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STRIPTEASE: THE POLITICS OF NEO-BURLESQUE

Maria Kosse

Acknowledgements

I have many people to thank for their advice and guidance throughout this process. First and foremost, thank you, thank you, thank you to Jason Ruiz – without your tough love and guidance I would not have been able to finish this thesis. Thank you also a million times over to Kevin Burke – your quick responses and insightful edits helped me to stay on track and keep my thoughts cohesive. To my mom – you are quite literally a lifesaver. I cannot thank you enough for your edits and uncanny ability to calm me down as soon as I started panicking about this paper. Tori and Cait – without having you two to vent with and bounce ideas off of, this process would not have been bearable. Thank you to UROP for providing me with the funds to travel to New York City. Thank you to the University of Notre Dame American Studies Department that has supported me and guided me throughout my academic career, helping me to get to the point where I could complete a project of this magnitude. Thank you to Erica Doss for beginning the process in our Capstone class. Finally, a huge thanks to my family and friends who have heard me talk about this project for over a year now – it's finally over and you don't have to listen to me talk about how nipple tassels and post-feminism are connected any longer!

Introduction

The CW Television Network's hit primetime show, *Gossip Girl*, enjoyed considerable success throughout its six seasons from 2007-2012. Centered on the lives of several New York City Upper East Side teenagers, *Gossip Girl* often aired episodes in which the characters

engaged in various forms of trendy, or popular, culture. One such episode, "Victor/Victrola," aired on November 7, 2011 and depicted Blair Waldorf, a main female character, performing a burlesque dance for her male friend, Chuck Bass. Justified by her need to escape from the stressors of her life, Blair visits a New York City burlesque club "because that's what these things are for right?". This question alludes to the possibilities that burlesque holds for her to play out the fantasy of embodying an alternative persona, even if just for a night.[279] This conception of burlesque as an outlet through which to experiment with varying identities is furthered as the scene concludes. Much to the pleasure of the eager male audience members, Blair performs a seductive striptease, slowly peeling off her clothes to the beat of the music. As the scene concludes, the narrator comments, "Prohibition never stood a chance against exhibition. It's human nature to be free. And no matter how long you try to be good, you can't keep a bad girl down."[280]

This brief scene from *Gossip Girl* raises profound questions about mainstream understandings of the cultural form of burlesque and its role in challenging and reinforcing standards of American femininity and sexuality. Why do representations of burlesque, like the one on *Gossip Girl*, emphasize the striptease and the display of the female body, when historically, burlesque was an entertainment form dedicated to comedy and satire on current events? Why is burlesque, in both history and in contemporary society, viewed as deviant, or as a form of stripping, when much of the work done in real burlesque theatres is explicitly political and challenges American understandings of gender? Finally, in *Gossip Girl,* Blair is empowered by her burlesque performance. Does this hold true for real burlesque? Is burlesque empowering, both on an individual and societal level?

A brief encounter with a neo-burlesque show - the revival and modernization of traditional burlesque in contemporary society - suggests that the modern adaptation of this historical entertainment form emphasizes the striptease as the main attraction. Unfortunately, this blanket association of burlesque with stripping is all too often the case, as pertinently illustrated by Blair's burlesque experience on *Gossip Girl*. To reduce a burlesque show to a status similar to

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[279] Steinberg, K. J. "Victor/Victrola." *Gossip Girl*. Dir. Tony Wharmby. CW. 07 Nov. 2007.

[280] *Ibid.*

that of a strip club would be a mistake and would ignore the deeply rooted complexity inherent in this entertainment form. Neo-burlesque is more than just a striptease; it is the product of a deeply rooted tension between the desire for female empowerment and sexual expression and mainstream societal restrictions dictating appropriate forms of femininity and sexuality. The assumption that burlesque is primarily about exhibition and the possibility of allowing "good girls" to acquire the temporary persona of a "bad girl," simplifies the reality of the multifaceted ways that burlesque engages with conceptions of gender, sexuality, and empowerment by creating and promoting an explicitly political discourse.

My thesis examines the political nature of neo-burlesque, arguing that although it possesses the potential to challenge mainstream understandings of femininity and sexuality in contemporary American society, this power is limited to the confines of the "carnivalesque" theater. Through choreography, music choice, and costume selection neo-burlesque dancers create the conditions for political work by promoting a discourse of empowerment, arguing that burlesque provides them with personal agency through their ability to control their own sexuality. Although political work is performed, this ability of neo-burlesque to promote wider political and social change is ultimately limited to the theater, as it does not challenge audience members to deeply engage with the content of the show and is not connected to any collective effort for empowerment for *all* American women.

This conversation must necessarily be contextualized by examining the traditional burlesque of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Early burlesque's historical transition from a purely satirical and comedic show to an entertainment form defined by the striptease laid the crucial groundwork for the continued lack of political influence that women have in contemporary neo-burlesque. The striptease emerged during a time period fraught with social and political change for American women, most notably through the passage of the 19th amendment. Initially it acted as one form, among many, of newfound female empowerment in that women utilized their emerging political and social power by choosing to publically display their bodies. Yet, this form of empowerment was not nearly as successful as gains in the political sphere and the work force, as early burlesque shows were primarily consumed by an uncritical male audience and labeled deviant by mainstream American society. While burlesque dancers

were able to enter into the business aspects of the industry because of this new political and social power, they were still regarded as second-class citizens due to their engagement with body politics. In a patriarchal society it was more acceptable to let women vote and work than to let women strip. Two burlesque dancers, Sophie Tucker and Fay Tunis, provide pertinent case studies that illustrate the tensions of this era; although these women gained new rights, they were still fundamentally powerless, especially when engaging with representations of femininity and sexuality.

With the historical context of burlesque in mind, I expand my discussion of traditional burlesque in the second chapter by arguing that the revival of neo-burlesque in the 1990s attempted to challenge traditional burlesque's inability to inspire widespread political change in relation to understandings of femininity and sexuality. To some extent, neo-burlesque is more effective than its traditional counterpart, as supported by an examination of the changing audience demographics. Neo-burlesque has become a cultural activity one must seek out. Theaters are located in quickly gentrifying neighborhoods and can be extremely expensive to attend. Women now constitute the majority of a burlesque audience, unlike traditional burlesque, which had a predominately male audience. This shift suggests that neo-burlesque is consumed by those who are able to, or want to, critically engage with the political subject material presented within the show.

Even though these claims surrounding neo-burlesque's political work are valid, its existence within post-feminism complicates its ability to invoke widespread social change. Rosalind Gill asserts that post-feminism, a response to second wave feminism, centers on the belief that feminism has been transcended and overcome, and includes:

> the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice, and empowerment; … a marked sexualization of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference.[281]

[281] Gill, Rosalind. "Post Feminist Media Culture: Elements of a Sensibility." *European Journal of Cultural Studies.* 2007, Vol 10, No. 147. <http://ecs.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/10/2/147>. 149.

This emphasis on creating and recreating various *individual* gendered identities obscures neo-burlesque's discourses relating to gender and sexuality by disallowing the creation of any collective political movement challenging understandings of femininity and sexuality in American culture. In particular, post-feminism's emphasis on "individualism, choice, and empowerment" relegates the political work performed on stage to the individual dancer and her body. This allows audience members to disengage with the political implications of the show after the close of the curtain, as they are not motivated to engage with the political messages promoted in the neo-burlesque show once it ends. Instead, audiences can "consume" the neo-burlesque production and leave without any further involvement. Post-feminism allows for this disengagement, and neo-burlesque parallels its earlier predecessor by occupying a "carnivalesque space" within American society.

> Mikhail Bakhtin defines the "carnival" as:
> the place for working out in a concretely sensuous, half-real and half-play-acted form, a *new mode of interrelationship between individuals*, counterposed to the all-powerful socio-hierarchical relationships of noncarnival life. … *Eccentricity* is a special category of the carnival sense of the world…it permits – in concretely sensuous form- the latent sides of human nature to reveal and express themselves.[282]

This is an especially helpful definition for understanding the role that neo-burlesque plays in contemporary society: neo-burlesque can be viewed as a " carnival" where alternative gender identities and representations are free to be enacted outside of the disciplinary gaze of mainstream society's rules and regulations. It is crucial, however, to note that this carnivalesque space is restricted, as the carnival ceases to exist with the final close of the curtain. Just as traditional burlesque was relegated to a lesser sphere in American society, contemporary neo-burlesque also holds a place outside of mainstream culture.

Finally, to see if burlesque could ever be transformative on a societal level, I further examine the most recent incarnation of burlesque by analyzing queer and fat neo-burlesque shows and dancers in the third chapter. These subcultural forms of burlesque further complicate

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[282] Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Carnival and the Carnivalesque." 1994. *Cultural Theory and Popular Culture: A Reader*. Ed. John Story. Vol. 4. Athens, GA: University of Georgia, 2009. 251.

perceptions surrounding appropriate representations of gender and sexuality by providing the potential for a more politically explicit dimension to be added to the conversation. The issues raised by the carnivalesque space and post-feminism are not exempt from these subcultural forms; fat and queer neo-burlesque's reliance on the post-feminist discourse of individual empowerment also ignores larger structural issues pertaining to American understandings of femininity and sexuality. While my examination of queer and fat burlesque emphasize that these subcultural forms of neo-burlesque possess a greater potential to subvert mainstream notions of body size, sexuality, and gendered behavior, ultimately these forms of neo-burlesque are limited by the carnivalesque space they occupy and are unable to inspire collective political action in American society.

Throughout the history of burlesque, from the traditional burlesque of the early 20th century to the subcultural forms of neo-burlesque found in contemporary society, burlesque's relationship with gender and sexuality remains complicated. Burlesque allows for the creation of alternative discourses and representations while simultaneously restricting their impact to a confined space. By highlighting the historical inability of burlesque to effectively act as a political force by challenging conceptions of sexuality and appropriate female body size in mainstream American society, it is evident that even in an age of post-feminism women are still subjected to patriarchal notions of body size, beauty, and behavior. While newer forms of neo-burlesque involve a more informed audience and subject material that pushes the boundaries of appropriate gendered representation, there is still much work to be done in creating a truly liberatory environment. Instead of offering a definitive statement regarding whether neo-burlesque is good or bad, I conclude my thesis by highlighting the tension between neo-burlesque's potential for liberating work and its inability to escape the constraints of patriarchal discourses of appropriate femininity, arguing that neo-burlesque offers an important cultural site in which to engage with and make sense of dominant American discourses pertaining to female agency and sexuality.

My thesis is informed through an engagement with archival and observational research. The archival approach proved immensely helpful in gathering an ample amount of information on traditional burlesque. Thanks to a Senior Thesis Grant (STG) through the Undergraduate

Research Opportunity Program (UROP) at the University of Notre Dame, I traveled to New York City for five days in October 2013 to work in the New York Public Library and New York Historical Society Archives. At the New York Public Library I accessed the Manuscripts and Archives Division, as well as the Billy Rose Theatre Division, where I collected a variety of original scrapbooks, autobiographical writings, fan correspondence, and historical records of burlesque from the 1850s through the 1940s. I also visited the Patricia Klingenstein Library at the New York Historical Society, where I viewed burlesque programs, original histories, and songbooks all dating prior to 1940.

I also engaged in two separate occasions of observational research, one at a New York City burlesque club and the second through a personal interview with a New York City based burlesque dancer. I observed a three-hour burlesque show in the Lower East Side at the Slipper Room, called *The Wiggle Room*. I classify this burlesque show as a "middle tier" show, as its thirty dollar ticket cost fell in-between glitzy, high class shows at exclusive clubs and free burlesque shows in local bars and restaurants. I also conducted an informal personal interview with Foxx VonTempt, a New York City burlesque dancer in a coffee house in central Manhattan. These two research methods serve as the basis for my inquiry and allow me to critically engage with burlesque's role in challenging and reinforcing dominant American gendered ideologies.

Chapter One: Powerful Tensions

The term burlesque, derived from the Italian word "burlesco," refers to a variety or satire show that seeks to invoke laughter about contemporary subjects, such as politics, literature, or highbrow dramatic works. When first introduced to the United States from England in the mid-1700s, burlesque embodied "the force of parody," and comedians and playwrights alike utilized this form of entertainment as a "vogue for travesties on classical drama and historical themes."[283] As a result, burlesque largely depended on audience recognition of the subject material, especially when satire was utilized, implying the assumption of literacy; in order to understand the comedic elements of an early burlesque show, the audience must have been well

[283] Sobel, Bernard. *Burleycue: An Underground History of Burlesque Days*. New York: Farrar & Rinehart, 1931. 4-5.

informed and educated in literature, history, and politics.[284] Burlesque, therefore, was viewed as a legitimate entertainment form, as the satiric subject material of the shows necessitated a certain level of cultural capital. Furthermore, the burlesque that America inherited from England in the late 18th century was devoid of any sexual content. Rather, the shows were explicitly political, and were widely viewed as legitimate sources of entertainment and political commentary.[285]

This early history of burlesque is perplexing and stands in stark contrast to representations of burlesque that permeate American popular culture today. From a purely foundational standpoint, "legitimate burlesque" originally existed in a form entirely different from contemporary understandings of burlesque, which now appear centered on the seductive striptease, as performed by Blair in *Gossip Girl*. [286] Why was the striptease first introduced? How did the introduction of the striptease result in the loss of burlesque's political capital within American society? Why did burlesque shift from a highbrow entertainment form to a lowbrow show reserved for voyeuristic, predominately male, audience members? In this chapter, I argue that the introduction of the striptease as an act within the larger burlesque show in the mid-1800s must be viewed in the context of the women's suffrage movement. At the same time that women gained rights in the political sphere, women also attempted to translate this new political power to the utilization of their bodies as a form of empowerment.

However, even though the gains of American women were acknowledged in the political sphere, most notably through the passage of the 19th amendment, this newfound political power did not hold true in the burlesque theaters. Instead of celebrating the empowerment of women to freely display their bodies, burlesque theaters and dancers were shunned and viewed as second-class citizens. This backlash by mainstream American society relegated issues of femininity and sexuality as irrelevant to the American politic and laid the groundwork for contemporary neo-burlesque's inability to translate political messages, regarding the same themes, on a societal level. Through an examination of the experiences of two prominent burlesque dancers, Sophie Tucker and Fay Tunis, I illustrate the tension women faced in this time period. Although both of

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[284]Adams, William Davenport. *A Book of Burlesque: Sketches of English Stage Travestie and Parody*. Folcroft, PA: Folcroft Library Editions, 1978. 44.

[285] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 4-5.

[286] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 5.

these women played significant roles in the industry, society ultimately looked down upon and viewed them only in terms of their bodies and sexuality; any political impact they wished to proliferate through their dancing was reserved to a contained, carnivalesque space that continues to define the role of neo-burlesque in contemporary American society.

A Period of Change

In the 1830s and 1840s, most white American men had achieved the right to vote, regardless of the amount of land that they owned.[287] Women, however, like other minority groups, were still excluded from full participation in American political life, and began to form clubs, societies, and conferences dedicated to achieving equal rights. In 1848, hundreds of women gathered at Seneca Falls, New York, creating a "Declaration of Sentiments" that called not only for the right for women to vote, but also for increased visibility at the political and social level.[288] At the same time, women in the American entertainment industry began the crusade for increased visibility and power, advocating for more control over the production and content of shows. One arena in which this desire was particularly evident was in the burlesque theater.[289] The introduction of the striptease in the mid-1800s by burlesque dancers such as Mlle. Hutin, Adah Isaacs Menken, and Lydia Thompson and the British Blondes, paralleled the desire of American women for independence and empowerment.[290] Yet, while the striptease was initially introduced during this time period, and women began the crusade for voting rights, it was relegated to the background of American politics due to the rise of the civil war and the crusade for "black rights."[291]

After the United States entered into World War I on April 6, 1917, women began holding an increased role in every aspect of civil life, including the workforce. Activists throughout the

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[287] "The Fight for Women's Suffrage." *History.com*. A&E Television Networks, n.d. Web. 19 Mar. 2014. <http://www.history.com/topics/womens-history/the-fight-for-womens-suffrage>.

[288] *Ibid.*

[289] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 5.

[290] *Ibid.*

[291] *Ibid.*

nation began to herald the efforts of American women and pointed out that "they were just as patriotic and deserving of citizenship as men."[292] Consequently, on August 26, 1920, the 19th Amendment was passed, giving American women the right to vote, a success, albeit small, for feminists throughout the U.S. While women gained the same voting rights as their male colleagues, the burlesque theater acted as another arena in which women asserted their authority and independence, through an involved presence in the business aspects of the show and the increased utilization of their bodies as a form of empowerment in their choreography.

In the 1910s and 1920s, the burlesque industry underwent a dramatic change, as the striptease became the primary attraction, instead of one act among many. Paralleling the rise in women's voting rights in the political sphere, women were also allowed to play a role in the ownership and production of the shows. Simultaneously, women not only became the primary stars of burlesque shows but also were able to create their own choreography and choose their own costumes. Yet, even with this newfound power, burlesque quickly lost popularity with the masses and was viewed as a lowbrow form of entertainment reserved primarily for voyeuristic male audiences. The controversy surrounding burlesque reached a peak after the Great Depression in the 1930s, as Progressives appealed to "public morality and common sense" as part of a crusade to "save" the citizens of the United States from moral decline and ruin.[293] Consequently, many activities were deemed immoral and "burlesque shows suffered proportionately," as shows were in constant danger of being raided or even shut down by local police.[294]

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[292] "The Fight for Women's Suffrage."

[293] Reich, Robert. "America's Public Morality Crisis." *Salon*. Salon Media Group, 14 Mar. 2012. 23 Jan. 2014. <http://www.salon.com/2012/03/14/americas_public_morality_crisis/>.

[294] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 127.

Figure 1.1. The radical costumes of early burlesque dancers. Sobel, A Pictorial History of Burlesque.

Interestingly, many self-proclaimed feminists also shared this skepticism toward burlesque's new emphasis on the public display of the female body. Olive Logan, a suffragette from the late 1860s, perhaps best summarized the tensions surrounding burlesque dancers during this time when she wrote,

> no decent woman can now look to the stage as a career. Clothed in the dress of an honest woman, she is worth nothing to a manager. Stripped as naked as she dare, and it seems there is little left when so much is gone, she becomes a prize to her manager, who knows that crowds will rush to see her.[295]

As Logan's quote illustrates, burlesque was taken out of the context of female empowerment and agency, and was instead labeled as deviant, or outside of the confines of mainstream societal expectations. Unlike gains made in other areas of American culture, the use of the female body to signify empowerment was labeled as "bad," and confined to a limited area.

These early examples of burlesque, in which the striptease provided women with an outlet through which to practice corporeal empowerment, were viewed "by critics as disruptive to societal expectations of femininity."[296] In particular, the female burlesque dancer held an uncertain place in society, as she "offered a model of femininity that existed outside the

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[295] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 5.

[296] Ratliff, Jamie. "Drawing on Burlesque: Excessive Display and Fat Desire in the Work of Cristina Vela." *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* 2.2. 2013. 118.131. *Taylor & Francis*. 6 Feb. 2014. 121.

dichotomous extremes of the good, domestic woman and the maligned prostitute."[297] She challenged long-held notions of passive female sexuality, resulting in her status as an "unsettling spectacle…due not simply to [her] presence on the stage, but [mainly due to her] conscious contemporaneity and sexual self-awareness."[298] Consequently, burlesque acquired the status of a "carnivalesque" space, in which the expression of this deviant sexuality was allowed within a confined space but was prohibited from entering wider American society. Although women were provided with significant gains in the political sphere, the utilization of the body as a form of empowerment pushed the boundaries past that which was deemed appropriate by patriarchal systems of social control.

Meeting the "Girls": Sophie Tucker and Fay Tunis

Two women in particular, Sophie Tucker and Fay Tunis, illustrate the tension women faced in this time period between the struggle for personal agency and individual empowerment both on and off the burlesque stage. Both women held impressive professional careers, drawing from the achievements of American women in the political sphere, and were permitted to integrate into the business elements of the burlesque industry. Additionally, they both chose to apply this newfound sense of power to the burlesque stage, where they experimented with varying performance styles. While endowed with the illusion of personal agency in both their professional and political lives, the effect of their work was limited in scope and untranslatable to American understandings of femininity and sexuality. Their experiences speak to the tension surrounding burlesque's ability to politically engage with, and subvert, gendered stereotypes and representations, as their entanglement with subversive body politics alienated them from full participation in American society.

Born in January of 1887, Sophie Tucker was a natural performer; in her autobiography she asserted that from a young age she possessed a "powerful voice and innate knack for

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[297] *Ibid.*

[298] *Ibid.*

entertaining."[299] However, even with her confidence in her ability to perform at a high theatrical level and "make a name for herself," Tucker was unable to acquire any roles in the national theater system and was forced to turn to the more risqué burlesque shows for work.[300] Upon entering the world of burlesque, her fame was not immediate. She was "pegged 'too fat and too ugly' to perform as herself," and was cast as a "coon shouter," a role that required her to dress in blackface and did not allow for any personal interpretation or agency.[301] During these early stages of her career, Tucker was unable to assert her independence, as women possessed little, if any, ability to make their own decisions.

In direct contrast to her early experience in the burlesque industry, in the 1910s and 1920s, Tucker gained significant control over her occupation, paralleling the gains women were making in the political sphere. For example, after a chance incident in Boston during which her makeup trunks were lost prior to a show, Tucker was given the chance to act as herself, out of blackface. During her first performance as herself, she defiantly proclaimed to the audience, "you all can see I'm a white girl. Well, I'll tell you something more: I'm not Southern. I'm a Jewish girl and I learned this Southern accent doing a blackface act for two years. And now, Mr. Leader, please play my song."[302] She quickly gained prominence on a national scale, revolutionizing understandings of what it meant to be an independent burlesque dancer, as she ultimately appropriated total control of her act from her producers, a blatant disregard from the previous producer-centric burlesque productions. She personally bought and owned the rights to popular burlesque songs written for her such as "Some of These Days" and "My Yiddishe Momme," a unique feat for a dancer, as producers or companies typically owned exclusive rights to the songs.[303] By choreographing her performances on stage, she engaged with a "complex critique of ethnic, gender, and class codes of morality" and challenged naturalized

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[299] *Sophie Tucker*. 14 Jan. 2014. <sophietucker.com>.

[300] *Ibid.*

[301] *Ibid.*

[302] Borden, Anne. "Jewish Women in Comedy - Sophie Tucker." *Jewish Women's Archive*. 14 Jan. 2014. <http://jwa.org/discover/infocus/comedy/tucker>.

[303] *Ibid.*

understandings of body size and appropriate expressions of female sexuality.[304] This was particularly evident in her non-traditional body size, as she was heavy-set and was not considered conventionally attractive. Tucker offered an explicitly political interpretation of gender and sexuality in her dances, separating her from past burlesque dancers through her conscious decision to redefine and challenge mainstream understandings of femininity, sexuality, and female agency on stage.

In 1938, Tucker was elected as the President of the American Federation of Actors (AFA), a reputable position that oversaw burlesque, vaudeville, circus performers, and other nightclub-esque forms of entertainment. Tucker's tenure as the President of the AFA was largely defined by her gender; in her autobiography she laments having to constantly fend off reports by the tabloids about her inability to control her emotions and serve as a stable leader.[305] In her writings, Tucker describes how, when leading an AFA meeting, she sat down and wiped sweat from her forehead with a handkerchief due to the heat of the room. The next day, accompanying a picture of her wiping her forehead, a newspaper headlined, "Sophie Tucker Weeps At Meeting," falsely alluded to her emotional instability and insinuated her inability to serve as a capable president due to her emotions.[306] Additionally, after the AFA was disbanded in 1939 for misappropriation of financial resources, Tucker experienced significant backlash, as her male colleagues implied that the AFA's failure had to do with the inherent inability of a woman to participate in business dealings.

Tucker's independence both on and off stage, while groundbreaking, was not universally accepted, The rejection she experienced illustrates how her potential to promote political change was limited to a contained space - the stage of the burlesque show – which remained untranslatable to wider American society. Tucker was allowed to play the part of an independent woman both in her performances and in her business dealings, but was only accepted as legitimate in the limited context of the burlesque theater. In her autobiographical writings Tucker included a multitude of newspaper articles articulating how she was received favorably

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[304] *Ibid.*

[305] Tucker, Sophie. *Sophie Tucker Autobiographical Writings*. New York Public Library Manuscripts and Archives Division. New York City. 23 Oct. 2013. See Microfilm reel 1.

[306] *Ibid.*

everywhere she traveled, winning favor with male audiences around the globe due to her "unique sex appeal."[307] This suggests that she was not valued on stage for her attempts to challenge the status quo, but rather was viewed as "sexy" and enjoyable to watch by male audiences.

Similar to Tucker, Fay Tunis was born in October of 1887. Labeled the "queen of the strip-tease art," by the end of her career Tunis was widely acknowledged as an expert in "artful disrobing."[308] Tunis was also not immediately successful, as she was denied from her first Broadway audition and forced to enter burlesque as a last resort. Once she made the switch, Tunis soon became a household name in both the burlesque show itself and in the managerial aspects of the business. She introduced several unique elements to the striptease, including the use of pasties. Tunis was also cited as the primary creator of the "tease" element of the striptease, in which she spent most of her act taking off her clothes, rather than dancing without her clothes on.[309] Tunis was acting as a predecessor to the contemporary belief in the importance of the "art of the tease" rather than the "art of the strip". Although detailed further in chapter two, here it is important to note that audience members largely disregarded her nuances. Instead of appreciating the artistic value of her actions, male audience members viewed Tunis as a sexual being performing for their pleasure.[310] As she became more famous, her ability to strip was intimately connected to her name, suggesting that her ability to challenge gendered assumptions was not advertised to the American public; rather, her act relied on traditional understandings of sexuality in order to maintain popularity in the burlesque industry. Any political work that Tunis did include, through parody or some other technique, was not acknowledged or correlated with a wider campaign.

Tunis was also a leading figure in the Chorus Equity Association (CEA) strike of 1919 that caused a "furore [sic] in Broadway musical comedy circles."[311] During this strike, she served on the executive board as the Vice President of Chorus Equity, a reputable position. Her work

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[307] *Ibid.*

[308] "Fay Tunis, Once Star of Strip Tease Act Now Has Shop Here." *The Sunday Morning Star.* Wilmington, Deleware. 26 Feb. 1939.

[309] *Ibid.*

[310] *Ibid.*

[311] *Ibid.*

with the CEA was largely successful, as she lobbied with primarily male actors to ensure better working conditions for those employed in the entertainment industry, including better pay and a defined workweek. However, although Tunis expanded beyond her role on the stage and took an active part in the politics and daily operations of the burlesque industry, she was subject to an extremely hostile response by those with whom she worked. Tunis' attractive physical appearance subjected her to numerous sexual advances from both adoring fans and coworkers, as illustrated by the collection of letters that she received throughout her time on stage.

These letters disregarded her work in the political sphere of the industry and relegated her to a sexual object to be consumed by a desiring male population. In various letters, Fay received monetary offers in which the male writers promised a "pleasant engagement" and praised her "work, charm, ability, and beauty."[312] She was also subjected to behavior that, to a contemporary observer, closely resembles stalking. For example, in one letter, the writer not only knew where she was staying, but also ended the letter by requesting a photograph of her that he promised to keep as one of his "most treasured possessions."[313]

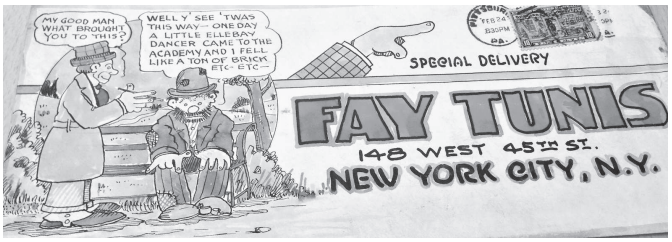

Figure 1.2. Intricate envelope design on a letter to Fay Tunis. Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library.

Tunis also received an assortment of letters with intricate designs on the envelope, often depicting the sender's affection toward her. While elaborate and certainly impressive, several of the envelopes also included belittling notes, such as "in case you have to return it (you won't have to – this gal will be sitting on the doorstep waiting for it)," and "if you are unable to locate this party, stand on the corner and make a noise like a casino – she will soon show up."[314] Similarly to the way women are derided in the comment sections of articles that they write on the internet in contemporary society, the inclusion of these sentences, although easily overlooked,

[312] *Letters to Fay Tunis*. Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts. Oct 23. 2013.

[313] *Ibid.*

[314] *Ibid.*

illustrate the lack of respect provided to burlesque dancers. They suggest that the male admirers' persistence in arranging a meeting with Tunis, or a similar dancer, had little to do with the appreciation of her talent on stage or of her efforts to challenge gendered assumptions. Instead, the "fan mail" serves as an illustration of the ways in which burlesque dancers held little political impact; audience members were able to avoid wrestling with the radical interpretations of gender, both in the political sphere and on the stage, by only viewing the women in a stigmatized manner and looking down upon them in a derogatory way as a result of their profession.

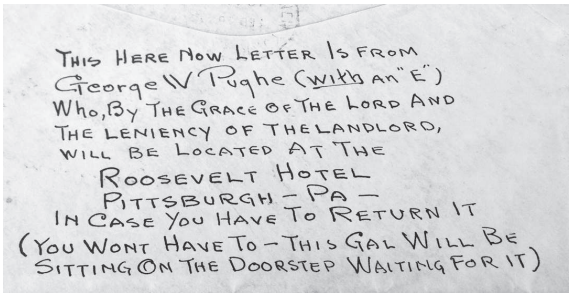

Figure 1.3. Derogatory comments on a letter to Fay Tunis. Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library.

Both Tunis and Tucker illustrate the complicated role that burlesque dancers held during this time period. Both women attempted to challenge understandings of appropriate femininity through their work on stage and in the industry but were ultimately limited to acknowledgment in the theatre: a sphere unable to influence mainstream society and promote wider social change in American perceptions of femininity and sexuality.

Further Sites of Tension in Burlesque

The tension evident in the intersection between Tucker and Tunis' political and professional lives illustrates that although women were given more power during this era, it was fundamentally limited, especially if they attempted to involve body politics as a form of empowerment. Yet, the choreography within the shows and their roles in the business elements of the industry were not the only ways that burlesque dancers like Tucker and Tunis attempted to utilize burlesque as a site for reimagining ideologies of femininity and sexuality. More specifically, the dancers' music choices and costume selections illustrate further areas of tension within the cultural form of burlesque.

The music of traditional burlesque was less explicit in its overt display of sexuality than the choreography but still possessed the potential for profound political interpretation. While most of the songs included gendered undertones, they were rarely directly related to the striptease, unlike the direct ties between the choreography and the display of flesh. For example, a burlesque songster from the late nineteenth century highlights a popular song named "I'm Called the Fairest Flower." This ballad is written from the perspective of a woman who is wrestling with her ability to abide by appropriate standards of femininity. In this particular song the female singer laments how "when at home, and all alone, and no one near or looking" she is able to "breakdown dance…prance… and sometimes mind the cooking." However, when she is "out at walk" she must "not act or talk" in an inappropriate manner.[315] This song and many others like it, address gender in a political manner, challenging previously held notions of appropriate femininity. Yet, because these songs often contained explicit political challenges to notions of femininity, and were endowed with arguably dangerous sexual implications, they were often sang in conjunction with a comedian or another form of comedic relief. This ensured that their political messages did not possess any real, or dangerous, power. Therefore, like the striptease, the political message inherent in the music selections of a burlesque show was largely limited to the realm of the theater.

The message of "I'm Called the Fairest Flower" is pertinently illustrated by Sophie and Fay's involvement in the business side of the burlesque industry, as they attempted – "out at walk" – to integrate into a male dominated space and defy previous standards of femininity. However, just as the song expresses, they were derided and reminded not to "act or talk" in a way that was deemed inappropriate for a woman. Conversely, on stage – where they were "at home" – they were celebrated for engaging in an action deemed more acceptable for the female gender, or showcasing their bodies for the pleasure of a predominately male audience. This song, and others like it, is intimately related to the experiences of the many burlesque dancers who were unable to challenge mainstream conventions surrounding gendered behavior in American society.

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[315] "I'm Called the Fairest Flower." *Mistress Jinks Burlesque Songster: A Collection of Comic and Burlesque Songs of the Day.* (1809). New York Historical Society. Oct. 24. 2013. 15.

In addition to the limited political work of the chorographical and musical content of traditional burlesque shows, the costumes of the dancers also provide a valuable context through which to understand the increasing tension between the display of flesh and mainstream understandings of appropriate femininity and sexuality. Traditional burlesque dancers took great pride in their costumes, as they were responsible for the creation, purchase, and upkeep of them. Interestingly, the dancers were also allowed to choose the outfits that they would perform in, suggesting that they possessed agency in their decision to don scantily clad outfits, as costumes became increasingly revealing as the 20th century progressed. Yet, here emerges another crucial site of tension: the agency of these women to chose their costumes as a source of personal empowerment ultimately backfired, as their nearly naked bodies were viewed by the mainstream American society as either deviant or for the consumption of a male audience. While the dancers took pride in their costumes and utilized them to celebrate their bodies and sexual agency, burlesque was further shunned as a lowbrow form of entertainment and associated with stripping or prostitution.

Figure 1.4. A typical burlesque costume from the 1930s. Billy Rose Theater Division, New York Public Library.

While an overview of traditional burlesque reveals that burlesque dancers were stigmatized and often only famous due to the successful sexualization of their bodies, one area in which dancers were removed from the judgment of the public eye existed in the community that they formed amongst each other. Burlesque dancers lived in boarding houses, rehearsed, performed, and spent their off days together. Sobel writes that burlesque "was one happy family

– a family that was perhaps closer inasmuch as it was just a little beyond the pale of the law."[316] This observation suggests that the burlesque community was not only formed due to proximity, but also as a direct result of the fact that burlesque was viewed as immoral and socially deviant. In addition to sharing meals and participating in similar activities, burlesque dancers were bound by their shared experience of "getting by with material and acts under the very eyes of the police," further illustrating how the stigmatized nature of the burlesque industry created a natural community for those within it.[317] In this sense, burlesque dancers were able to continue the political work performed on stage in the safety of the burlesque community, by welcoming all forms of gendered behavior and expression. Once again, however, this power was confined to a limited space, the community itself, and was ultimately untranslatable to mainstream American society.

The Decline of Burlesque

While burlesque enjoyed popularity as part of the American entertainment industry until the 1940s, even with its perceived immorality, its prominence ultimately diminished. Sobel cites many factors that resulted in the decline of this American entertainment form, such as the external causes of "World War I, the advent of movies and radio, the popularity of the new Broadway revues, clerical and press opposition, conniving politicians and grafting police, Prohibition, the market crash, and the Depression."[318] Perhaps more than any other factor, however, the rise of television and film provided the most drastic blow to traditional burlesque, as entertainment became easily accessible to a wide range of audience demographics, while simultaneously offering new technology and subject material. Instead of attending a live production, audiences were able to access unique storylines and characters that had been

[316] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 129.

[317] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 129.

[318] Sobel, *A Pictorial History of Burlesque*, New York: Putnam, 1956. 186.

carefully manipulated to appeal to them, a feat that burlesque was unable to perform as its success depended on the "joy of recognition…the pleasurable contact with the familiar."[319]

Additionally, the American obsession with morality was not as extreme as it was in the early years of the century, as the "use of blasphemy and frank speech [in mainstream American theater]…took the edge off burlesque ribaldry."[320] New fashion trends in America, along with the rise of the "New Woman," also significantly changed perceptions of burlesque, as the display of the leg was no longer a sought after commodity; flesh was everywhere. The striptease in burlesque, therefore, no longer held the same power of sexual deviance, relegating burlesque as an outdated entertainment form, no longer popular with audiences. The ability of burlesque dancers to challenge mainstream assumptions of gender was ultimately unsuccessful, and its potential for political work died along with the entertainment form.

Over the next 50 years, except for a few nostalgic tours, burlesque held considerably less prominence in the entertainment industry, and remained this way until its revival and modernization in the 1990s, when it was heralded as neo-burlesque or "new" burlesque. Largely rooted in "a hunger for good dirty fun" and a sense of "rebellion against…reformers," neo-burlesque expands upon many of the themes of conventional burlesque, offereding dancers an avenue to bend widely accepted gendered-conventions through the intentional eroticized display of their bodies.[321] Growing in popularity since its emergence in the 1990s, examples of neo-burlesque can now be found in almost every major city in the United States but holds an especially prominent place in New York City, where burlesque can "be found on stage somewhere in the city most nights of the week."[322]

In chapter two, I jump sixty years into the future, illuminating how neo-burlesque attempts to rectify some of traditional burlesque's shortcomings. In particular, I critically engage with a contemporary neo-burlesque show and dancer, illustrating how even though the political implications of burlesque are more readily visible and acknowledged by both those participating

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[319] Sobel, *Burleycue*, 164.

[320] Sobel, *A Pictorial History of Burlesque*, 187.

[321] Caldwell, Mark. "The Almost Naked City." *The New York Times.* The New York Times, 18 May 2008. 8 Dec. 2013.

[322] *Ibid.*

in and those observing the show, the political work of neo-burlesque is still largely confined to the carnivalesque space of the theater. As we go forward in history, it is crucial to keep this historical context in mind as evidence for the ways in which many of the themes of neo-burlesque are deeply rooted in an entertainment form that has a complicated relationship with representations of femininity and sexuality.

Chapter Two: Boobs, Boobs, and More Boobs

On the corner of East Houston and Orchard Street in the Lower East Side of New York City sits a nondescript building with a bar on the lower level. Although located in a quickly gentrifying neighborhood, the particularly dismal state of Orchard Street has obviously detracted curious passersby or seasoned regulars. The street is largely deserted, with the exception of the trash blowing in the wind in and around the gutters. It is also quiet, an unnerving sound in a city defined by constant movement and activity. However, upon closer examination, a neon sign illuminates the impending nightfall, depicting pink and white sparkly letters. A small door under the sign leads to a set of steep stairs, providing access to the second floor of the building.

Upon reaching the top of the stairs, a doorman admits customers one by one after proof of ticket purchase is provided. The man is friendly, engaging in conversation with the arriving patrons, asking if they had ever been to a show before, and if they had, which shows and performers they had seen. He then ushers the customers into a pitch-black room, with the exception of a large fluorescent cross that is lit by a black light. This cross creates an eerie entrance to the theatre, as it does not seemingly have anything to do with the subject of the performance or the performance space itself. It suggests that the building designers had some specific message in mind that they intended to share with their patrons. Its glowing light illuminates all of the hidden stains and spots on the clothes and shoes of the audience members, perhaps foreshadowing the transparency that defines much of the upcoming show.

The next room is spectacular. A ceiling two stories high provides the room with the illusion of space, even though the actual room itself is not particularly large. A stage takes up the entirety of the front of the room, identifiable by a red curtain, drawn, hiding whatever lies behind

it. A disco ball spins on the ceiling and creates pattern of white lights on everything it touches. The red curtain is mesmerizing as the disco ball creates a continuous pattern of light, suggesting the presence of something magnificent behind it. The lighting is dim in the theatre, with most of the light radiating from the disco ball and the candles placed on the twenty-something small circle tables that are placed haphazardly in front of the stage.

Figure 2.1. The Wiggle Room stage. www.timeout.com.

A bar on the right-hand side of the room is in full swing, as bartenders mix a variety of concoctions; yet, this is no regular bar. The glasses are carefully chosen: women drink out of martini glasses while men sip from whisky tumblers, regardless of their drink order. A buzz permeates the room as the audience eagerly anticipates the upcoming show. The room feels older, sophisticated, as if transported back in time to the 1910s or 1920s, enjoying a night out with a loved one or group of friends. The audience members are predominantly white, women, presumably middle class, and behave with the utmost civility, talking quietly amongst themselves. Finally, after what feels like an eternity of anticipation, the lights shine brightly on the stage, a soundtrack reminiscent of the jazz age begins to play, and a man dressed in a tuxedo steps out from behind the curtain proclaiming: "Welcome all to *The Wiggle Room*, where you will enjoy a night full of boobs, boobs, and more boobs!" The neo-burlesque show has just begun.

The scene described above is reminiscent of the traditional burlesque shows of the early 20th century, as the intimate space and 1920s inspired décor illuminates the sense of nostalgia that defines contemporary neo-burlesque. Like its traditional counterpart, this neo-burlesque show is a true performance and takes place in a theater in front of an eager audience. My

observations at *The Wiggle Room* and my conversation with Foxx VonTempt, a New York City burlesque dancer, illustrate the ways that neo-burlesque attempts to revive and modernize traditional burlesque, especially through changing audience demographics and an increased promotion of alternative gendered identities and expressions of sexuality. Yet, while this neo-burlesque show evolves from traditional burlesque, it also mirrors it in crucial ways. My observations also illuminate the tensions between personal empowerment and mainstream discourses regulating femininity and sexuality that continue to pervade neo-burlesque today, paralleling the experiences of Sophie Tucker and Fay Tunis. Although neo-burlesque attempts to rectify the shortcomings of traditional burlesque by more contentiously engaging with representations of femininity and sexuality, it still parallels its traditional counterpart, as its political work is limited to the carnivalesque space of the theater.

The Host: Stage Director, Comedian, & Politician

"My name is Sir Richard Castle" the host begins, "and you're in for a treat tonight. Dancing, boobs, contortionism, boobs, ostrich fans, boobs, jokes galore, and of course, more boobs!" The audience laughs enthusiastically; after all, they have paid money to attend the show and are looking forward to an experience that is reminiscent of the entertainment of past decades. From the very first lines, Sir Richard Castle, a stage name for the actor Bradford Scobie, fulfills the audience's nostalgic desires by playing the part of the historical vaudeville host and commentating before, after, and even during some of the burlesque acts. Like the hosts of the past, Sir Richard is tasked with keeping "a room full of people happy and respectful of performers, clothed or not."[323] Consequently, his role in the burlesque show is multifaceted, as he must wear the cap of stage director, comedian, and in some senses of the word, politician. These three roles compliment the aesthetics of the theatre to provide the audience members with the illusion of participation in the burlesque entertainment tradition.

Sir Richard Castle plays the role of stage director, a logistically fundamental role for the success of the show. Similar to the burlesque shows of the late 1800s and early 1900s, the acts do

[323] DuBois, Shelley. "How A Burlesque Host Keeps the Peace." *CNN Fortune Management*. Cable News Network, 30 May 2013. 10 Dec. 2013.

not possess a central connecting theme or a unified plot; rather, it consists of several unrelated acts, complete with monologues, songs, dances, and other "bits" or comedy sketches. Sir Richard Castle guides the audience through these different acts by introducing the dancers and stalling for time when the dancers may not be quite ready to perform. In this particular show, as there were only four dancers, Sir Richard Castle frequently asked the girls if they needed more time or if they were ready to begin their performance. After hearing an audible statement in the negative, he would then inform the audience that the girls needed more time, and that he was going to entertain them further. His inclusion of the audience in his role as stage director serves as a pertinent illustration of how audience interaction defines burlesque, as the functions of the show are transparent to the audience and result in a unique performer-audience dialogue that rarely accompanies other theatrical productions.

In addition to his role as stage director, Sir Richard Castle's invocation of jokes, puns, and even insults directed toward the audience mimics the dynamic experienced in the burlesque shows that first came to America from England in the 1700s. In this early burlesque, the host was the connection between the audience and the performers, utilizing the audience's knowledge of current events to engage them in the political commentary of the show. The host gradually lost favor in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, however, as the striptease became the primary attraction. He was no longer needed to provide political commentary; the audience was only there to watch the women dance. Therefore, the reintroduction of the host's political role in neo-burlesque suggests a commitment to modifying some of the shortcomings of traditional burlesque by allowing the host to engage in explicit political commentary.

From the very beginning of his time on stage, Sir Richard Castle begins to rip and rag on the audience, poking fun at their individual actions as well as at the wider population of people who attend burlesque shows and are privy to this form of entertainment. For example, Castle begins a joke, "Are there any blacks out there? Nope, no blacks. It's just all you white upper-class 1% assholes," To his surprise a man in the back of the room yells out that he is indeed a black man attending the show. Castle's reply feigns shock that a black man would enter an entertainment scene that has historically been reserved for members of the wealthier white population. While clearly joking, as illustrated by the voice that he invokes, as well as his

exaggerated laughter after his punch lines that inform the audience that "it's time to laugh now," this type of racialized dialogue has profound implications for understanding the demographics of this niche type of entertainment in both a historical and contemporary sense.

The Wiggle Room is located in the Lower East Side of New York City in the East Village, a neighborhood comprised of a majority immigrant population. Twenty-six percent of the East Village population speaks a language other than English, primarily Spanish, and over a quarter of the population was born in a country other than the United States.[324] It is therefore significant that this show, set in the middle of an ethnically and racially diverse area, is a space reserved almost entirely for white members of society. This suggests that this form of entertainment holds prominent race and class connotations, an assumption that is confirmed by Sir Richard's racialized commentary. For example, his pun about black male audience members illuminates the anxiety surrounding black male sexuality that is still present in American society. I argue that black men in the audience are subject to a different set of judgments than white males, as deeply rooted historical concerns about protecting white women against the "myth of the sex-crazed black boogeyman" render their presence at a burlesque show, in which white women perform in explicitly sexual ways, questionable.[325] It is apparent that the comedic elements of the host's act do more than simply provide the audience with a good laugh: they provide political commentary that has the potential to illuminate many of society's deepest issues, such as the anxieties about race that are still present in American society.

The most significant example of the politically infused nature of Sir Richard Castle's commentary, however, occurs in his discussion of gender and sexuality. Throughout the show, Sir Richard utilizes several "bits" or reoccurring puns about "appropriate" female sexuality. In one such bit, Sir Richard discusses how society typically blames a woman's promiscuity for getting pregnant out of wedlock, even though it is the male sperm that actually impregnates her. He jokes that women should just "stick their hands up their pussies and tie their fucking tubes," in order to eliminate any possibility of pregnancy. While this statement was treated to extensive

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[324] "East Village, New York, NY Demographics." *Data & Community Statistics*. AreaVibes. 24 Mar. 2014. <http://www.areavibes.com/new%2Byork-ny/east%2Bvillage/demographics/>.

[325] Persaud, Rajen. *Why Black Men Love White Women: Going beyond Sexual Politics to the Heart of the Matter*. New York: Pocket, 2007.

laughter from the audience, Sir Richard is providing an explicit commentary on the notions of gender and sexuality that are espoused by post-feminist American culture. More specifically, I suggest that he exposes the triviality of post-feminism's emphasis on "individualism, choice, and empowerment," by providing the absurd suggestion that a woman should go so far as to stick her own hand up her vagina to tie her fallopian tubes; after all, it is up to her to fix the issue herself.[326] Sir Richard's commentary on the appropriate ways to embody female sexuality, like his comments on race, illustrates how the parody inherent in burlesque challenges mainstream discourses and perceptions through the invocation of humor.

The Girls & Their Acts

After Sir Richard finishes his opening monologue, the lights dim, encasing the room in almost complete darkness except for a single spotlight in the shape of a circle on the thick red curtain. A Beach Boys song, remixed with an eclectic combination of beats and rhythms similar to those of an electronica or dubstep song begins to play, resulting in a jarring concoction of sound reminiscent of both past and present eras. From inside the curtain a young woman, no older than her early twenties, with a bright red bob hairdo, red lipstick, and sparkles plastered all over her pale face, sticks her head out of the space in between the curtains and winks at the audience. Exaggeratedly mouthing the words to "Good Vibrations," Melody Jane slowly slinks her left arm through the red curtain, followed by her left leg. Then, instead of allowing her body to emerge, Melody Jane begins to gyrate against the curtain, holding the red cloth above her head for leverage as she rubs her body up and down the fabric, mimicking the action of having sex. Finally, in swift, dramatic movement, Melody Jane throws open the heavy red curtain, showcasing her tiny body to the audience. She begins to strut around the stage, pausing every now and then to shimmy or shake, in what appears to be a combination of practiced moves and improvisation. On the surface, her act is unremarkable, as it mostly consists of her dancing to the beat of the music in the middle of the stage, with the minimal striptease, if it can even be called that, occurring at the very end of her dance. However, upon closer examination of her costume in

[326] Gill, *Postfeminist Media Culture*, 149.

relation to the specific movements of her dance, it is clear that her performance possesses explicit meaning and consciously bends traditional gendered expectations of young, white women.

Most of Melody Jane's act consists of overt moves demonstrating her sexuality; her act is infused with expectation that the audience will recognize her sex appeal. She gyrates, shakes her breasts, and even bends over so that her thong is visible to the audience. Yet, her outfit tells a different story, as her yellow-and-black-striped triangle bikini top and bottom and a yellow tutu, similar to those worn by young ballet dancers or youth playing dress-up in suburban basements, invoke an image of innocence and sexual purity. Although her g-string is visible over the top of her bikini bottoms, and she eventually does take off her bikini top so that she only has pasties covering her nipples, Melody Jane only removes her tutu skirt at the end of the act and remains in her bikini bottom, so that her butt is always fully covered. This disparity between the content of her act and her outfit is no accident, as Melody Jane is purposely playing upon understandings of "appropriate" sexuality for young white women. By dressing in a youthful manner while simultaneously mimicking sexual behavior deemed unacceptable for young women, Melody Jane offers an alternative understanding of appropriate gendered behavior and sexuality than that endorsed by mainstream society, in which sex is often seen as taboo, especially for youth.

Melody Jane's defiance of "appropriate" gendered behavior is further exemplified in an interaction I had with her during one of the show's intermissions. Labeled the show's "stage kitten" by host Sir Richard Castle, also playing upon her image of youth and innocence with the connotation of the nickname "kitten," Melody Jane was tasked with walking around the audience asking patrons if they would be interested in entering a raffle. As she approached my table, my uncle asked her how she was doing, to which she replied, "I'm just fucking dandy!" This response initially shocked me, as her youthful appearance, further exaggerated through her hair and makeup, made her use of this expletive unexpected and jarring. In a society in which we are taught that it is unbecoming for "proper" young girls to curse or swear, Melody Jane's utilization of the expletive illustrates her willful defiance of understandings of appropriate young womanhood.

After the conclusion of Melody Jane's dance, host Sir Richard Castle labels the next act as weighing "a whopping three hundred and fifty pounds," a woman emerged from the wings of the stage to the tune of a sultry jazz song full of various melodies and wailing brass instruments. Dressed in a tight red tank top and a bikini bottom with red tassels hung on every free space of the costume, the dancer began to shimmy her large body, walking toward the audience members. Her breasts were massive, hanging over her numerous stomach folds. Every step she took, her body jiggled, as her excess skin overtook her. Yet, any reaction elicited for Melody Jane was doubled in response to this act, as the audience continuously yelled praises for the dancer throughout her act. As she walked toward the audience, acknowledging their approval with a smile on her face and nods of her head, the dancer began to slowly peel her outfit off; first the mid-section of her top, then her bikini bottom, then the bottom portion of her tank top and finally the straps around her shoulders, leaving only a g-string on the bottom and tassels covering her nipples. As the music climaxed, she finished her act by shaking her breasts in various circular patters at increasing speeds so that the nipple tassels swung in accordance with her movements, an act that was met with thunderous approval from the audience.

Of all of the performances that I observed, this was the most exceptional, as the confidence and ease with which she performed was mesmerizing. Furthermore, this sentiment was not unique to me, as the audience gave her a standing ovation after her performance and was extremely responsive to her throughout the act. Interestingly, her weight was seemingly absent from the equation when it came to the audience's reaction to her and her own attitude and exceptional confidence toward her performance. This was the most explicit rejection of "appropriate" sexuality that I observed at *The Wiggle Room* burlesque show, as her weight did not impact her display of sexuality and self-confidence during her performance, a direct defiance to the post-feminist emphasis on "femininity as a bodily property…monitoring and discipline…[and] self-surveillance."[327] Consequently, I suggest that this performance is a pertinent illustration of the ways in which neo-burlesque complicates post-feminist discourses relating to body image and body size. The fat burlesque dancer, as discussed in greater detail in chapter three, departs from "masculine ideas of sexiness…and does so with a vengeance because of her

[327] Gill, *Postfeminist Media Culture*, 149.

own culturally constructed excessiveness," suggesting a rejection of widely held norms within the space of the burlesque theatre.[328] While Melody Jane's previous performance was certainly endowed with political commentary, the fat burlesque dancer's brave and revolutionary performance did more than merely challenge "appropriate" forms of femininity and sexuality. Her performance outwardly rejected patriarchal notions of beauty, body size, and acceptable sexual behavior. She illustrated not only that women can be in control of their sexuality, but that women of all sizes are sexy.

After the conclusion of the fat burlesque dancer's act, a Russian woman named Ekatrina walked toward the audience dressed in a leather dominatrix outfit, smacking a cat of nine tails whip against her backside. After mimicking sexual arousal by the whip and throwing it into the audience, she began contorting her body into a variety of seemingly impossible poses, including placing her whole foot into her mouth and sitting on the ground with both legs tied in a knot around the back of her neck. However, the content of Ekatrina's act, while certainly impressive, was not the most notable element of her performance. Rather, her body served as a more pertinent illustration of how she embodied a challenge to post-feminist ideologies of body image, size, personal control, and empowerment.

In contrast to the fat burlesque dancer, Ekatrina's body was exceptionally built; her ability to successfully contort her body largely depended on possessing the necessary strength to hold unnatural positions. Ekatrina's body size was arguably deviant in a nature opposing that of the heavy burlesque dancer: her body was so fit that it could be deemed "masculine." Therefore, one of the ways that Ekatrina challenges post-feminist discourses through her participation in neo-burlesque exists in the physical shape of her body, as she does not succumb to widely, or popularly, endorsed ideologies of feminine beauty. Additionally, her costume choices of leather and props with S&M undertones offer an alternative perspective on empowerment and personal control, as her act implies that she occupies a dominant, traditionally masculine, sexual position.

In addition to his work on the "carnival," Bakhtin also proposed the concept of the "grotesque," or the study of the "aesthetics of the monstrous."[329] Bakhtin outlined how within the

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[328] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 126.

[329] Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Rabelais and His World*. Cambridge, MA: M. I. T., 1968. 43.

carnivalesque space, the grotesque is permitted, offering a "sharp, static contrast" to images or identities that are accepted as normal within mainstream society.[330] Put in the context of a performance that centers on corporeal deviance, such as Ekatrina's contortionist act, the grotesque refers to a body that is "liberated from the prevailing point of view…from conventions and established truths, from clichés, from…all that is universally accepted."[331] Ekatrina embodies the grotesque, as her performance offers a direct contradiction to mainstream understandings of body size, as well as challenges ideologies surrounding the appropriate use of the female body. Within this carnivalesque space of a neo-burlesque theater, Ekatrina is allowed to promote a brand of grotesque corporeal deviance, not only through her masculine figure but also through her body's unnatural contortions and her mimicry of sexual power.

The fourth, and final dancer of *the Wiggle Room* burlesque troupe, Miss Tickles, was the last performer in the first act, but performed one of the most recognizable forms of the striptease in burlesque: the ostrich fan dance. Made popular in the early 1900s by burlesque dancer Sally Rand, the ostrich fan dance has long held a controversial position in the minds of many Americans concerned with the perceived immorality of burlesque.[332] Rand was arrested multiple times on charges of indecent exposure, as the ostrich fan act eventually calls for the dancer to strip down to nothing but a g-string and boob pasties that are revealed under the fluttering of the multitude of ostrich feathers in the fan attachments of the costume.[333] Miss Tickles performed a wonderful adaptation of a fan dance and completed the dance by showcasing her g-string and boob pasties, as is traditional.

While she did not perform in a radically different manner from any burlesque dancer executing the ostrich fan dance over the past century, the inclusion of this dance into the show is relevant as it calls into focus the connection between the politicized nature of both neo-burlesque and traditional burlesque. Just as Sally Rand was considered deviant during her time by those who felt that her act defied normalized expectations for feminine sexuality, so too does Miss

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[330] *Ibid*., 34.

[331] *Ibid*., 41.

[332] Price, Ryan Lee. *Stories of Old Glendora*. The History Press: Charleston, SC, 2012. 99.

[333] *Ibid.*

Tickles' dance speak to anxieties that still circulate regarding the appropriate display of femininity and sexuality. By performing the ostrich fan dance, Miss Tickles symbolically links neo-burlesque to traditional burlesque, suggesting that while the form and content of the two entertainment forms may differ, traces of anxiety surrounding appropriate gender and sexuality remain prevalent in American society.

The Importance of Space: The Theatre as a Carnivalesque Space

In his writing "Carnival and the Carnivalesque," Mikhail Bakhtin introduces the concept of the carnival, arguing that it represents a space where the "laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary are suspended."[334] Within his description of the carnival space, all "distance among people is suspended," and replaced instead with "free and familiar contact among people…who in life are separated by impenetrable hierarchical barriers."[335] In addition to the possibility for the creation of relationships between members of society who may not frequently interact, the carnival as proposed by Bakhtin is also defined by "profanation," or the inclusion of parody or satire on "the earth and the body," as well as "eccentricity" or the "violation of the usual and the generally accepted."[336] Bakhtin's carnival represents a space removed from the constraints of reality, in which all people, regardless of background or social class, are united in a shared experience that is both exaggerated and often times divergent from expectations of normalcy. With Bakhtin's definition in mind, I argue that neo-burlesque shows, such as *The Wiggle Room*, function as a carnivalesque space. While neo-burlesque shows connect an eclectic mix of people through a shared experience of satire and parody, challenging popular understandings of "ordinary," through the various ways that the dancers' bodies, outfit choices, and performances deviate from post-feminist understandings related to gender and sexuality, it is ultimately constrained to an approved space, the theater, and removed from mainstream society.

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[334] Bakhtin, "Carnival and the Carnivalesque," 250.

[335] *Ibid*., 251.

[336] *Ibid.*, 251-254.

Within *The Wiggle Room* show, much of the "laws, prohibitions, and restrictions" that define mainstream understandings of femininity and sexuality, arguably implemented through systems of post-feminist control such as the media, are suspended.[337] Mainstream media and popular culture have naturalized the link between female beauty and an ideal, small, body size; these assumptions illustrate how the reality of the second dancer's large body size, as well as the supportive response she received, is suspended in the carnivalesque space of a burlesque theatre. The overweight dancer defied normalized expectations of beauty by stripping to only a g-string and pasties, while simultaneously receiving praise and support for her action, an occurrence that would rarely occur outside of the confines of a burlesque performance.[338] Yet, the second dancer was only one example of many performances throughout the show in which similar counter-hegemonic work occurred, as further illustrated by Melody Jane's complication of appropriate sexuality for youthful women, Ekatrina's "masculine" figure, and Miss Tickles' utilization of ostrich fans as a symbol of a deeply-rooted cultural anxiety surrounding the female figure and sexuality. Consequently, *The Wiggle Room* functions as a carnivalesque space as proposed by Bakhtin, as the ordinary, or mainstream popular understandings relating to gender and sexuality, are twisted and convoluted, resulting in a space where "life is drawn out of its usual rut."[339]

The Wiggle Room neo-burlesque show also exemplifies the "carnival" attribute of parody, or satire, as illustrated through my analysis of Sir Richard Castle's politically infused commentary. While his commentary is certainly comical and is an integral component in the creation of an environment that allows the audience to actively engage with the host and the dancers, it also illustrates the ways that carnivalesque spaces, such as a burlesque theatre, overtly challenge the existing social order. Bakhtin argues that "carnivalistic laughter…is directed toward something higher – toward a shift of authorities and truths, a shift of world orders," illustrating how the parody and laughter within carnivalesque spaces, such as burlesque, is necessarily infused with political meaning. [340] Laughter in the carnivalistic space is by definition

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[337] *Ibid*., 250.

[338] This is challenged by the emergence of the "Fat Pride Movement." However, as further illustrated in chapter three, this movement rarely explicitly deals with the sexual display of the female body.

[339] Bakhtin, "Carnival and the Carnivalesque," 254.

[340] *Ibid.*

directed toward those with social control or power. Neo-burlesque embodies this sense of parody by questioning and explicitly denying accepted norms relating to gender, sexuality, race, and socio-economic class, among other social orders, resulting in a carnivalesque space that allows for exposure to the "world turned inside out."[341]

Yet, although *The Wiggle Room* and other neo-burlesque shows challenge popularly held assumptions surrounding gender and sexuality, ultimately, its subversive power is limited to theatrical space. Bakhtin argues that although the carnival once "occupied an enormous place in the life of the broadest masses of people in ancient times," its prominence in the public squares and lives of all people began to wane, resulting in a world in which only some elements of the carnival are preserved.[342] The few manifestations of the carnival remaining in modern society exist in the "life of the theatre," as the carnival "sense of the world" has largely lost its influential role in the public squares and daily experiences of the general population.[343] The loss of the carnival's influence speaks to its limited power in contemporary society, as it is largely confined to regulated spaces, such as burlesque theatres. The counter-hegemonic work that is performed within the burlesque theatres, primarily through the parody of the host and in the dancers' appearances and acts, remain in the theatre with the close of the curtain, unable to extend into mainstream society.

Interview with Foxx VonTempt: "I Know I'm Sexy, and I Don't Give a Fuck"

In order to better understand the ways that neo-burlesque challenges post-feminist discourses on gender and sexuality and the spatial limitations of neo-burlesque, I interviewed Foxx VonTempt, a New York City woman who is a full time burlesque dancer. Set up through a mutual acquaintance, Foxx and I exchanged emails and made plans to meet on Friday October 25th, 2013 at The Coffee Bean on Broadway. I arrived a few minutes before our scheduled meeting time and emailed her a description of what I was wearing and where I was sitting. Soon

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[341] *Ibid.*

[342] *Ibid*., 256.

[343] *Ibid*., 258.

after I pressed send, a young woman walked up to me. She was short and was wearing an entirely black outfit: black turtleneck, black leggings, black crocodile leather heels, and a black, mid-thigh pea-coat. She had short, dark brown hair that was curled as if she had put curlers in her hair overnight. Her face was clearly powdered with blush, she wore bright red lipstick, and had eyeliner drawn on her eyelids that extended past the outer-corners of her brown eyes, providing her with a cat-like appearance. She was very beautiful, but did not immediately stand out in the crowd of coffee-goers; she looked like any other fashionable young woman living in New York City. It was not readily apparent that Foxx was a burlesque dancer.

Foxx walked over to my table and introduced herself to me. She was very forward and honest in response to my questions, and spoke with a confident, loud voice throughout our conversation. She exuded an exceptional display of confidence in the way that she carried herself and in the tone of her voice. The content of the interview primarily centered on her experience as a burlesque dancer: her journey toward becoming a performer, the various difficulties of being a dancer, and the political messages that she believes are promoted by her work on stage.

Figure 2.2. Fox VonTempt. www.bushwickdaily.com.

Background

Although we spoke for over an hour, Foxx never provided me with her real name. On and off stage, she goes by her stage name, Foxx VonTempt, an identity that she cited as "extremely important" to her.[344] Foxx described how the inspiration for her name was formulated long before she became a burlesque dancer, as her "infatuation with burlesque began at age nine."[345] She choose Foxx as her stage name because foxes are "sly and sexy," two qualities that she attempts to integrate into her performances.[346] While it may appear that Foxx bridges her life as a burlesque dancer with her life outside of the theatre through the decision to utilize her stage name in our conversation, ultimately she conceded that she "rarely talks to anyone outside of the burlesque community." When she does speak with those outside of the burlesque community, such as the first time that she met her boyfriend's parents, she uses her real name.[347] This conscious decision to switch her name suggests that, although she claims to identify with her burlesque identity off of the stage, allowing for the possibility of exposing the public to alternative notions of gender and sexuality through contact with her, her burlesque identity is confined to the "appropriate" spaces for it: the theatre and the wider burlesque community.

The burlesque community is vastly different from the one existing in her hometown of Chicago. Self-described as having a "wholesome" upbringing, Foxx spent a significant amount of time describing the negative impact that her decision to become a burlesque dancer had on her family, as they "have a hard time justifying to friends and family" the type of work that she does in New York City.[348] She cites the pervasive American "culture, where sex is seen as bad or deviant" as the motivating factor behind her family's inability to accept her occupation, adding that her family views "burlesque as a form of stripping, and therefore, bad."[349] While

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[344] VonTempt, Foxx. Personal interview. The Coffee Bean. New York. 25 Oct. 2013.

[345] *Ibid.*

[346] *Ibid.*

[347] *Ibid.*

[348] *Ibid.*

[349] *Ibid.*

unfortunate, the reactions of Foxx's family are not unique, as misperception surrounding burlesque and confusion about the differences between stripping and burlesque dancing have existed since the introduction of the striptease to American burlesque. Just as American citizens in the past lamented the immorality of the entertainment form, contemporary Americans still possess anxiety about the display of the female body, as exemplified by Foxx's parents. This perception that burlesque is "bad" or "immoral" further supports the notion of burlesque as a carnivalesque space, as the promotion of alternative understandings of gender and sexuality is outside the boundaries of normalcy, and, therefore, relegated as eccentric or deviant.

Foxx's relationship with her parents was not always strained, as she originally followed the "normal" path for a middle-class white woman; after she graduated high school she attended Iowa State University, where she received a bachelor's degree in business. Upon graduating, she moved to New York City and worked for a corporate bank close to our meeting spot, regularly working eighteen-hour days but earning a solid living. However, this lifestyle was not satisfying to her and she quit her job to become a stylist during the day and a waitress at a café at night. One night while working at the café, a "woman came into the café wearing a stunning emerald dress," and Foxx describes being "absolutely mesmerized by her; she was beautiful and exuded a self-confidence that I had only ever seen from a distance."[350] After talking with the woman in the emerald dress and learning that she was a burlesque dancer, Foxx decided to take classes at the New York School of Burlesque, where she attended courses for four continuous weeks.

Though the classes offered at the New York School of Burlesque are designed for beginners and professionals alike, the first class requires all students to take off their shirts and wear pasties, regardless of burlesque experience. Foxx described how she was so "fucking nervous" during the first class because her past did not include any significant time being naked in front of other people.[351] Her love for burlesque quickly blossomed because the "women in the classes inspired me and made me fucking love my body and what I could do with it." After her time at the New York School of Burlesque she quickly booked her first burlesque

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[350] *Ibid.*

[351] *Ibid.*

performance.[352] Foxx's experience at the New York School of Burlesque reflects many themes of post-feminism, including the emphasis on "femininity as a bodily property" and "the shift from objectification to subjectification."[353]

My conversation with Foxx illustrated how she, along with the other women in the NYSB, attended the classes in order to "take control" over their bodies, as they consciously chose to display their bodies in sexually provocative ways. Foxx and her classmates embody post-feminist sensibilities by individually choosing to take their sexuality into their own hands and disregarding mainstream conventions that dictate appropriate femininity in order to find empowerment through their experience. Just like the dancers and audience members at *The Wiggle Room*, however, this empowerment is reserved for a select group of women who seek out this activity for their own individual motivations and are not connected to any wider campaign to redefine appropriate femininity and sexuality in American culture.

"It's Hard as Fuck": Life as a Burlesque Dancer

Life as a neo-burlesque dancer is not always glamorous. Throughout Foxx's time as a dancer, and like her historical antecedents have shown, she has experienced significant difficulties both inside and outside of her time spent performing in the theatre. When asked if she enjoyed being a burlesque dancer, she immediately replied, "it's hard as fuck," allluding to the complexity of finding work and supporting oneself financially.[354] According to Foxx, because the shows pay an average of twenty five to two hundred and fifty dollars per show many burlesque dancers face financial difficulties. Although Foxx explained that she is surviving because of the money she saved from her corporate banking job, she lamented the difficulties that many dancers face. Many dancers are forced to claim unemployment and apply for welfare because they do not earn enough to support themselves. As a result, many dancers work multiple jobs, working during the day and dancing burlesque at night. Although there are exceptions, the financial

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[352] *Ibid.*

[353] Gill, "Post Feminist Media Culture," 149.

[354] *Ibid.*

difficulties of many burlesque dancers speak to the presence of a limited carnivalesque space within which alternative discourses are supported and enacted. In other words, because burlesque does not typically provide dancers with a livable wage, they are often forced to integrate into mainstream society in order to survive. Therefore, the work that is done in the burlesque clubs is limited in space, as the dancers often have to find other forms of employment that do not allow for the explicit challenge of mainstream understandings of gender and sexuality. The dancers must compartmentalize their varying gendered persona, by only utilizing them in appropriate spaces in order to successfully integrate into mainstream society.

In addition to financial struggles, Foxx also spoke to the presence of strained gender relations within the burlesque community. While the shows themselves largely allow for the representation of various understandings of gender and sexuality, the production and ownership of shows and venues suggest the existence of a more strained understanding of gender that often fall along binary lines. Foxx cited male producers as her biggest issue, claiming that they are often "sleazy and slimy and don't care about the wellbeing of the girls; they just care about earning more money."[355] Foxx's depiction of male producers illustrates how neo-burlesque is not fully immune to negative perceptions surrounding women who use their body as a source of entertainment, as the objectification and sexualization of burlesque dancers by male producers threatens the true empowerment of burlesque dancers.

This disconnect is pertinently illustrated through an examination of Foxx's experience co-producing several shows with both male and female producers. When discussing her vision for a show, she describes how her focus "centers on the dancers first and foremost, even before thinking about the venue and money."[356] For Foxx and other female producers that she has co-produced with, the primary interest in designing a show lies in ensuring the well being of the dancers by providing them with support for their creative agency. Conversely, according to Foxx, the male producer that she is currently co-producing a show with speaks solely in terms of

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[355] *Ibid.*

[356] *Ibid.*

profitability, often imploring her to "get him more girls," and possessively referring to the dancers that he does have as "his girls."[357]

This tension between male and female producers' visions for a burlesque show highlights another way that neo-burlesque plays into mainstream understandings of gender: through an uneven power distribution among binary lines and male objectification of women. One such example of this disconnect occurred during a recent show when a male producer attempted to incentivize a crowd to buy raffle tickets by suggesting that Foxx would give the "lucky winner a once in a lifetime lap dance."[358] Foxx described how she took the microphone away from him and said, "no you're not, because I don't fucking do that." Her reponse suggesting that although Foxx views herself as empowered and endowed with a sense of agency, this does not always translate to members of society who are unable to remove themselves from the influences of patriarchal understandings of femininity and sexuality.[359]

Finally, beyond financial struggles and disconnect between producers, burlesque dancers also struggle with the stress of the performance itself. Foxx described how performing burlesque is exceptionally difficult because in order to execute burlesque correctly, "you have to believe that you are sexy."[360] Foxx continually stressed that burlesque is intimately tied to self-confidence by emphasizing that in order to be successful, burlesque dancers must "go out there and not give a fuck and have confidence – only then will you be sexy as hell. But you can't give a fuck or the audience will know and won't think you're sexy."[361] In this sense, performing as a burlesque dancer is a largely individualized act, as she has to "feel and know that she's sexy" on an individual level.[362]

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[357] *Ibid.*

[358] *Ibid.*

[359] *Ibid.*

[360] *Ibid.*

[361] *Ibid.*

[362] *Ibid.*

Messages Within Burlesque

Even with the difficulties associated with life as a burlesque dancer, Foxx still praised the burlesque industry, especially for the tight-knit burlesque community to which she belongs. Foxx spoke at great length about the support within the burlesque community, particularly the widespread acceptance of varying sexual identities, nationalities, ethnicities, races, and even body sizes and weights. Mainstream discourses surrounding ideal body size and beauty are challenged within burlesque communities, as Foxx noted that "most people are very comfortable in their bodies, as the whole purpose of burlesque is to be confident in who you are, because you are sexy."[363] Additionally, Foxx spoke to the ability of burlesque to bend gendered conventions as she described how

> Gender doesn't really exist in burlesque. It's more about being comfortable in your body and being comfortable as a human being. I don't give a shit if you're a guy or a girl, it's more about believing 'I'm sexy, I don't give a fuck what people think, and I'm going to prove that I'm sexy.'[364]

Unsurprisingly, Foxx commented several times on her feelings that performing as a burlesque dancer empowers her as a woman because she controls the portrayal of her own sexuality. Foxx described how dancing in front of an audience is "empowering and inspiring, and I feel empowered when I do it, because I am sexy and I am showing the audience that I am sexy." Burlesque offers her a sense of agency, rather than feelings of objectification or unwarranted sexualization. While she did concede that there are better audiences and venues than others, and the occasional creepy, or stalkerish, audience member, she rarely feels objectified by the audience, as "most of them want to be there because they appreciate the art of what we are doing."[365] Burlesque possesses meaning for Foxx, and is an empowering act for her because she

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[363] *Ibid.*

[364] *Ibid.*

[365] *Ibid*.

is "owning and taking control of her sexuality," while simultaneously complicating mainstream understandings of sexuality, femininity, body image and size, and womanhood.[366]

Yet Foxx's experience raises profound questions surrounding the limits of neo-burlesque to truly act as an empowering entertainment form. While Foxx certainly feels individually empowered through her performances, her *individual* experience is not translatable or connected to any widespread collective effort to empower *all* women in an American society that is defined by patriarchal expectations for appropriate femininity and sexuality. Although neo-burlesque does expand beyond its historical predecessor by offering a more politically conscious interpretation of gender and sexuality, through changes in performance content, audience demographics, and performer intent, it mirrors traditional burlesque's inability to invoke change outside of the carnivalesque space of the theater. If the political work remains contained to the stage, can neo-burlesque be understood as an empowering entertainment form? The emergence of fat and queer neo-burlesque represents a further evolvement in burlesque's quest to promote widespread social and political change surrounding ideologies of appropriate femininity and sexuality, and will be discussed in greater detail in chapter three.

Chapter Three: Opening Up Possibilities for Re-Signification

My experience observing a neo-burlesque show and my interview with Foxx illuminate the powerful ways that neo-burlesque engages with "the expression and articulation of ideas about sexuality, gender, class, and politics."[367] Individual women challenge restrictions placed on the female body and on expectations of "appropriate" sexuality through the content of their performances and their heightened consciousness surrounding the meanings produced by their work. This awareness of the potential for political work was present regardless of the performer's style at *The Wiggle Room* show, ranging from Melody Jane's stage kitten striptease to the fat burlesque inspired nipple tassel act, as all of the performances consciously challenged widely accepted norms pertaining to female sexuality, body size, personal control, and empowerment.

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[366] *Ibid.*

[367] Fleming, Lauren M. "Queer Femme Follies." *Curve.* Jan. 2007: 34. *Avalon Media*. 6 Feb. 2014. <http://www.curvemag.com>.

Furthermore, Foxx's emphasis on her ability to subvert mainstream ideologies of femininity and sexuality through her performances further indicates that part of the appeal of neo-burlesque lies in its potential to illuminate alternative understandings of gender and sexuality.

Even though neo-burlesque performers and their acts demonstrate a commitment to challenging contemporary standards of feminine beauty and expectations related to appropriate sexuality, neo-burlesque's relationship with post-feminism complicates the effectiveness of its subversive power. The dancers in the show, and especially the sentiments expressed by Foxx, signify the belief that the *individual* female body is a site of political significance that can be imbued with meaning, independent of any wider political crusade. Neo-burlesque serves as a prime example of post-feminism's "focus on individualism, choice, and empowerment," as my observational work indicates that the dancers are not part of one cohesive effort dedicated to raising collective empowerment for all American women.[368] Rather, the female performer subjectifies her individual body as a way through which to experience personal empowerment; she personally chooses to display her body.[369] While post-feminism would celebrate this ability of neo-burlesque dancers to independently control their sexuality through the public display of their bodies, neo-burlesque is ultimately rooted in theories of individual empowerment that largely ignore structural issues pertaining to femininity and sexuality. Additionally, its place in a contained, carnivalistic, space further prohibits the creation of a collective political movement outside of the theater.

Furthermore, while the emphasis on sexuality within a burlesque show is limited in its potential to challenge mainstream understandings of appropriate gendered behavior, neo-burlesque often reinforces notions of sexuality in ways that are pre-defined as appropriate by American patriarchal society. For example, although Foxx strips during her shows as a form of personal empowerment, her display of "sexiness" largely corresponds with what mainstream society advocates as attractive. In this sense, neo-burlesque can be understood as a display of sexuality "that heterosexual culture produces for itself…complicit in the construction of traditional feminine ideals…running the risk of upholding [women], once again, as the ultimate

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[368] Gill, "Post Feminist Media Culture," 149.

[369] *Ibid.*

objects of patriarchal desire."[370] By interacting with neo-burlesque simply as a commodity to be consumed, audiences are not forced to engage with the politicized meanings produced by neo-burlesque outside of the theater, limiting the spread of any explicitly political work. This suggests that, as an institution, neo-burlesque struggles with "the differentiation between a politically aware and self-conscious programme [sic] of entertainment, as opposed to a simplistic display of the flesh."[371]

Neo-burlesque's complicated relationship with post-feminism begs the question: can neo-burlesque ever effectively challenge widely held norms related to female body size, appropriate sexuality, and empowerment both inside and *outside* of the theater? Or is neo-burlesque too intimately connected to post-feminist thought? In the remainder of this chapter, I address two further evolvements of burlesque, fat burlesque and queer burlesque, and argue that these forms of neo-burlesque problematize the idea of post-feminism read through a "traditional" neo-burlesque performance, such as *The Wiggle Room* show. These two facets of neo-burlesque offer a greater possibility of subverting patriarchal systems of control, particularly in regard to traditional scripts about beauty and sexuality. Fat and queer burlesque are intimately connected with more explicitly political projects that have the potential to further subvert understandings of femininity and sexuality by exposing the binary system of gender as limited and constricting. Ultimately, however, both fat and queer burlesque face the same restrictions as traditional burlesque and neo-burlesque: their political work remains limited within the carnivalesque space of the theater and untranslatable to any collective political effort dedicated to widespread empowerment for all American women.

Fat Burlesque

From its conception, burlesque has been heralded as "an irreverent and powerful entertainment form that continues to raise important questions about women, their sexuality, and

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[370] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 124-125.

[371] Nally, Claire. "Grrrly Hurly Burly: Neo-burlesque and the Performance of Gender."*Textual Practice* 23.4. 2009. 622. *Francis & Taylor*. 6 Feb. 2014.

their public power in American culture."[372] As part of this commitment to questioning patriarchal control over the female body in America, burlesque provides "a site for staging transgressive identities that [are] celebrated and made visible in the theater," extending its acceptance to all women, with varying body types, skin colors, and sexualities.[373] While the rise of neo-burlesque shows expand upon traditional burlesque by depicting a wide range of sexualities and gendered behaviors, most traditional neo-burlesque shows conform to the widely accepted standards of beauty in American culture. For example, although in *The Wiggle Room* show there was one fat woman, the rest of the performers possessed incredibly fit bodies, suggesting that traditional neo-burlesque is not entirely removed from the influences of the wider patriarchal society that values a particular standard of female beauty: thin and fit.

While this remains the norm in many traditional neo-burlesque productions, the emergence of fat accepting spaces, in which "fat people, their friends, and admirers…come together to experience, celebrate, and embrace their fatness without being subject to ridicule or humiliation" soon began to establish itself as an alternative form and facet of neo-burlesque.[374] Rooted in fat studies theory, a theory which highlights how the "fat female subject has been discursively excluded from traditional expressions of fantasy," fat burlesque emerged as way to "redefine the fat body as an object of sexual desire and as home to a desiring sexual subject."[375,376] Fat studies theory also "demands a wider social, political, and economic shift in understandings of fatness and what a fat body can do," which offers a new outlook on how neo-burlesque could be used to subvert mainstream understandings of feminine beauty and sexuality. Within fat burlesque shows, dancers "hold great potential for critiquing hegemonic understandings of sexuality and femininity, particularly given the destabilizing nature of the

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[372] Fleming, "Queer Femme Follies."

[373] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 121.

[374] Colls, Rachel. "Big Girls Having Fun: Reflections on a 'fat Accepting Space'" *Somatechnics* 2.1 (2012): 18. *Edinburgh University Press*. 6 Feb. 2014.

[375] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 119.

[376] Asbill, D.L. (2009) "I'm allowed to be a sexual being": The distinctive social conditions of the fat burlesque stage'." *The Fat Studies Reader*. Eds. E. Rothblum and S. Solovay. New York: New York University Press. 300.

sexualized fat body."[377] The fat body is not only largely invisible within American popular culture, but also offers a direct contradiction to established norms regarding appropriate femininity. In fact, the only time that fat bodies are visible in American popular culture are on shows like "The Biggest Loser," in which fat people are literally screamed at for "what" they are. In these shows, success is both literally and figuratively measured by the contestant's ability to become "non-fat," and thus, fit and attractive by mainstream "normative" standards.[378]

Fat burlesque offers visibility to fat female performers in an explicitly political manner, "especially in a culture that stigmatizes fat women and relegates their sexuality to invisibility."[379] Jamie Ratliff draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of the carnival, invoking his concepts of the "unruly woman" and the "theory of excess" inherent within the carnival structure as the backbone of fat burlesque's political potential. The "unruly woman" possesses a variety of qualities deemed unattractive by mainstream society, including the fact that her "body is excessive or fat, suggesting her unwillingness or inability to control her physical appetites."[380] Additionally, she "deliberately turns to parody, humor, and laughter to help loosen the bitter hold of…social and cultural structures," that deem her as "simply too much" in relation to normative standards of female beauty and sexuality. [381] In a society obsessed with bodily control, this "unruly woman" threatens the established social order by "disrupt[ing] the norms of femininity and the social hierarchy of male over female through excess and outrageousness."[382] As a result, the "unruly woman" serves as a political figure, defying normative standards of beauty and sexuality through her knowing manipulation of mainstream norms relating to femininity.

Within fat burlesque, the fat performer also plays the role of the "unruly woman" by parodying the sexuality deemed ideal by American culture through the use of her undesirable

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[377] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 126.

[378] In recent American film and television, the emergence of Melissa McCarthy and Rebel Wilson seems to allow room for certain versions of "positive" women who are heavy. Yet, these women are still not ever really seen as sexual beings (or sexy, at least). Additionally, their fatness is the butt of many of their jokes. Is this progress? While they do have increased visibility, it is still only in a very limited way.

[379] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 126.

[380] *Ibid*., 127.

[381] *Ibid.*

[382] *Ibid*.

body in a sexual manner. Her blatant disregard for the conventions of female beauty and body size, exemplified through her fatness and combined with her parody of female sexuality, "embodies the perfect storm of excessive desires," and effectively challenges mainstream discourses mandating how women should look and act.[383] Ratliff expands upon fat burlesque dancers' challenge of the mainstream understanding of gender by arguing that:

> Her corporeal excess, or fatness, which overrides her sexuality and renders it invisible, is matched by the excessive femininity that she adopts by performing burlesque. Thus, she embodies two contradictory discourses of corporeality while participating in an act of gender performance that is meant to parody female objectification. Doing so allows the fat burlesque subject to subvert the very process through which the female body comes to signify by performing recoded embodiments of femininity, sexuality, and fatness, creating a space where these things co-exist in a nexus (or excess) of desire.[384]

Fat burlesque, therefore, not only allows fat women a space in which to present and defend their right to display their sexuality; it also offers a profound political commentary on the ways that even the seemingly empowered displays of the female body are intimately connected with systems of patriarchy that define appropriate forms of femininity and sexuality.

Fat burlesque's counter-hegemonic work is pertinently illustrated by the Vah Vah Boombah fat burlesque troupe. Reserved for "all genders who self-identify as fat," Vah Vah Boombah's "fat lovin'" manifesto highlights many of the theoretical facets of fat studies and fat burlesque, including an emphasis on naturalizing representations of fat sexual bodies in popular culture.[385] For example, the manifesto reads, "any time there is a fat person onstage as anything besides the butt of a joke, it's political. Add physical movement, then dance, then sexuality and you have a revolutionary act."[386] This practice of the Vah Vah Boombah fat burlesque troupe parallels the theoretical content of fat studies put forth by Ratliff, Asbill, and Colls because it

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[383] *Ibid*.

[384] *Ibid*., 128.

[385] McAllister, Heather. "The VVB Fat Lovin' Manifesto." *Va Va Boombah*. 25 Mar. 2014. <http://www.vavaboombah.com/manifesto/>.

[386] *Ibid.*

views the fat body in an explicitly political manner and challenges mainstream understandings of body size and "appropriate" female sexuality.

Figure 3.1. The Vah Vah Boombah fat burlesque troupe. vahvahboombah.com.

The Vah Vah Boombah fat burlesque manifesto also articulates how, within the space of the theater, those performing and those watching the performances should not have to "deal… with the message that our fat bodies are wrong and need to be changed."[387] Others have referred to this simply as "fat pride." Paralleling Bakhtin's theory of the "unruly woman" and the "theory of excess," the Vah Vah Boombah manifesto prohibits the "perpetuation of the idea that losing weight is better than not losing weight," suggesting that they value the fat woman who knowingly chooses to remain fat and outside of "appropriate" forms of femininity.[388] Finally, the short bios of the Vah Vah Boombah performers illustrate a concern with exposing traditional neo-burlesque's reliance on patriarchal standards of corporeal beauty by emphasizing the socially constructed nature of femininity. For example, in Cupcake Kitten's bio, she writes that she is "living proof that brains and beauty can co-exist," while "Dame Titzi Te Kanawa" writes about how she chose her name because it means "large tracks of land," playing on the historical belief that women could be conquered, just as land was.[389] Both of these women sarcastically engage with stereotypes of appropriate femininity, illustrating their commitments to challenging

[387] *Ibid.*

[388] *Ibid.*

[389] *Ibid.*

mainstream understandings of female body size and appropriate forms of femininity and sexuality.

By disregarding not only the standard for body size, but also utilizing their fat bodies in a sexual, and generally taboo, way, the fat burlesque dancers provide an alternative and radical version of the female body. Fat burlesque highlights the ways that even a space such as neo-burlesque, dedicated to reimagining femininity and sexuality, still acts in conjunction with the dominant forms of social control. Fat burlesque not only problematizes the post-feminist reliance on "self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline," as the fat woman clearly does not spend time self-fixing her socially constructed "problems," but also highlights the triviality of defining femininity solely in terms of a "bodily property."[390] Fat Burlesque makes sexuality accessible for a body that is not understood as occupying a space within the norm.

Queer Burlesque

While fat burlesque offers a heightened political response to traditional neo-burlesque's reliance on forms of pre-determined female beauty and an alternative image of the female body and sexuality, the emergence of queer burlesque further politicizes the display of the body by challenging the construction of gender itself.[391] Queer burlesque is rooted in critical gender studies, a school of thought that holds that "gender [and sexuality] is constructed rather than innate and correlated to one's sex."[392] Largely led by feminist scholars such as Judith Butler, critical gender theory highlights the "instability and indeterminacy of *all* gendered and sexed identities," by providing examples of individuals that do not fit the widely accepted binary gender system. Consequently, unlike fat burlesque, critical gender theory is less concerned with offering an alternative way for male and female bodies to bend traditional conventions and is more interested in exposing the socially constructed nature behind our understandings of gender

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[390] *Ibid.*

[391] Some people would argue that fat burlesque is a form of queer burlesque and vice versa. Here, I am not claiming to argue for the presence of "categories" that are more or less radical, but simply wish to elucidate responses to alternative forms within neo-burlesque.

[392] Nally, "Grrrly Hurly Burly," 627.

and appropriate gendered activities. One such way that critical gender theory scholars provide an alternative to the binary system of gender is through the invocation of a "third term." Majorie Garber, a feminist scholar, writes that

> the third is that which questions binary thinking and introduces a crisis – a crisis which is symptomatized by *both* the underestimation *and* the overestimation of cross-dressing… the 'third' is a mode of articulation, a way of describing a place of possibility. Three puts in question the idea of one: of identity, of self-sufficiency, self-knowledge.[393]

Thus, the concept of the "third" is useful in understanding the premises behind critical gender theory, as it not only recodes how gender is understood, eliminating the reliance on the binary system, but also disregards traditional conventions of categorization that limit appropriate gendered behavior.

Queer burlesque draws upon critical gender theory by dedicating itself to the promotion of the "idea of an alien sex, a parody of both masculinity and femininity" that is accomplished through the "confounding of traditional gender roles through dress codes and the extravagant performance of gender bending."[394] Much of the political work within queer burlesque is accomplished through drag performances that work to "de-naturalize gender and open up possibilities for re-signification…by challenging the notion of an essential sexed body."[395] While drag can refer to the more popular male-to-female drag, it also includes female-to-female drag, referred to as a bio-queen or a faux drag, in which a woman parodies an exaggerated form of femininity. Regardless of the form the drag performance takes, critical gender theorists argue that "any intentional performance of gender should be considered an act of drag," as it highlights the ways in which understandings of gender and appropriate gendered behavior are socially constructed. Therefore, drag works to parody the "notion of an originary or primary gender

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[393] Garber, Majorie. *Vested Interests: Cross Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992. 10.

[394] Nally, "Grrrly Hurly Burly," 624.

[395] *Ibid*., 627.

identity…playing upon the anatomy of the performer and the gender that is being performed… [and] *implicitly reveal[ing] the imitative structure of gender itself - as well as its contingency*."[396]

Queer burlesque possesses an explicitly political nature, as its "focus on gender parody and subversion" works to illustrate the constructed nature of gender and the fluidity of sexuality.[397] By illustrating how "gender and sexuality are…malleable, mimetic, and culturally constructed categories," queer burlesque challenges the entire foundation of traditional neo-burlesque, and, to an extent, fat burlesque. The cultural work performed in queer burlesque is not limited to dealing with a pre-determined gender that is socially constructed as part of mainstream society's understanding of gender as binary. As a "subculture" of mainstream forms of neo-burlesque, queer burlesque disassociates itself with the commercialization of neo-burlesque, and offers a more political outlook on gender by forcing the audience members to actively engage with the acts by shifting their entire perspective regarding the construction of gender, something that traditional or fat neo-burlesque does not require. Queer burlesque seeks to disrupt wider structural narratives by questioning the construction of gender as a system of categorization, rather than simply focusing on the socially constructed understanding of "female."

Just as I used the case study of the Vah Vah Boombah troupe to examine fat burlesque, I will examine queer burlesque through the example of the work of Moira Finucane, an internationally renowned queer burlesque dancer. During her show, *The Burlesque Hour*, Finucane performs several different acts that "deal explicitly with [the social constructedness] of female sexuality…by simultaneously inviting [the audience's] desiring gaze and subverting it through techniques such as gender aversion, abjection, and politics."[398] For example, in one act entitled "Romeo's Striptease," Fincuane enters the stage dressed as Romeo in "blue jeans, a black leather jacket, cowboy boots and sunglasses…long hair in a ponytail, facial stubble and sideburns."[399] The audience is not privy to Romeo's true gendered identity, who initially believes

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[396] *Ibid*., 627.

[397] Boucher, Georgie, and Sarah French. "Postfeminist Pleasure and Politics: Moira Finucane and "The Burlesque Hour"." *Australasian Drama Studies*. 2011. 194.

[398] *Ibid*., 195.

[399] *Ibid.*

her to be a man, as her "expressions, body language, and physique are strongly coded as masculine."[400] However, after "he" completes a striptease, the audience is privy to the fact that Romeo is, in fact, a woman due to context clues and "Finucane's naked torso."[401] This act is indicative of the political work that queer burlesque does, as it "complicates any definitive reading of gender" and highlights the constructed nature of mainstream understandings of masculinity and femininity.[402] Finucane is understood as both masculine and feminine "and thus his gender remains ambiguous and indeterminate."[403] Finucane is illustrative of the "third," as her Romeo performance allows her to occupy a space outside of the binary distinction of gender, supporting Butler's argument that "sex itself is a constructed and gendered category."[404]

Figure 3.2. A queer burlesque performer in drag. fuckyeahqueerlesque.tumblr.com.

Queer burlesque is not only reserved for famous dancers but is also practiced by neo-burlesque communities throughout the United States. One such group, queerlesque, is dedicated to "celebrating queer bodies, of all kinds, pushing the conventional boundaries of gender and sexuality," and providing a "safe space for performers to try out edgier acts, as well as a safe

[400] *Ibid*., 197.

[401] *Ibid.*

[402] *Ibid.*

[403] *Ibid.*

[404] *Ibid.*

place for queer audiences to enjoy the magic of burlesque."[405] Even in these amateur spaces, the political nature of queer burlesque is evident. The dancers are not only dedicated to challenging the binary system of gender but also ask audience members to rethink the categorization of gender within American society by looking "past labels and checkboxes to celebrate…sexual fluidity."[406]

Limitations of Subcultural Neo-Burlesque

Both fat and queer burlesque offer profound political statements surrounding gender and sexuality in American culture, subverting widely accepted norms about appropriate gendered appearance and behavior. These two forms expand beyond traditional neo-burlesque, as both engage in an important conversation regarding gender and sexuality that is largely invisible in mainstream society. Fat and queer burlesque expose the audience to more radical interpretations of gender, seeking to disrupt wider structural narratives on more than an individual level. However, while endowed with radical potential, neither fat nor queer burlesque holds enough cultural capital to effectively redefine mainstream society's control over understandings of gender. While perhaps a pessimistic view of fat and queer neo-burlesque's potential to initiate change, as it does do important, and arguably rare, political work, ultimately, space limitations, audience disengagement, and pervasive mainstream ideologies limit the ability of subcultural forms of neo-burlesque to ever truly implement real political change in mainstream society.

Similar to traditional neo-burlesque, both fat and queer burlesque can also be viewed as sites of Bakhtin's carnival. While the space within which fat and queer burlesque shows are performed allows for the safe enactment of alternative displays of gender, removed from the judgmental eye of mainstream society, they too take place in contained spaces. Although performers are provided with the freedom to experiment with a wide variety of differing interpretations of gender and sexuality, the carnivalistic space of the neo-burlesque theater mandates that the inclusion of radical acts are placed under the label of an "act" or a

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[405] Falcor, Ace. "Queer Burlesque History and Archives." *Fuck Yeah Queerlesque*. 25 Mar. 2014. <http://fuckyeahqueerlesque.tumblr.com/>.

[406] *Ibid.*

"performance." In other words, while the carnivalistic space provides for the display of alternative forms of gender and sexuality that are parodied beliefs and understandings present in mainstream society, the theatrical setting indicates that the performers are engaged in a "play-acted" form of representation. Therefore, the work that they do can always be justified through the invocation of the performative aspect of their actions.

These "spatial restrictions placed on the liberatory potential" of the work performed by fat and queer neo-burlesque dancers exist because the performances "occur away from the everyday restrictions placed upon" bodies that do not conform to mainstream normative expectations.[407] As an unfortunate result of the burlesque theatre's status as a "space 'outside' of mainstream…space, both the spatial and temporal contingencies of the accepting and acceptance of" alternative bodies and desire are highlighted.[408] This suggests that even with the emergence of more politically infused forms of neo-burlesque, such as fat and queer burlesque, their potential to result in political or social change in mainstream society is extremely limited by the temporary space within which they are performed

The carnivalesque space of neo-burlesque also complicates the audience's relationship with the performative subject material. Unlike the predominately male audience demographic of the traditional burlesque of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, neo-burlesque audiences are predominately women, making up "as much as 70-75% of the audience, depending on the venue."[409] Critical scholarship argues that the woman spectator "is significant to the transgressive potential of burlesque because it creates a space where women find pleasure in the act of spectatorship, because both performer and audience are in on the joke."[410] Rather than attending neo-burlesque shows as a method through which to objectify women, my experiences demonstrate that women spectators largely attend to experience a subversive representation of gender and sexuality; they are aware that the dancers are parodying norms and expectations relating to female beauty and sexuality. Consequently, neo-burlesque has been praised as

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[407] Colls, "Big Girls Having Fun," 31.

[408] *Ibid*., 33.

[409] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 123.

[410] *Ibid.*

facilitating the "mutually constitutive pleasure of performer and audience," as both dancer and audience member are able to share the liberating experience of rejecting repressive mainstream norms and understandings of the female body.[411]

Even with this "political potential offered by [subcultural] burlesque to purposefully expose the limitations placed upon our understandings" of female sexuality for both performers and audience members, audience members are not pressed to disseminate or even acknowledge the counter-cultural message of neo-burlesque outside of the theater.[412] This is largely due to the isolated nature of the theater, as there is no collective political movement that accompanies neo-burlesque outside of the show. Therefore, although audience members may be invited to share in the "joke" with the performers, and even agree and support their subversion of gender roles through engagement with the performance, once the curtain has closed there is no pressure or even request for audience members to continue the work of the dancers. Just as the dancers must often assimilate into mainstream culture due to their precarious financial situations, so too do audience members re-enter into society unscathed by attending the show. Therefore, fat and queer burlesque mimic traditional neo-burlesque's post-feminist emphasis on individual consumption, as the show truly is only consumed in an individual sense, and no collective action is required by audience members or dancers in response to the political elements of show.

Although queer and fat burlesque subvert many assumptions implicit even in traditional neo-burlesque pertaining to the female body and appropriate forms of sexuality, neither subcultural form of neo-burlesque is able to completely separate itself from the influences of patriarchal culture. Judith Butler writes about the concept of parody in her work, arguing that "parody by itself is not subversive…and when it falls back onto the "normal" or "original" it claims to be mocking, it becomes nothing more than a pastiche, a "blank" or "neutral" parody."[413] Although fat and queer burlesque may provide a thought-provoking parody surrounding expectations relating to body size and sexuality, and even the construction of gender itself, "there is a fine line between parodying femininity, or performing it excessively, and simply

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[411] *Ibid.*

[412] *Ibid.*

[413] *Ibid*., 125.

reinscribing the objectification of women as sexual beings."[414] This is not to say that performers of fat and queer burlesque do not have good intentions to perform parody in a legitimate way, or do not succeed in some ways; rather, it simply highlights the ways in which even these good-intentioned parodies rely on the "construction of traditional feminine ideals…run[ning] the risk of upholding them…as the ultimate objects of patriarchal desire."[415] Even though their bodies and routines highlight the arbitrary restrictions on the female body and sexual agency, and even gender itself, these dancers still perform in ways that the audience understands as "sexy."

In response to the way in which all forms of neo-burlesque mime mainstream versions of sexuality, Ratliff argues that,

> Perhaps for burlesque to truly enact and reveal the performativity in a way that destabilizes the naturalized categories of identity and desire, then it should be executed in a manner that more directly calls attention to the constructedness of so-called naturalized definitions of desire.[416]

Whether or not it is possible to separate understandings of desire and sexuality from the influences of patriarchal society remains to be seen, a feat that neo-burlesque dancers should continually strive for in the future. Regardless, it is worth applauding all forms of neo-burlesque for its ability to "de-naturalize gender and open up possibilities for re-signification," a rare accomplishment in contemporary society.[417]

Conclusion

In June 2011, the Berkshire Conference of Women's Historians featured a neo-burlesque show, complete with acts dedicated to fat and queer burlesque, as part of the official conference program. The show was met with a range of responses, both positive and negative, as the

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[414] *Ibid*., 124.

[415] *Ibid*., 125.

[416] *Ibid.*

[417] Boucher, "Postfeminist Pleasure and Politics," 197.

conference attendees wrestled with the "personal, political, historical, and contemporary meanings of sexual performance" within a feminist context.[418] The show, entitled "The Down and Dirty Show," was designed with the purpose of engaging "performers and their audience with contemporary politics and the sexual politics at work among them," similar to the aims of the neo-burlesque show that I encountered in my research trip to New York City.[419] While many attendees applauded the show for its ability to "knowingly destruct…or make…meta-commentary on conventional, unironic sexually explicit performance genres," an equal number of women felt that the show reinforced the "old line that male-identified behavior is not inherently liberatory just because the practitioner says it is."[420] Because each side felt passionate about its understanding and analysis of the meanings presented within the show, the attendees were unable to reach a mutual understanding regarding the effectiveness of cultural work produced by the "Down and Dirty" neo-burlesque show.

This deeply rooted tension between the liberation and limitation of neo-burlesque has impacted American burlesque for over a century. From its earliest days, burlesque was viewed as "bad" and contrary to mainstream American beliefs and understandings, and was constantly faced with the threat of closure by moralistic police forces representing the interests of the "pure" American public. Consequently, as illustrated in chapter one, burlesque was removed from the eyes of the American public and instead relegated to carnivalesque spaces, which effectively limited the ability of any political message to expand beyond the stage. The achievements of Sophie Tucker and Fay Tunis were all contained within the private sphere of the burlesque theater. Their status as burlesque dancers overshadowed any political work they attempted to do both on and off stage. Likewise, neo-burlesque is also confined within the space of the theater, as even the more radical subcultural forms of neo-burlesque do not possess the ability to promote a widespread political consciousness in American society surrounding femininity and sexuality. Instead, the subversive work performed by neo-burlesque is limited to

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[418] Gilmore, Stephanie, and Leigh Ann Wheeler, eds. "Getting "Down and Dirty" at the Berks: A Conversation about Feminism, Queer Politics, and the Many Meanings of Sexual Performance." *Journal of Women's History* 24.2. 2012. 171.

[419] *Ibid*., 172.

[420] *Ibid*., 173-177.

the stage, only consumed by audiences who are willing to attend the show and likely already aware of the constructed nature of gender and sexuality.

Traditional burlesque catered to a predominately male audience by offering an experience in which the "focal point was not the drama itself, but the performances of scandalously clad actresses."[421] The burlesque dancer was "accepted by bourgeois society as an embodiment of ideal female beauty," illustrating how even within a space removed from mainstream society, traditional burlesque borrowed heavily from patriarchal standards of appropriate femininity in order to gain favor with their audiences.[422] While complicated by the emergence of neo-burlesque, especially through subcultural forms such as fat and queer burlesque and an audience of predominately women, the dancer still often "correlates to the re-energizing of patriarchal agendas and standards of value," just as her counterpart in the early 1900s did.[423] Although many neo-burlesque dancers cite empowerment as a motivating factor behind their decision to participate in this entertainment form,

> It is easy to see how [burlesque] represents a commodification of the body, and moreover, an uncritical but commercial approach to female disempowerment – women are still encouraged to look taut, sexual, and maintain a specifically feminine image, even if they claim they are emancipated by such exercise.[424]

Even fat and queer burlesque dancers who certainly challenge, and even reject, mainstream understandings of body size, sexuality, and gender, often perform in ways that conform to these patriarchal notions of feminine beauty or "sexiness."

Although burlesque has both historically and contemporarily challenged mainstream understandings of the "sexual and erotic" woman, can this entertainment form truly be understood as subversive if it both rejects and accepts patriarchal standards of beauty?[425] Yes and

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[421] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 120.

[422] *Ibid*., 121.

[423] Nally, "Grrrly Hurly Burly," 622.

[424] *Ibid*., 623.

[425] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 120.

no. Neo-burlesque embodies both "sites of passionate and feminist turns of gender" as well as "performances [that] echo and even reproduce sexist gender norms."[426] It is difficult to pass an overarching judgment about the benefits or harms of a neo-burlesque show. While its intimate connection with post-feminism allows for the unique acceptance of the public display of flesh, the political work burlesque does is ultimately limited to an individualized, contained space. Ratliff demonstrates this tension inherent within neo-burlesque when she writes,

> the contemporary burlesque performer does not necessarily depart from masculine ideas of sexiness but embraces and appropriates the many sexualized clichéd codes and stereotypes embedded in our visual culture. [At the same time, however] the self-aware… burlesque performer [attempts to] depart from those ideas…because of her own culturally constructed excessiveness.[427]

The neo-burlesque dancer is thus both liberated and limited through her relationship with a post-feminism that views individual empowerment as an end to itself, absent larger structural engagement or change. As she knowingly subverts mainstream understandings relating to gender, body size, and appropriate sexuality, she still often performs within systems of representation produced by masculine hegemony in a carnivalesque space, complicating her true subversive power.

This discussion is rooted in an American Studies context that inquires about the production and reproduction of representations of gender and sexuality in American culture. There is no simple way to define gender within an American Studies context, a fact complicated even further within the setting of neo-burlesque. As this thesis demonstrates, neo-burlesque highlights a commitment by women to reassert what it means to be empowered through the control of the display of their body and sexuality. However, the persistence of patriarchial notions of appropriate gender roles even within these "liberating" spaces reflect the complexity of gender relations within American society. American Studies allows me to ask questions like, "Will women ever effectively defy patriarchal standards of femininity and beauty on a large

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[426] Gilmore, "Getting "Down and Dirty" at the Berks," 195.

[427] Ratliff, "Drawing on Burlesque," 126.

scale?" Neo-burlesque also illustrates the American Studies emphasis on gender as a legitimate category of analysis; burlesque cannot be understood without examining the ways that women are both liberated and limited their involvement in corporeal display. Finally, this thesis locates the study of gender at the intersection of fat studies, critical gender studies, and history, illustrating the interdisciplinary nature of American Studies, as well as the fact that identity within America is influenced, and complicated, by a variety of factors, including gender and sexuality.

American Studies scholars interested in further pursuing studies of neo-burlesque would benefit from examining other forms of subcultural neo-burlesque. The study of black burlesque in particular would indicate how gender, sexuality, and race combine to complicate mainstream understandings of appropriate femininity and sexuality. Black burlesque has historically been underrepresented in scholarly inquiry, a fact that is unfortunately perpetuated by the exclusion of any reference to black burlesque dancers in this thesis. A study of black burlesque would highlight the difficulties black dancers face, including not only patriarchal discourses of appropriate femininity but also preconceived notions of race. This inquiry would expand this thesis' conclusions related to neo-burlesque by questioning how, and if, race further complicates black women's ability to publically display their bodies as a form of individual empowerment.

Stephanie Genz and Bejamin A. Brabon argue that representations of "popular culture should be reconceived as a site of struggle over the meanings of feminism and the reconceptualisation of a post-feminist practice…a contradictory site that interlaces complicity and critique, subordination and creation."[428] By understanding neo-burlesque as a site of popular culture within American society, it is apparent that this entertainment form is imbued with tension about what it means to be an American woman. Within neo-burlesque, women are provided with the opportunity to reassert what it means to be a woman by radically subverting understandings of femininity and sexuality. Yet by often remaining subordinate to traditional notions of "sexiness" promoted by patriarchal society, as well as occupying a carnivalesque space, neo-burlesque stands as a complex facet within American pop culture, tension-filled and

[428] Genz, Stephanie and Brabon, Benjamin. *Postfeminism Cultural Texts and Theories*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009. 25-26.

open to a wide range of interpretation. Perhaps Stephanie Gilmore best articulates this difficulty in categorizing neo-burlesque as good or bad, harmful or helpful, when she writes:

> Feminists still have a difficult time with gender performance as an issue of bodily integrity and right; we still grapple with how to interpret performance in a way that will put us at ease. Perhaps the point is that we will continue to be uncomfortable as we take bold stands in new directions. But I hope that we will be aware of the emotional trauma that may result.[429]

I agree with Gilmore and advocate for the continued study of neo-burlesque and gender performance. Neo-burlesque provides a pertinent way through which to highlight the complexities of femininity and sexual expression in contemporary American society. Even with its failings, neo-burlesque does important political work through its commitment to reexamining and challenging mainstream discourses of femininity and sexuality. What we must now do is find a way to disseminate burlesque's political work to mainstream American society, an act that would lay the groundwork for the ability of all women to control their bodies and sexualities.

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[429] Gilmore, "Getting "Down and Dirty" at the Berks," 195.

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