesque is not the only contemporary popular performance practice driven by its relationship to the popular past. Kélina Gotman's (2009) article on tango tourism in Buenos Aires in the last issue of *Conversations Across the Field of Dance Studies* described touristic consumption of the sites of tango's past, as well as its present. Tours to key locations in the narrative of tango history, and fleeting conversations with elderly tango dancers offer tantalizing glimmers of an 'authentic' tango past, glimmers which can be commercialized in the transnational tango economy. This is an economy not only of 'passion', as Gotman notes, but of the popular past.

Consuming the popular past, through dancing tango in Buenos Aires, or by participating in the London burlesque scene, appears to position the consumer and the performer in relation to the modernist and colonialist politics (including those of class, gender, race and nation) that these practices originally performed and negotiated. It appears to signal both a continuation of these politics and a distance from them, perhaps an acknowledgement of the extent to which the contemporary body both is constructed by the past politics of the body, and possesses the potential (realized or latent) to challenge them.

When I was originally asked the question, "So should we still call it 'popular'?", I replied tentatively (expecting groans from an audience weary of the birth of new 'post-'s), "Perhaps it should be called 'post-popular'?".[2] This neologism has stuck in my mind because it seems to convey both the continuity and discontinuity between 'the popular' and its contemporary consumption in the practices described here. The prefix 'post-' is perhaps derivative, but it nevertheless serves to indicate the connection between this practice and postmodern concerns with memory, nostalgia and parody. This is not to say that all of contemporary popular performance might be considered post-popular, or that past popular cultures have not reworked their own histories. Rather, practices become post-popular when the creative construction and consumption of the popular past becomes central to their contemporary popularity. The producers and consumers of the post-popular fashion their bodies as sites of a complex intersection between the popular past, present and future. These historical layers accumulate, like Audacity Chutzpah's vintage garments, and it is precisely the temporal juxtaposition, the semantic friction between one costume and another, that gives these bodies their potent post-popularity.

[1] This description is based on my memories of *Farewell Whoopee!* at the Bethnal Green Working Men's Club, 11th December 2009, particularly Audacity Chutzpah's performance, *Women Through the Ages*.

[2] In a forthcoming book chapter (Parfitt-Brown, forthcoming) I expand on this concept in relation to the film *Moulin Rouge!* (2001). As I acknowledge there, I am not the first to coin this term, but my definition of it is distinct from previous interpretations.

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